A MULTI-LEVEL INVESTIGATION OF PLANNING IMPLICATIONS OF THE NATIONAL BROADBAND NETWORK IN AUSTRALIA

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The Australian government is currently constructing a National Broadband Network (NBN), which at an estimated cost of $43 billion will be Australia’s largest ever infrastructure project. The NBN is expected to provide terrestrial fibre network coverage for 93% of Australian premises by the end of 2020, with the remaining 7% served by fixed wireless and satellite coverage. The NBN, if its full potentials are to be realized, raises a number of important but to date largely unexplored questions for planning in Australia. The paper is part of a continuing study and questions to what extent the current planning strategies and policies at federal, state and local levels respond to the urban and regional possibilities of the NBN, whether economic, social or otherwise.

At federal level, the paper acknowledges the resurgence of Australian Federal Government interest in urban challenges with infrastructure as particular area of policy concern. It also reviews the recent initiatives taken by the Federal Government to provide for nationally-significant economic infrastructures including telecommunication and to avoid the tendency towards ad-hoc infrastructure decisions. The paper then attempts to investigate what connections the Australian government sees between the upcoming telecommunication infrastructure (NBN), urban policy and urban development outcomes. The findings reveal that the main planning matters seen as relevant to the NBN were spatial equity in access to advanced services within the context of a highly uneven continental settlement pattern.

At state level, the paper investigates the implications of the NBN for Australian metropolitan planning, and focuses on Sydney, as Australia’s largest metropolitan city. It analyses the major strategies and policy documents shaping the future of the region during the rollout and post construction periods of the NBN. The assessment is according to the three key themes identified in the literature - economic competiveness, infrastructure planning, and urban structure and processes, and reveals the weak stance towards the NBN and telecommunications generally. Some key findings include a segregation of infrastructure planning and metropolitan planning; a lack of consistency between different policies within the metropolitan area; and policy gaps regarding the role of telecommunications at the metropolitan level.

At local level, the paper offers a brief review of the NBN rollout plan so far and then examines the role defined for and played by the local governments in the first localities in Australia that have active NBN in place. It focuses on the first five mainland NBN release sites and attempts to analyse the policies developed to address the local opportunities and challenges raised by the NBN. The policy analysis will include three areas of interest identified in the literature - e-governance, socio-economic development and land-use planning.
Considering the growing worldwide interest in telecommunication infrastructure and broadband, this paper is appropriately timed and addresses policy issues that will impact upon future planning across the world. It identifies the main themes discussed in the international literature and uses them in a multi-level policy analysis. The results illuminate the need for a closer examination of planning strategies and policies and their stance towards the fast growing telecommunication infrastructure. The paper has to be understood as a prelude to further empirical and theoretical expansion when it comes to planning for telecommunication infrastructure.

References