



**What's Now. What's Next.**

**Access & Equity**

**↳ Social  
Infrastructure**



# Access & Equity: Social Infrastructure



Welcome to our **What's Now. What's Next.** series – an exploration of resilience, adaptation and antifragility in the context of an increasingly complex world.

In this paper, we consider how equitable access to social infrastructure differs across urban and rural settings.

# Leveraging infrastructure to support future communities

**Social infrastructure is a critical element of all kinds of communities – it increases productivity, stimulates growth and underpins liveability.**

Housing, schools, hospitals and sporting centres – and basic infrastructure such as power and potable water – significantly improves lives when it is designed and delivered to meet the specific needs of the local community.

Despite a growing acknowledgement of the value of social infrastructure, there remains a notable difference between urban and rural or remote areas when it comes to equity of access. With many communities experiencing rapid population growth, much of the infrastructure debate has been focused on fast-growing cities. However, this growth is not just confined to urban areas and the provision of better social infrastructure in rural and remote areas is lagging.

Perhaps not surprisingly, many urban centres around the world are home to purpose-built social infrastructure, while many regional, rural and remote areas lack access to essential infrastructure. Infrastructure Australia's 2022 **Regional Strengths and Infrastructure Gaps Report** highlights the inequity between cities and rural areas as "deeply pronounced".

Similarly, **Canada's Long-Term Infrastructure Plan** highlights the significant infrastructure gap in rural and northern communities – including little or no access to reliable transportation and broadband internet connectivity.

So, with the push for equitable provision of social infrastructure gaining traction, it's worth considering what can be done differently to close the discrepancy between urban and rural areas and support thriving communities. How can we make social infrastructure fit-for-purpose and accessible to all?

# The source of truth – understanding the local ‘lived experience’

**Because each community is different, listening to diverse local voices is critical to shaping appropriate social infrastructure.**

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- \* Unfortunately, understanding the ‘lived experience’, particularly of vulnerable or minority groups, is often missing from regional and rural infrastructure planning.
- \* This lack of genuine engagement with a diverse cross-section of people in our communities allows for incorrect assumptions to affect decision-making.

For example, a project to upgrade a cyclone shelter for a community in Australia’s Northern Territory revealed that the original shelter, despite its poor condition, was held in high regard by the local community as their Traditional Elders were involved in its construction. Original plans to knock the existing shelter down would have destroyed a piece of infrastructure that has come to hold social and cultural value for the local community. This was avoided through meaningful engagement with the community, ahead of confirming the methodology for the upgrade of the shelter.

In Canada, our engagement specialists recently worked with a suburban municipality to explore community payment options for waste management services. As part of this project, our practitioners hosted a ‘lived experience roundtable’. In this case, the lived experience was sought from people who had or were experiencing poverty. The roundtable sought to improve understanding of how potential changes to payment for waste services would impact these vulnerable citizens. The information obtained has been invaluable in helping to shape the new waste payment system, so that it works for everyone. It also demonstrates that engagement efforts can be a useful approach to build trust and rapport with community groups that are often left out of the consultation process.

# Engaging early and with the right intent

In most cases, maximising the value of social infrastructure requires focusing on the ‘collaborate’ and ‘empowerment’ end of the spectrum of **IAP2’s public participation continuum** – an internationally recognised benchmark for community engagement. For projects in major cities, it is a community expectation that everyone is given an opportunity to have their say. However, this is not typically the case in rural and remote areas, which often present unique access, geographic and cultural challenges.

**Infrastructure  
Australia’s recent  
infrastructure audit  
estimated that around**

**AUD20<sup>ⓑ</sup>**

**worth of infrastructure  
projects were delayed  
or cancelled due to  
community opposition  
over the past decade.**

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Poor community engagement, or incidents where people simply didn’t feel respected or heard, were the primary reasons for many of these outcomes.

It is essential to create respectful relationships and engage with communities at the outset of a project; this engagement should also leverage varied communication approaches that help overcome any physical, social or cultural barriers to meaningful participation.

# Holistic planning – at the intersection point of community needs

Planning for new infrastructure requires consideration of the unique ways a community's social, cultural, economic and environmental aspirations intersect – as it is often at the nexus point of these various elements that the true vulnerability of communities is seen. As an example, a new medical facility should consider the connecting bus or rail infrastructure to ensure that people relying on public transport can access it easily.

This holistic, systems approach also applies to considering local weather conditions; for instance, in Western Australia, some communities in the remote Kimberley area are cut off from essential social infrastructure during the wet season due to flooding of the Great Northern Highway. This highlights the need for even basic infrastructure – such as road networks that connect people from A to B – to be designed with the multiple interconnecting needs of the local community in mind.

Fortunately, holistic planning is being considered more frequently, particularly in relation to energy and resources developments in regional communities. For example, in Canada, project proponents are increasingly being asked by regulators and the communities themselves to consider

the indirect effects of their projects on vulnerable populations, which may be excluded from the economic and social benefits of development of new mines, energy projects or large-scale infrastructure. As an extension of this, Canada's new *Impact Assessment Act* requires proponents to apply 'Gender-based Analysis Plus' (GBA+) to impact assessments.

In remote communities, new mining developments can result in a shortage of accommodation and escalating housing costs, which impacts the local population relying on affordable rentals. Project proponents that consider direct and indirect impacts of social infrastructure are better positioned to gain community acceptance and political buy-in. Collaboration is needed between sectors and stakeholders to continue to break down barriers in planning, funding and governance, to maximise flow-on benefits of social infrastructure investment.

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# Applying learnings from urban settings to lead positive change

While acknowledging that ‘big city’ approaches can’t simply be replicated in regional locations, planners and engagement professionals can take key learnings from major urban centres and apply them to rural and remote areas to help achieve equitable access to social infrastructure and close the urban-rural divide.

Rural and remote social infrastructure can often focus, necessarily, on maintaining basic community function and meeting essential needs, such as upgrading schools or medical facilities, whereas projects in urban areas can be more focused on meeting future community needs, stimulating innovation and economic growth and enhancing liveability. There is an opportunity for us to bring this thinking to rural and remote social infrastructure – can the provision of even basic services be seen as opportunity to enhance a community’s sense of connection and identity? Can we look beyond the bricks and mortar solution to see the potential to bolster productivity and support connectivity?

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# Thinking differently about social infrastructure

There are positive signs that the importance of social infrastructure as an enabler of all sorts of communities – urban and regional – is attracting greater attention. For example, in 2021 for the first time, the **Australia Infrastructure Plan** included social infrastructure. The plan says ‘to drive more appropriate and effective investment, Australia needs a consistent national framework for valuing social infrastructure’. Similarly, **Europe’s Boosting Investment in Social Infrastructure** Report aims to ‘to raise political attention to the crucial role of social infrastructure and related services, to enhance public and private investments in this sector’. Canada has also added social infrastructure to one of its five main infrastructure spending streams.

When it comes to the provision of social infrastructure in regional and remote communities, we don’t just need more – we need better. Now is the time for a new approach, one that puts people first, incorporates the lived experience, is driven by tailored community engagement and takes a holistic and collaborative view.

There is no one size fits all – the approach will vary with each project and each community – but the learnings from our urban projects can help create places and spaces where people living outside our bigger cities can truly thrive.

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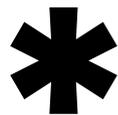
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# Contributors



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# About GHD

**GHD recognises and understands the world is constantly changing. We are committed to solving the world's biggest challenges in the areas of water, energy and communities.**

We are a global professional services company that leads through engineering, construction and architectural expertise. Our forward-looking, innovative approaches connect and sustain communities around the world. Delivering extraordinary social and economic outcomes, we are focused on building lasting relationships with our partners and clients.

Established in 1928, we remain wholly owned by our people. We are 10,000+ diverse and skilled individuals connected by over 200 offices, across five continents – Asia, Australia, Europe, North and South America, and the Pacific region.

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