

Transforming rural local governance: the question of ‘sustainability’?

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Abstract

This paper reports on an investigation in south west Victoria, Australia undertaken to determine whether there is any evidence to suggest progress towards a transformation of community governance in rural areas that integrates the social, economic and environmental pillars of sustainability. The paper begins by outlining a concept of community governance that includes four approaches; local government, citizen governance, network governance and incorporated governance. Following a brief discussion of the way that community governance relates to sustainability the paper explores two international sustainability programs; Local Agenda 21 and the Cities for Climate Protection. Using two data sources the discussion focuses on the instruments used in these programs to anchor the environmental pillar into political and administrative routines in south west Victoria. The first source is a general survey of south west Victorian people to ascertain the extent to which they incorporate the social, economic and environmental into their understanding of sustainability. The second source involves interviews with local government practitioners to establish whether the social, economic and environmental pillars of sustainability are integrated into the local political and administrative routines. The paper concludes by arguing that the community governance of sustainability in rural areas needs to be constituted within the broader power relations of higher levels of governance but without the pressure to surrender local forms of autonomy and identity.

Introduction

The notion of sustainable development has produced a range of responses from the global to the local scale. One such response has been Agenda 21, a non-binding, international agreement for the delivery of sustainable development adopted at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in 1992. The International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives¹ (ICLEI) launched Local Agenda 21 (LA21) devised as a means of giving local agencies a place in sustainable development that was both meaningful and practical. Local engagement with sustainability began generally as a commitment to the social, economic and biophysical dimensions or triple bottom line and now extends into other programs associated with LA21 and sponsored by the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI) such as the Cities for Climate Protection (CCP).

The initial response to LA21 and CCP was a sense of optimism that sustainable development could be achieved through greater community participation in local governance (Freeman, et al. 1996; Patterson and Theobald 1995; Sharp 2002; Van Begin 2004). The aims of LA21 and CCP were focused on challenging the practices of local planning authorities by developing fresh and innovative ways of including the local community into decision-making processes. Freeman et al (1996, p. 67) argued that '[m]ore pragmatically, participation in LA21 is essential in order to mobilize political, business and popular support, to bring new resources of various kinds into the strategy and implementation process, to improve local 'ownership' of the whole strategy and to make links to other important policy areas, not least economic development'.

Others have not been so optimistic and have raised a series of questions about the extent to which LA21 and CCP can involve local community participation (Carter and Darlow 1997; Jackson and Morpeth 1999; Scott 1999; Selman 1998). The notion that LA21 and CCP can improve environmental citizenship is challenged by those who argue that this involves some unproven assumptions; 'that citizens are inclined to work collectively and selflessly on sustainability issues; and that service providers (notably local government) will readily respond to expectations of, and public debates about, improved provision of services affecting quality of life' (Selman 1998, p. 535). Instead there is a sense that participation is generally stultified by public apathy or influenced by vested interests or NIMBY ('not in my back yard') attitudes (Carter and Darlow 1997). A significant issue for local authorities is the lack of clear guidance from higher levels of government (Mercer and Jotkowitz 2000).

Notwithstanding the criticisms there have been claims that programs like LA21 and CCP have gained success around the Globe. The ICLEI website carries a number of case studies that claim to have delivered changes to local government practices (<http://www.iclei.org/>). However while there are claims to success the question still remains as to whether the outcomes of these programs are sustainable in the light of the relative place of the environmental pillar in the use of a sustainability approach to governance (Ryan 2003).

This paper contributes to the debate on local sustainability through an investigation into the community governance framework in south west Victoria, Australia. The

¹ ICLEI was founded in 1990 as the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives. The council was established when more than 200 local governments from 43 countries convened at an inaugural conference, the *World Congress of Local Governments for a Sustainable Future*, at the United Nations in New York.

research in the paper was undertaken to determine whether there is any evidence to suggest progress towards a transformation of community governance that integrates the social, economic and environmental pillars of sustainability in south west Victoria.

Community governance and sustainability

Governance at local level often involves a complex arrangement of institutions in the public, private and community sectors (Stoker 2005). As part of the everyday discourse of public life governance can be seen in structural terms as the 'institutional arrangements for debating, considering, deciding, prioritising, resourcing, implementing and evaluating public policy' (Head 2005, 44). However in the wider agenda of the modernization of government the term governance has been extended to mean the dynamic process in which social and political actors play a significant role in deciding how to satisfy many of their needs (Pierre and Peters 2000). In this sense governance becomes a method whereby state and non-state actors and institutions interact with one another to manage the affairs of the public (Coe, et al. 2001; Weller 2000).

Within this broader framework there is often confusion over *vertical* and *horizontal* approaches to governance. Vertical approaches are mainly driven by managerialist principles such as new public management and corporate governance (Hirst 2000; Rhodes 1997). Horizontal approaches to governance focus on the new practices of co-ordinating activities that occur through networks, partnerships and deliberative forums (Hirst 2000). On the ground however the distinction is often blurred and problems arise between application of horizontal (network and partnerships) and vertical (corporate) approaches to governance.

At local level the interplay of vertical and horizontal approaches leads to what Sullivan (2001) describes as three distinctive approaches to community governance. The first approach places local government in the central role of the governance structure and process (Sullivan 2001). For proponents of this position (See Clarke and Stewart 1998) it is the reinvigoration of local government as the legitimate representatives of the community playing a strategic role amongst other groups and agencies that is the central theme of community governance. The second approach is built upon the notion of citizen governance where neighbourhoods and communities construct their own forms of governing for their localized areas (Sullivan 2001). This approach is based upon communitarian notions of self-governing where citizens work towards achieving their goals and objectives for their own local areas (See Atkinson 1994; Box 1998). A third approach eschews the privileged role of local government in favour of a network system in which different actors at community level come together for specific purposes (Sullivan 2001). Proponents of this view hold that local government needs to involve other partners to build local capacity but shouldn't be able to dictate the terms on which such arrangements are based (See Stoker 1996).

What all three community governance models have in common is the aim of obtaining sufficient legitimacy to act in the name of the collectivity (Contandriopoulos, et al. 2004). Accountability in community governance is central to the cause of legitimacy through both transparency of decision making and where possible increased participation of the different interests concerned. Generally though, accountability is couched in terms of economic and/or social sustainability of

public and private interests. Sustainability that includes the environment is generally only accounted for in terms of traditional environmental issues, such as open space and local planning (Gibbs, et al. 1996; Jonas, et al. 2004; Mercer and Jotkowitz 2000). Programs like LA21 and CCP are designed to redress this imbalance by further involving local communities in extending local sustainability. The aims are to integrate the environment into local governance activities, to broaden the participation of groups and social categories, to adopt long term perspectives about issues like climate change and to work together to find solutions at local level (Del Bello 2006). For community governance the task is to alter the decision-making process to achieve a broader approach to sustainability. However the question remains as to whether local knowledge frameworks are sufficiently robust enough to incorporate an approach that integrates the economic, social and environmental.

Victorian Local Government

The Australian system of government operates at the national, state and local levels. Corporate governance at the local level has undergone significant reform under the influence of new public management. In the reforms of the 70s, 80s and 90s governments were enjoined to move away from 'rowing' to take a more central role in 'steering' the system (Osborne and Gaebler 1992). As a result many government services were either privatized or contracted out in a variety of public-private partnerships (Linder and Vaillancourt Rosenau 2000). At local government level the aim was to re-codify behaviours across a range of local government functions to ensure the efficient delivery of services (Kloot 2001).

The internal arrangements of local governments in Victoria, Australia, were reformed to adjust to the demands of auditing, monitoring, accounting and compliance in the new governance arrangements (Mercer and Jotkowitz 2000). The corporate structure of local government ensured that economic and financial monitoring, auditing and accounting were well integrated into the governance structures. While the financial bottom line has always been a significant factor for local governance the new public management style constrained local decision making even more. Service delivery was primarily judged by reference to savings in the bottom line and in so doing the economic became more fully embedded into the practices of local government than it had in the past (Williamson 2002). The major focus of this approach is vertical governance where there is financial accountability and compliance up the chain of command while auditing and monitoring flow down from the top.

The widening of the governance framework in the last few years into a more consultative style involving community engagement brought the 'social' back into local governance (Municipal Association of Victoria 2004). The aim was to embed the 'social' into governance through 'engagement' that 'is achieved when the community is and feels part of the overall governance of that community' (Department of Infrastructure and Victorian Local Governance Association 2002, p. 5). Networks and partnerships are used to broaden participation in the governance process across the community in a more horizontal way.

More recently there have been attempts to incorporate the environment into the monitoring, auditing and reporting of local affairs. The Australian Federal Government through support of ICLEI and the state government of Victoria through a range of programs have attempted to support sustainability initiatives at local level. Sustainability Victoria, a state government agency, has programs directly aimed at

local government (Sustainability Victoria). Besides programs designed to tackle specific events like waste, street lighting and green purchasing there is also a Sustainability Accord (launched in November 2005) that is a partnership agreement between the Victorian State Government and local governments on environmental sustainability. The Accord aims to increase the effectiveness of State and local environmental sustainability programs and foster a more consistent development of environmental policies and legislation. There is also financial and material support for ICLEI Oceania's Triple Bottom Line (TBL) Capacity Building Program that aims to build new TBL tools for use and application in local councils.

While there is an apparent awakening to the issue of sustainability at local level in Victoria that involves an integration of economic, social and environmental pillars any actual changes at local level, especially in rural areas, is not yet readily apparent. The paper now looks at south west Victoria, especially the Glenelg-Hopkins Catchment, to ascertain the degree to which local knowledge frameworks can absorb a broader sustainability approach into local governance processes.

South West Victoria and Data Collection

The southwest region of Victoria stretches from the southern coastline of Victoria, north to Ararat and Harrow, and from the South Australian border in the west to Ballarat in the east (Figure 1). The area covers approximately 23,300km² and the majority of the landscape is dominated by flat volcanic plains, compared to the north of the region which is characterised by sedimentary rises and a mountain range (South West Sustainability Partnership 2001). The southwest is defined by its three catchments; Hopkins, Glenelg and Portland. These catchments represent drainage basins within which there are 32 sub-catchments based upon natural landscape features (Glenelg Hopkins Catchment Management Authority 2003).

Since the arrival of Europeans the south west region of Victoria has experienced much economic prosperity, mainly through the agricultural sector. Intensive land clearing associated with farming practices, industrial development and urbanisation has resulted in problems such as soil degradation, salinisation, eutrophication of waterways, habitat loss and a subsequent loss of biodiversity all of which pose a threat to regional sustainability. All of this has produced a recognition by local stakeholders that conserving the natural resource base is important for future economic development and social well-being.

Following a consultation with local stakeholders to identify regional indicators we conducted a general survey of south west Victorian people to ascertain the extent to which they incorporated the social, economic and environmental into their understanding of sustainability (See O'Toole, et al. 2006). The telephone survey at the end of 2003 focused on 32 sub-catchments of the Glenelg-Hopkins catchment area that covers most of what is termed 'south west Victoria'. By randomly sampling individuals from within each sub-catchment we were able to examine the region as a whole as well as allowing comparisons to be made between sub-catchments.

The second data source derived from interviews in 2007 with local government practitioners from the four municipalities in the region whose boundaries were totally incorporated inside the catchment boundaries. The interviews were focused on establishing whether the social, economic and environmental pillars of sustainability were integrated into the local political and administrative routines. Using a semi-

structured format we interviewed five representatives of four councils in the region; Glenelg Shire, Moyne Shire, Southern Grampians Shire and the City of Warrnambool. Two of the municipalities had full time environment officers, one had a temporary staff member whose job it was to write a report about sustainability to the council and the other involved a councillor who had taken on the cause of sustainability for the council. The profiles of the municipalities were as follows:

Table 1
Profiles of municipalities

Municipality	Pop	Area	Total Expenditure 06/07 \$'000	Economic Activity
Glenelg	20,200	6,212 sq km	\$29,553	Agriculture – forestry, cattle, sheep. Manufacturing – aluminium smelter. Export Port – fishing, wood chips, live sheep.
Moyne	16,060	5,478 sq km	\$28,520	Mainly agricultural - dairy, beef cattle, sheep, vegetable production, fishing and tourism.
Sth Grampians	17,187	6,807 sq km	\$26,977	Mainly agriculture – sheep, cattle, forestry. Sand Mining.
Warrnambool	31,000	103 sq km	\$41,379	Local Regional Centre – Retail, Manufacturing, Health, Education

The in-depth interviews were designed to:

1. determine levels of awareness, knowledge and application of issue of sustainability and climate change.
2. investigate levels of awareness, knowledge and application of programs for sustainable development and climate change.
3. determine if the application of sustainable development programs was resulting in the integration of environmental decision making into local government practices.
4. determine if any move toward adoption of sustainable development programs is being transferred into local government policy.

Results

The results from the two data sources indicate that although the community in the south west region share some common values the integration of the social, economic and environmental pillars into one core notion of sustainability is still not embedded into the action or consciousness of local communities and local institutions.

In the community survey people were asked the question – what does sustainability mean to you? Nearly a third of respondents (29% or 155) were unsure of what the term sustainability meant and were not able to articulate a specific response. Another 36 percent of respondents (192) gave responses that were not specific to any pillar and the types of non-specific definitions provided are listed in Table 1.

Table 2
Non-pillar Specific Responses to the Meaning of Sustainability

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
• Keeping things going the same	122	63
• Providing for future generations	38	20
• Improving things		
• Other	19	10
	13	7
Total	182	100

Around a third of respondents (35% or 171) actually linked sustainability to a specific pillar and only a third of these included multiple pillars in their definitions. Furthermore the environmental pillar either singly or in combination was the dominant theme for these respondents as Table 2 demonstrates.

Table 3
Pillar Specific and Pillar Combinations to Responses to the Meaning of Sustainability

Pillars	Frequency	Percentage
Environmental	59	31
Social	29	15
Economic	27	15
Social + Environmental	17	9
Social + Economic	17	9
Environmental + Economic	29	15
Environmental + Social + Economic	10	6
Total	171	100

The data from in-depth interviews with staff or councillors from the four municipalities indicated quite a variation between the four councils. The awareness of sustainability and climate change as a central focus of local government activities was a lot more advanced in two of the municipalities as the following table indicates:

Table 4
Local government awareness of sustainability and climate change programs

Municipality	LA 21	CCP	Eco-buy ²	Waste-wise ³
One	✓	✓	✓	✓
Two	✓	✓	✓	✓
Three		✓		
Four	✓			✓

NB Numbers are randomly allocated

The application of sustainability programs to local council activities was again varied. Two of the municipalities have won awards in the implementation of one or more of these programs. One municipality is also one of the five pilot councils in the Victorian Local Sustainability Accord. As the following table indicates the implementation of sustainability in the local councils was not uniform.

Table 5
Local government application of sustainability and climate change initiatives

Municipality	Local policy	Specific sustainability committee	Community consultation for strategy	Partnerships with local groups
One				✓
Two	✓	✓		✓
Three	✓	✓	✓	✓
Four				

NB Numbers are randomly allocated

The application of sustainable development programs for the integration of environmental decision making into all local government practices had begun to take effect in one municipality. The council has adopted a sustainability strategy that includes both corporate and community goals. The strategy covers six areas – biodiversity, water, air (climate change), soil, waste and community. The appointment of an environmental officer has been used to assist the council and the administration to review its tasks in the light of the sustainability strategy. The aim is to embed an environmental consciousness into the organisation in such a way that the councillors, council officers and staff will incorporate it into their everyday practice. There is also a sense that the council cannot expect the community to participate in environmental change until it gets its own house in order.

A second municipality was attempting to integrate the environmental pillar into its accounting, auditing and compliance systems although it is still quite limited in scope. The council through an environmental officer is attempting to influence the internal work practices of its organisation through environmental education, project

² ECO-Buy is a government funded organisation established to encourage the purchasing of green products

³ Waste Wise is a practical, step-by-step government program to minimise waste and maximise the efficient use of valuable resources.

management and implementing relevant State government programs. The other two municipalities had yet to arrive at a policy framework to address the strategies required to attempt the integration process.

Discussion

There is widespread consensus about managing the environment at the local or regional level (Morrison and Lane 2005) and programs like LA21 and CCP were launched as strategies to progress sustainable development within the local context. However the evidence from the above investigation indicates that environmental concerns although clearly expressed by the local community are yet to be fully embedded in local governance structures in south west Victoria. The 'environment' still has to compete with local entrepreneurialism (economic) and regeneration (social) for recognition (Jonas, et al. 2004). Embedding the environmental dimension together with the economic and social dimensions requires a type of 'joined up' thinking that involves recognition in both the corporate and the community approaches to governance.

There are two major knowledge frameworks that need to be taken into account when attempting to integrate the environmental dimension into local governance. First there is local community knowledge about the extent to which the three dimensions of economic, social and environmental form one integrated form of decision making. The evidence above indicates that integrated thinking about sustainability is not widespread in the community. Local participation in some form of community governance is dependent upon effective knowledge systems (Freeman, et al. 1996) and at present it appears that the general understanding of sustainability is either non-existent, vague or focused on a particular pillar.

Secondly there is local government organisational knowledge that includes the functional areas of production, regulation and service provision. Embedding environmental accounting, auditing and compliance into the overall functional role of local government is not only an internal process it is also about imparting this consciousness to the wider community. However it appears that unless those who oversee the strategic directions of particular local governments are committed to specific change paths that include the environmental pillar it is unlikely that the practices of the organisation will shift. Furthermore there is the constant problem of re-aculturating people in their work environment especially if it impinges upon their own lifestyle. The interesting issue here is that climate change can be sudden but social adaptability always moves slowly as people are deeply entrenched in prevailing habits and norms. Adaptation often only comes after people have been shocked into change.

An important element here is the way that sustainability is built into electoral accountability. If as the councils in the south west of Victoria claim their strategy is to lead by example then the community will need to see transparent accounting systems that incorporate sustainability into the council policy and practices. A major problem with electoral politics is that policy more often responds to the electorate rather than being a leader. If policy does not accord with existing perceived habits, expectations, desires, wants and needs of the electorate then it will be either rejected or severely revised. Thus for council to invest in culture changing activities within its own organisation it has to be certain that it does not distract from the wants and needs of the electorate. It also has to be assured that the cultural changes can be demonstrated to the electorate in terms acceptable to them. In this respect the local

governance processes need to incorporate the community (in all its different manifestations – interest, place etc).

Reconciling the environmental dimension within these knowledge frameworks would ultimately lead to a more unified approach to governance. The theory is that a multi-dimensional approach will be integrative by 'joining-up' the two approaches in the array of disparate services, efficient through making better use of resources, accountable through increased knowledge of local resource allocation and service provision, and sustainable by weighing the outcomes of all three pillars at once. However there will be times when the economic, social and environmental dimensions will clash with one another. Attaining convergence among a diversity of actors and organizations is hard enough without the overlay of competing fields of practice.

Of course the different types of knowledge are sustained by an array of ideological interpretations of the meanings given to the environmental pillar. For members of a local community environment may focus on place based identity and the ownership, protection and care of a landscape for future economic or social output (Redclift 2005). In areas of policy development experts may make professional judgements 'on the type or the value of a resource – 'critical natural capital', 'biodiversity hotspots', 'commonpool resources' or 'natural sinks'' (Redclift 2005, p. 220). The interpretations reflect the interests of the people concerned and adoption of particular meanings is dependent upon the power exercised by those interests.

Social change can be difficult to achieve as people resist altering the ways they do things. Long established patterns of behaviour, institutional cultures with fixed policy frameworks and the control of programs by central and local bureaucracies can hamper efforts toward local systems for sustainability (Brunckhorst 2005). The dominance of corporate governance in local institutions hampers integration of the three pillars since devolution is organised along lines of accountability and auditing within separate silos of the organisation. The danger is that sustainability initiatives are detached from other local government activities like service delivery and policy development and become bounded in their own silo (Jonas, et al. 2004).

Conclusion

It would appear that an integration of the three sustainability pillars is not embedded in the knowledge frameworks of local community members in south west Victoria and that the environmental pillar is still the dominant focus of sustainability for many. This is quite understandable, especially when the literature on sustainability is still attempting to persuade people to 'integrate' their knowledge. While there may be attempts at integrative approaches to sustainability in local governance there is rarely 'integration' where knowledge is synthesised for the purposes of developing or reporting on programs and policies. Furthermore while local governments are trying to incorporate the environmental pillar into their organisational framework there is still uncertainty about how far that will go if higher level government support for sustainability initiatives dissolves. Nevertheless the introduction of a sustainability approach appears to have given some impetus to changes in local governance in Victoria. However the disparity both within and between the different knowledge networks is likely to impede a rapid movement toward greater integration of the environmental dimension into local governance.

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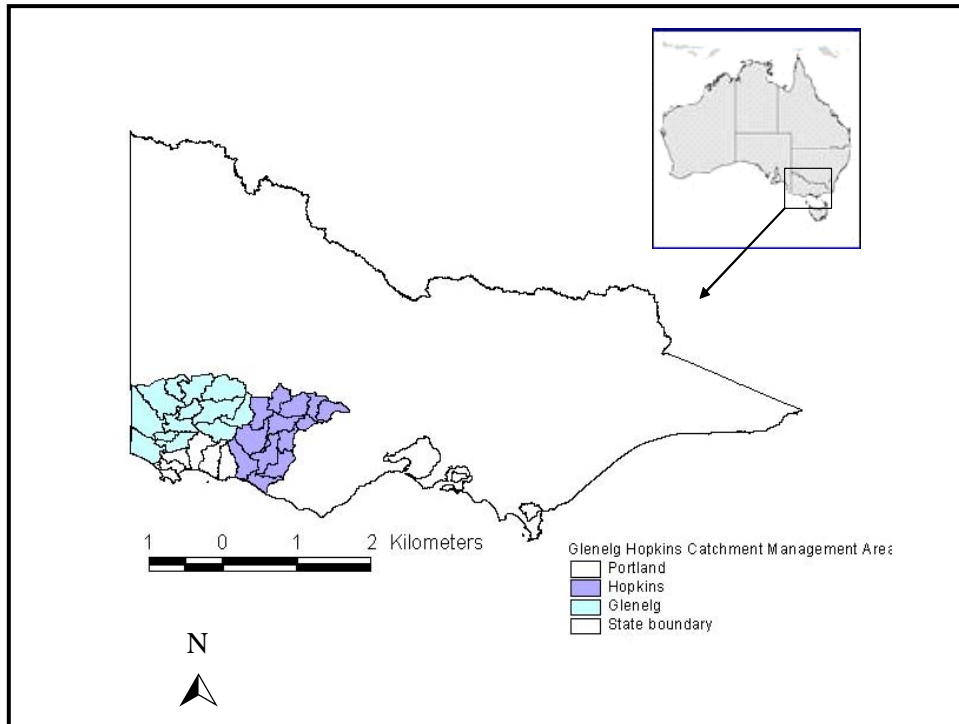


Figure 1: The south west region of Victoria as defined by the boundaries of the Glenelg Hopkins Catchment Management Area.

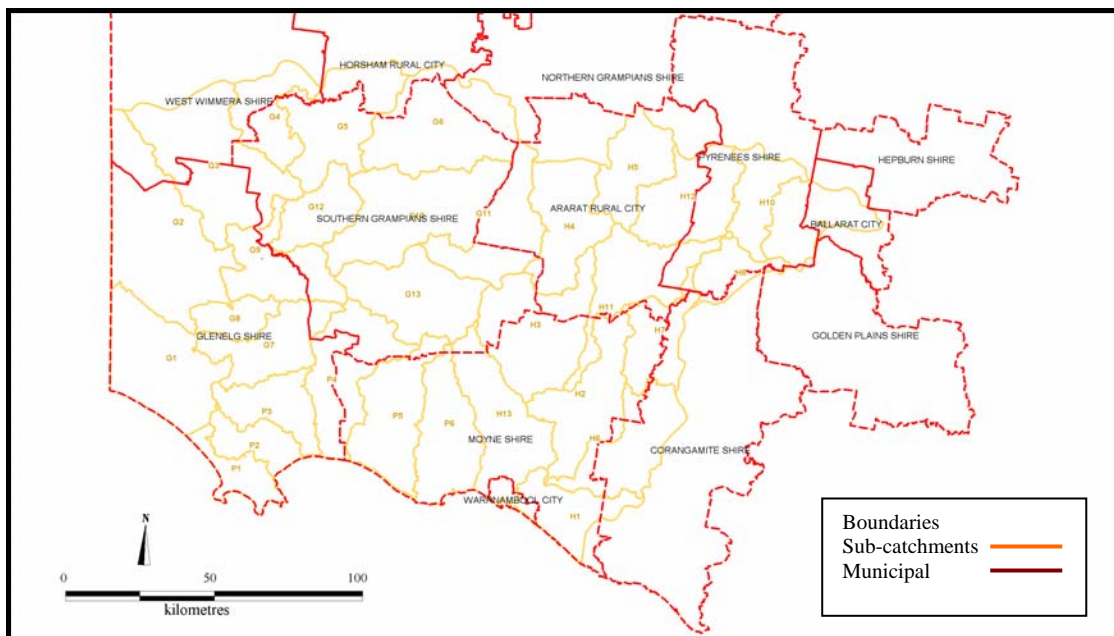


Figure 2: The region takes in three river basins, Portland, Hopkins and Glenelg with a total of 32 subcatchments. The region spreads across nine municipalities although only four are fully incorporated inside the region’s boundaries