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Achieving Full Employment in Remote Settlements: subsidiarity and path dependence

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Achieving Full Employment in Remote Settlements: subsidiarity and path dependence

Abstract

Many intertwined factors contribute to sustainability in the desert settlements of Birdsville and Bedourie. Taking one factor, the commitment to, and achievement of, full employment for all local residents, this paper draws data from a larger research project into desert settlement sustainability to unpack the components that have interplayed through history and into the present to make that local goal achievable. Current sustainability in these two settlements can be seen as an effect of astute and entrepreneurial adaptation of contemporary opportunities, both external such as policy and internal such as local resources. Yet, the capabilities underpinning such adaptations and the aspirations that drive them have a local history that exists in complex relationship to broader socio-political developments. The ways in which these settlements have resolved past conflicts, addressed past challenges and invested in certain directions over others can all be seen as contributing factors in present sustainability (and associated vulnerabilities). The analysis of this paper suggests that whilst changes in national and state level policy can be swift and impose short timeframes for producing outcomes, the achievement of sustainable settlement outcomes depends on social dynamics and path dependencies that have developed slowly, over time in the particular geographical locale. Settlements inevitably build upon, rather than act outside of, their own legacies, and this is too rarely apprehended in the process of external policy intervention in settlements. The case study of this paper suggests that, as best case scenario, external policy is one component to be employed in what is essentially a local creative process, and it is this creative process that, if tapped, produces sustainability.

Keywords

remote economy, full employment, Aboriginal

Cover Page Footnote

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Introduction

Small towns in regional Australia may contribute substantially to the well-being of society and to national economic productivity, whilst struggling to maintain their own viability. The presence of large national and multi-national mining and pastoral companies in a region may not necessarily mean good employment options locally or translate as local economic strength (Beer, 2006; Gray and Lawrence, 2001). This paper is about two small settlements on the eastern edge of the Simpson Desert in western Queensland: Birdsville and Bedourie. Whilst all desert settlements share some characteristics considered likely to contribute to vulnerability (Stafford Smith, 2008), and whilst all are dependent to some extent on government funding, these two towns, unlike many others, have achieved significant sustainability, including full employment. Examining how that has come about, the paper proposes that a local focus on the local economy, held over the long term by long term local people is the characteristic of these settlements that has enabled the achievement of full employment.

Two concepts are considered useful in understanding the achievements of these towns. Firstly, current sustainability is the result of good governance at a local level that actively seeks and adapts external policy opportunities to its own needs. This we argue is an example of *subsidiarity* (Carozza, 2003). Secondly, current sustainability results from the layering of relationships, decisions, actions, events, and feelings over time which culminates in a pathway that is unique to these settlements. This we are calling *path dependence* (Pierson, 2000; 2004). Path dependence builds on itself as a community goes about its business managing internal conditions and external impacts. Community norms and narratives consolidate path dependence so that inclusions and exclusions accumulating over time become increasingly hard to change.

Beginning with a brief summary of literature and method, this paper then presents a profile relevant to understanding the employment achievements in the two towns, and goes on to explain how these have been achieved and why the concepts of subsidiarity and path dependence are relevant.

Desert Settlement Sustainability: locating the case studies in the literature

Rural and remote towns in the arid and semi-arid zones are not homogenous (Holmes, 2002). Whilst the literature provides some typologies (Newman et al., 2008; Maru et al., 2006), these mostly revolve around remoteness, size, economic function and socio-economic indicators. As Newman et al. (2008) point out,

settlements themselves have had little input to discussion of typologies, and hopefully this will be remedied as research continues. Given the recent emphasis on remote Aboriginal communities, it seems useful for this paper to distinguish between three types of remote, arid settlement. These are (i) predominantly Aboriginal settlements (ii) predominantly settler towns, where, if there is an Aboriginal population, the people are largely marginalised and disadvantaged, and, (iii) settlements where settler and Aboriginal communities both actively contribute to, and benefit from, the life of the town. The towns discussed in this paper belong to this latter category.

Remote regions in Australia have a number of key characteristics including climate variability, low population densities, high environmental variability, remoteness from markets and centres of power and a high proportion of Aboriginal people in the local populations (Stafford Smith, 2008). Stafford Smith refers to these as desert drivers. High levels of unemployment are common in very remote areas, especially amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Altman and Martin, 2009). It has been well established that persistent unemployment and poor social development are closely related (remoteFocus, 2008). The towns considered in this paper experience all of the desert drivers cited by Stafford Smith, and yet, they have actively promoted and found the means of achieving, full employment. This has both necessitated and contributed to beneficial levels of social development. Throughout this paper the capability to generate and sustain full employment will be the primary focus.

Moran (2009), in the context of national debate about ‘viability’ of remote Aboriginal communities, points out that “there are, in fact, many jobs in the bush, but there are substantial barriers to Aboriginal recruitment, and many more jobs are being performed than are actually paid for”. The more remote the area, the more dimensions of life requiring the active input of Aboriginal people, such as, attending planning forums, contributing to natural resource planning, and providing assistance to paid service providers, so they can do their job. These activities are combined with providing numerous unpaid caring tasks, and with the ongoing work of maintaining language, culture, country and engaging in natural resource and cultural heritage work. Overcoming the barriers to Aboriginal recruitment in mainstream remote activities (particularly construction) has been significant in achieving sustainability in the settlements of this case study, as has turning tasks of desert living into paid work. In both of these towns, maintaining good relationships between Aboriginal and settler populations has been a key to success.

Investment of public money in remote areas is currently a contentious topic that has been politically linked to notions of sustainability and viability (Johns, 2009). Viability is generally used in current discussions to mean having economic function and purpose that are recognised as legitimate by mainstream Australia. So the argument ‘no job, no house’ (Johns, 2009) is a viability argument which is unsympathetic to people’s commitment to place and relationships. Sustainability can be taken to mean ‘the existence of conditions which enable a settlement to have a long term future’ (Newman et al., 2008, p. 1). Three conditions can be read into this statement: (i) people choose to live in a place for a variety of reasons, and (ii) residents foster the social and economic conditions that support human life, and (iii) residents draw on the natural resources of the area, without destroying the potential for future generations to do the same. Few cities, towns or settlements in Australia are sustainable across all of these dimensions and none would be without government support. Sustainability will always rest on some conditions that locals have no control over as well as some they can control. Nevertheless, this makes it important to consider why and how some settlements succeed where others do not.

Further, this paper identifies some of the attributes that enable Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people to work together to manage desert drivers to their own ends. In the case study settlements, this has required significant bridging of two very different cultures and has required the effort of people of both cultures. For Aboriginal people in these settlements there have been enormous accommodations and yet they articulate returns for effort. Three particular things are identified by local Aboriginal people. Firstly, they have stayed on their country, with all that that entails: secondly, their children are equipped for the contemporary world; and thirdly, they have ‘a not bad life’ compared to what they see when they visit other remote communities.

Long term academic and personal commitment to remote Aboriginal settlements, has led people like Peter Sutton to express some despair at their current socio-economic plight. Sutton (2009) calls for closer attention to the very, very different cultures of Aboriginal and settler people. Underestimating this difference, he argues, undermines appreciation of what can be done on one culture’s part to address current problems in some very distressed communities. In the end, he attributes bridge building between cultures to ‘personal relationships’ and this is certainly a feature of the case studies of this paper.

Birdsville (population 100) and Bedourie (population 140) are the only two inhabited settlements of Diamantina Shire. There was a third, Betoota, which has been uninhabited since 2004. Note that 66 Australian towns disappeared between

2001 and 2006 mostly due to them being swallowed up by urban sprawl, however 25 rural towns disappeared because their populations dropped below 200 (Salt, 2008). The use of the term 'town' is generally reserved for populations larger than 200, however the Desert Knowledge CRC, Sustainable Desert Settlements Core Program, uses the term settlement and town interchangeably depending on the audience. 'Town' is used when referring to residents responsible for small settlement management, and 'settlement' is used for the wider research audience as a field of inquiry. Thus, 'settlements' refers to the whole inter-related dynamic that includes: (1) the communities of people that use, associate with and access the settlement; (2) the physical structures, network flows and services created by and for these communities; and (3), the general environmental and evolutionary (including. 'path dependency') context drivers that when all the above three areas are combined as a complex interlinked system, define at any time, the total entity of the Settlement. The term 'community' refers to groups of socially related people, so that there could be several communities associated with any one settlement. Settlements with less than 200 people living in isolated contexts would then appear to be vulnerable by any conventional calculation. Yet the settlements discussed in this paper have multiple strengths, and it is argued through this paper that these strengths emerge from a bottom-up determination to make desert drivers work to their advantage. It is this bottom-up capacity, and its contribution to sustainability, that is explored in this paper through the concept of subsidiarity.

Paulo Corozza (2003, p. 38) provides a simple definition for what is a complex concept – but it is a good starting place:

Subsidiarity is the principle that each social and political group should help smaller or more local ones accomplish their respective ends, without, however, arrogating those tasks to itself.

Subsidiarity has become an important concept in the European Union, as a principle to inform action for mutual benefit by federated nations without compromising the sovereignty of member states, arrogating their powers or muting their distinctive voices and cultures. The term has had some use in Australia, mainly in relation to discussions concerning powers of Federal, State and local government (Head, 2007), and to argue for greater powers for local government (Brown, 2002). The term is introduced into this discussion because it is capable of articulating a number of ideas about social organisation and about relations between groups and the state, that are particularly important to remote governance. The first and most important use of the term in this discussion is to focus the relationship between remote settlements and the state and federal governments. The aim of subsidiarity in these relations would always be to foster the capacity of the local to govern locally. This requires some flexibility, given

that state and federal governments generally create policies that apply top-down to the whole of their jurisdictions. It requires appreciation on their part that remote local government necessarily takes on a broader role than is the case for urban local government and that local government in remote areas will need to work hard to make policies and programs that are designed for urban areas ‘fit’ their remote areas.

Carozza (2003, p. 141) traces the genealogy of the term back to ancient Greece, and later, to Catholic Church encyclicals, where the emphasis was on public authorities assisting, yet not intruding, or preventing, the local from “accomplishing what they can on their own”.

It is this phrase that is so important to remote governance. There must be federal and state government support and resources, but these must facilitate and foster capability and competent governance at the remote site. These external levels of government have a duty to assist the remote government but an equal duty not to undermine their local sovereignty. Developing local remote governance capability however, is achieved over time and cannot be assumed or imposed (Dollery et al., 2010).

Theoretically, subsidiarity can operate locally to create a bridge between local groups, endorsing pluralism and difference, whilst building social cohesion and unity (Carozza, 2003). In a remote context, this might mean local government having appreciation that the communities and settlements within its jurisdiction are both related and distinct. The challenge is to enable them to preserve sovereignty over their distinctiveness, whilst fostering unity between and across groups. This has been, and remains, a sensitive point of relations in Australia between culturally different groups. This is where path dependence comes in.

Path dependence is a concept often used in economic and institutional development to signal that past decisions set up a train of investments, returns, consequences and logic that will act as forces in the shaping of subsequent decisions (Pierson, 2000). Examples often given are that the decision to establish a single keyboard layout, QWERTY, constrained all subsequent design decisions, even at the major transition from typewriter to computer (David, 1985); or that having developed a complex system of sewers, cities were then constrained in their thinking about how to deal with sewerage (Praeger, 2007). Path dependence however is about both enabling and constraining forces. We draw on the concept in this paper in terms of examining how choices made at a local level, in response to externalities such as policy developments, derive from the specifics of local history, and also how choices made through the history of a settlement have

shaped current relations between communities of those settlements. Past choices in turn shape future choices, investments and possibilities. This is not to subscribe to a fully deterministic view of development, but rather to identify that local communities institutionalise certain ways of being in the world through a layering process that may not be amenable to sudden change, no matter how positive the external force. Pierson (2000) argues that path dependence can explain both linear development over time, and also moments when the contradictions have built up, and force a path deviation. Combined, the concepts of path dependence and subsidiarity provide a way of thinking about how change might happen in remote settlements, and how it can be nurtured and sustained, and these concepts might help explain why certain interventions are successful in some settlements and not in others.

Method

The findings in this paper are drawn from a larger Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre project examining the sustainability of desert settlements. This component of that study was conducted using a mixed methods research design in order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of how the Diamantina Shire has developed over time to secure social and economic sustainability. This approach also facilitated engagement with the people of the Shire to better understand how they see the strengths and vulnerabilities. Mixed methods, employed over time, extend the insights possible about a situation in ways not possible through a single method approach (Mertens, 2003; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003).

The first stage involved a literature review to gain an overview of the development of the settlements and the underlying issues they faced. The literature review also examined the socio-economic challenges faced by remote desert settlements in achieving sustainable development.

The second stage of the project involved establishing a relationship with the councilors and staff of the Shire, the business owners and other residents. The research team included an Aboriginal researcher, who facilitated intensive engagement with the Aboriginal people of the Shire, and ensured that their perspectives were included.

Interviews occurred over a three year period beginning in mid-2006 and finishing in mid-2009. In the first instance the researchers interviewed 70 residents from across all groups, positions and roles in the community. This was followed by validation discussions and provided the first 'picture' of sustainability. An

interpretation of the interviews was presented as a power point display on an electronic photo-frame that was displayed in both towns for several weeks.

An important development from this first round of data gathering and presentations was the women's art group in Birdsville. This emerged around a desire to tell the history of Birdsville from an Aboriginal perspective through a more comfortable medium than words. Desert Knowledge CRC funded this process and commissioned the painting. Many stories emerged during the painting process and the painting itself provided a powerful and positive image of how people from two very different cultures, had, over time, sustained their relations to each other and to place.

In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with the business owners in the Shire over a period of 18 months directly addressing the issues of employment in the Shire. While conducting the research, the researchers visited the Shire approximately every three months. Regular visits were important in maintaining relationships, building trust and allowing researchers to appreciate the complexities involved in sustaining these towns.

Other activities were also undertaken by the researchers during the period of the research that contributed to reciprocal relations. For example, the researchers undertook a cost of living study for the Shire. In addition, a tourism workshop, hosted by the Diamantina Shire and involving two neighboring Shires, was facilitated by the researchers. Finally, the women artists were flown to Alice Springs accompanied by the researchers where they gave several presentations.

Whilst the early interviews were not recorded, but rather written up from notes and validated by respondents, later interviews were recorded and transcribed. In both, respondents had opportunity to amend where necessary. The direction of analysis, including the relevance of theoretical constructs has been checked with respondents, who have had the opportunity to read drafts of emerging papers.

Diamantina Shire

Despite being 200 kilometres apart Birdsville and Bedourie are interdependent due to the remoteness of the two towns in the Diamantina Shire. Birdsville contributes the iconic status that attracts tourists while Bedourie provides the strong administrative base for the Shire. One of the strengths of these two towns is their acknowledged relationship of interdependence within the one Shire. It is then this 94,832 km² Shire with its 307 people (ABS, 2008) that is the unit of sustainability. The leadership shown by the local government has ensured the

Aboriginal and settler populations have worked together to secure full employment for everyone, even through the economic downturn of 2008-09. In 2009, there were five councillors; reduced from seven in 2008 as part of the Local Government reform in Queensland (see Diamantina Shire Council, 2007; LGRC 2007).

The Wangkangurru/Yarlulandi People are people of the Simpson Desert. They moved around the area that is now Diamantina Shire and west almost to Alice Springs as part of their economic and ceremonial pursuits for thousands of years. They began to settle in Birdsville during the 1890s. Trips to the desert, taking along older and younger family members, remain a central part of life. There are still some of the older People alive who maintain the songs of their country. The Wangkangurru/Yarlulandi People claim unbroken contact with the Simpson Desert and there is a Native Title Claim current. The Wangkamadla are the traditional owners in the Bedourie area. They have now moved elsewhere, and it is Wangkangurru people who, with respect for the traditional owners, care for country across the Shire now.

Explorers, including Sturt, and Burke and Wills traversed this country in the mid 1800s. Pastoralists started arriving around 1870-1880. Mostly from Britain, early pioneers found the country very harsh and only the most resilient stayed. Some of these original families are still living in the Shire. As stated previously, the current population of the Shire is 307 (see Table 1).

Table 1: Population: Birdsville and Bedourie and Diamantina Shire

	Birdsville	Bedourie	Shire
People	115	142	307
Male	59	78	237
Female	56	64	171

Source: Data compiled from: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006)

Despite the small population of Diamantina Shire, the Shire's socio-economic indicators compare favourably with Queensland-wide data, and indicate the close relations between favourable social and economic conditions (see Table 2).

Table 2: Selected Characteristics: Comparison to Queensland

	Diamantina Shire	Queensland
Median Age	35	36
% Under 15	16.2%	20.7%
% 65 and over	5.4%	12.4%
% with profound or severe disability	0.0%	4.0%
Median Weekly Income Individual	\$588	\$476
Median weekly household income	\$1069	\$1033
Median housing loan repayment (monthly)	\$475	\$1300
Median Rent weekly	\$ 85	\$200
Average household size	1.8	2.6

Source: Department of Infrastructure and Planning, 2007

Aboriginal people constitute 3.1 percent of Queensland's population, compared to Birdsville's Aboriginal population of 33.9 percent and Bedourie's 28.2 percent. Generally speaking across Australia, the higher the percentage of Aboriginal peoples in the population, the lower the median weekly wage. It is perhaps most instructive to compare Diamantina with neighbouring Shires of Barcoo and Boulia. Diamantina Shire can be seen to have achieved significantly higher wages for Aboriginal people than neighbouring Boulia Shire which has a comparable size Aboriginal population (see Table 3).

Table 3: Median Weekly Income by Aboriginal Status Diamantina, Boulia, Barcoo

	Percentage of Aboriginal Population	Median Weekly Income Aboriginal Persons	Median Weekly Income Other Persons
Diamantina	27.9%	553	613
Boulia	24.4%	226	615
Barcoo	6.7%	500	578

Source of Basic Data: ABS Census (2006)

Although the Shire would like to grow its population, projections by the Queensland State Government suggest that it will remain fairly stable. The population is predicted to be 327 in 2026 (Queensland Government, 2008a).

Such small population does constitute a vulnerability, especially as children leave for High School and often do not come back to live. Nevertheless the core population of Aboriginal people and settler families have a very long term association with the place. Their children and extended families remain very connected and involved. Therefore the population committed to the place is much higher than the population recorded as living there. This is consistent with research on other remote communities (Guerin, 2008).

Employment in contemporary economies is intimately linked with educational outcomes. In Diamantina Shire, as across Australia, non-Aboriginal educational outcomes are stronger than those of Aboriginal people (Figure 2).

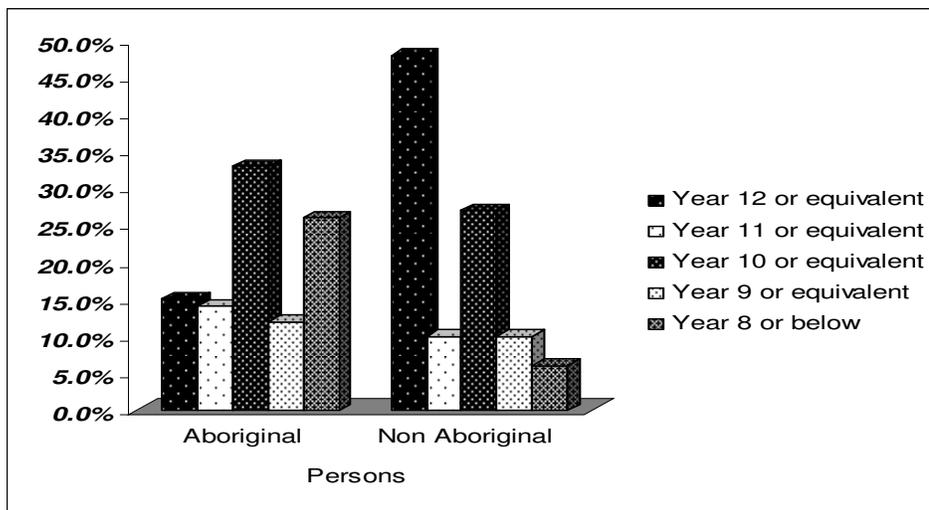


Figure 2: Educational Attainment by Indigenous Status: Diamantina Shire 2006

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008

Therefore, despite Aboriginal people having a high level of full time employment and good income, because of their relatively poor educational outcomes they have a more limited choice in occupational opportunities. This is reflected in the level of Aboriginal managers in the Shire (see Figure 3)

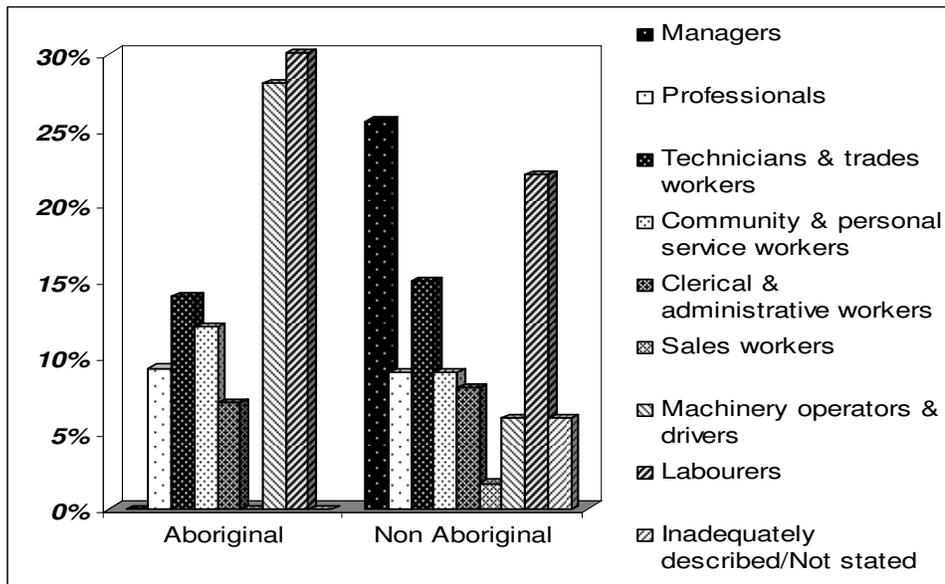


Figure 3: Occupation by Aboriginal Status in Diamantina Shire

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006

Table 4: Employment by occupation in Birdsville/Bedourie compared to national employment – 2006

Occupation (Employed persons 15 years of age and over)	% employed in region	% employed in Australia
Managers	21.5	13.2
Technicians & Trades	15.5	14.4
Professionals	9.0	19.8
Labourers	22.5	10.5
Sales Workers	5.0	9.8
Clerical & Administration	8.5	15.0
Community and Personal Service	9.5	8.8
Machinery Operators and Drivers	8.5	6.6

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2007)

Table 5: Employment by sector in Birdsville/Bedourie compared to national employment - 2006

Industry of employment (Employed persons 15 years of age and over)	% employed in region	% employed in Australia
Sheep, Beef Cattle and Grain Farming	30.5	1.5
Local Government/Administration	28.5	1.4
Accommodation	5.0	1.3
Other Construction Services	3.0	0.5
Building Completion Services	3.0	1.4
Supermarket and Grocery Stores	9.5	2.4
Heavy and Civil Engineering Construction	6.0	0.6
Legal and Accounting Services	2.0	2.0
Other	12.5	N/A

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2007)

Figure 4 shows the gross revenue generated by businesses and organisations in Diamantina Shire. The total output estimate for Diamantina is \$33.672 million. It can be seen that Agriculture Forestry Fishing is the major sector providing 27.6 percent of the output. This reflects the size of the cattle industry in Diamantina Shire. It is followed by Government Administration & Defense (26.4 percent) and Construction (22.6 percent). Both of these are predominantly Council's own operations of administration and roads construction. Smaller, but important sectors are Accommodation, Cafes & Restaurants (9.4 percent) and Retail Trade (5.4 percent).

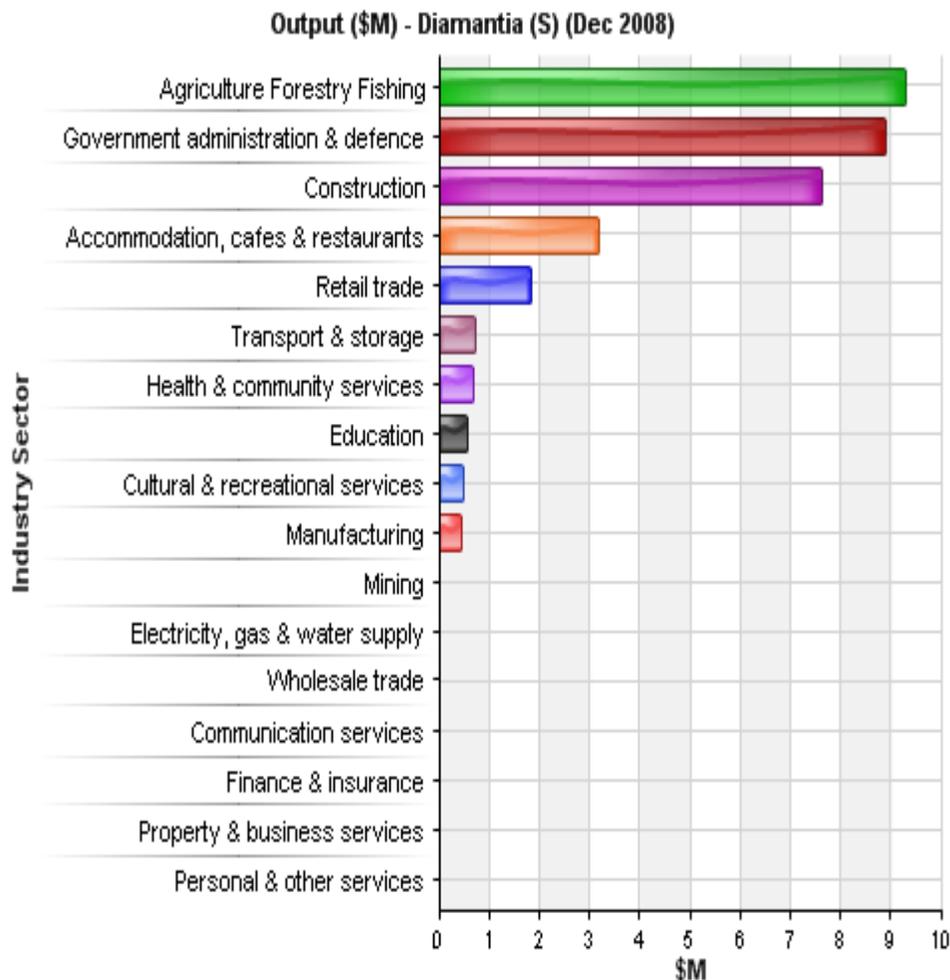


Figure 4: Economic Structure of Diamantina Shire

Source: Based on Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006 Census Community Profile.

Table 6: Employment in the Diamantina Shire ranked by industry sectors

Sector	Jobs	%
Agriculture Forestry Fishing	54	30.9
Government administration & defence	48	27.4
Accommodation, cafes & restaurants	20	11.4
Construction	16	9.1
Retail trade	16	9.1
Health & community services	7	4.0
Education	5	2.9
Cultural & recreational services	3	1.7
Transport & storage	3	1.7
Manufacturing	3	1.7
Finance & insurance	0	0.0
Property & business services	0	0.0
Personal & other services	0	0.0
Communication services	0	0.0
Mining	0	0.0
Electricity, gas & water supply	0	0.0
Wholesale trade	0	0.0
Total	175	100.0

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006

The extremely low unemployment rate of 2 percent in 2008 in the Diamantina Shire compares very favourably with unemployment 5.8 percent rate across Australia (ABS, 2009). The adjacent Peterson area located across the border in the Northern Territory had a 13 percent unemployment rate, whilst regional Western Australia had 5.4 percent and Far Western New South Wales had a 10.2 percent (Workplace, 2009). Overall the overall Australian Aboriginal unemployment rate was 16 percent (Workplace 2009).

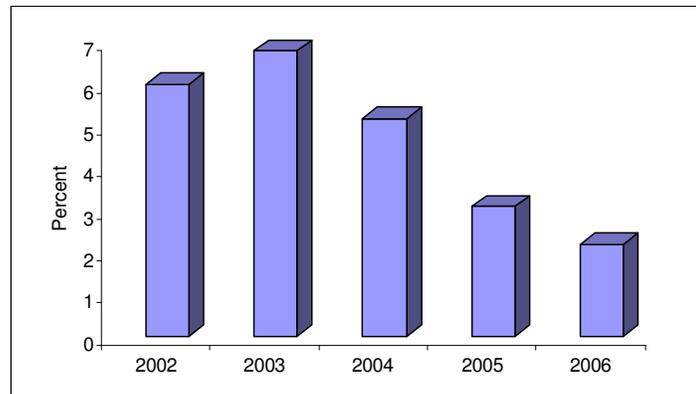


Figure 5: Unemployment in Diamantina Shire, Queensland 2002-2006

Source of basic data: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2008)

Discussion

This profile of Diamantina Shire provides only the briefest sketch of a very remote Shire with a tiny population that is currently achieving quite good outcomes on most conventional indicators. Unemployment is low, employment and wages are good, social conditions are good and population is stable, despite the significant drift to the cities from most remote areas. Although the private sector is small, the economy is quite strong. Indicators however are a reflection rather than cause of sustainability. Sustainability inheres, rather, in a set of capabilities and practices that occur locally. The discussion provides some insight into some local dynamics that contribute to sustainability.

The Pastoral Industry

From settlement of this region until the mid-1960s the beef industry was the centre of the economy of the two towns and the Shire. It was the main employer of local people, and as elsewhere across Australia, Aboriginal families lived and worked on stations contributing to stock management, station tasks and domestic work. For the most part good relations were formed between pastoral families and Aboriginal families in this area. These relations provided the basis of respect and long term sociability within the Shire. This respect was probably not so unusual as there are many accounts of benevolent and loyal relations developing between pastoralists and the Aboriginal people whose traditional land they were on (Bowman, 1989; McGrath, 1987; Rowse; 1998). This is not to deny there were also, everywhere, some stations where cruelty, even murder occurred and hired labour including Aboriginal people, were demeaned. Yet, McGrath (1987) points

out that the arrangement on the pastoral stations often suited settler and Aboriginal families alike. This is consistent with the accounts of Aboriginal people in Diamantina Shire. Aboriginal people were very attached to the land where they worked as stockmen, lived and raised their children. McGrath (1987) reports that Aboriginal people in her study felt themselves to be in de facto possession of their own land, looking after it and performing cultural responsibilities. In the meantime pastoralists gained labour at a cost the station could afford. Aboriginal people say that looking back, the wages were unfair, but at that time, wages were less important than being on country, doing the work of stockman, and being respected within a sociable environment.

In terms of path dependence, it is very clear from current conversations with people in Diamantina, that respectful relations began in these days of working together to establish the stations and manage the stock. A layer of sociality and mutual respect was built. Even though people may consider in retrospect that the conditions were often unfair, the relationships continue to be highly valued.

The introduction of equal wages for Aboriginal people in 1965 changed relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people across rural and remote Australia. The Productivity Commissioner, Gary Banks, (2009, p. 6) reflecting on the unintended consequences of that as a national policy, noted that:

Despite warnings by some at the time, this apparently well-motivated action led to the majority losing their jobs, driving them and their extended families into the townships – ultimately subjecting them to the ravages of passive welfare, with liberalized access to alcohol as the final blow. Good intentions, bad consequences, very, very, difficult to remedy.

Whilst national policy led unwittingly to loss of employment for Aboriginal people, and whilst all local communities witnessed this and the despair that accompanied it, most communities did little about it until the negative consequences were very obvious. In many cases where goodwill had existed between cultures on some stations, the reduction in livelihood for Aboriginal people was not as great. In Diamantina Shire this divergence was not allowed to happen. A local response was articulated so as to maintain full employment in the Shire. This bottom-up dynamic did not contest federal policy rather it was a proactive local response to the changes that occurred as a consequence of it. The combined effects of federal policy and local initiative for change meant that a discriminatory practice against Aboriginal people was ended, the cattle industry was freed up to modernise, and the local community was kept fully employed in jobs that paid full wages and offered opportunities for training and development.

This is a good example of subsidiarity with each level of government acting within its appropriate realm of responsibility. Several things contributed to this possibility.

The governance of the Shire, by this time, was firmly in the hands of quite experienced local councilors, largely pastoralists and businessmen. Senior council staff may have been brought in from outside, but the strategic direction was held by long term locals. The same families ran the stations, the businesses and the Council. They were the main employers and had grown up alongside, and in respectful relations with, their Aboriginal peers, therefore this local government group had community support. This group saw that there was a strong work ethic already established in the community, this contributed to social cohesion, and the policy shift that led to loss of pastoral jobs put this at risk. They recognised that they must take action to remedy the emerging situation.

The Construction Industry

Through a stroke of entrepreneurial creativity, Council determined to turn its works and road maintenance responsibilities into a business that would secure grants and contracts and therefore the capacity to employ all those locals who would, in the past, have worked on the pastoral stations. With investments in road plant, training, traineeships, apprenticeships, human resource development, and good management, Council is now able to undertake sophisticated construction tasks like airport upgrades, is able to employ between 60-80 staff across its administration and construction activities and is able to generate surpluses that are reinvested in community. Certainly this work is supported by, and would not be possible without, the *Road Grants Scheme* funded by the Federal Government and construction contracts funded by the State Government. While government funding is important, the point of subsidiarity is that the initiative is driven by local government that has full support of its community.

In the process of considering options following the decline of employment in the pastoral industry, the Council made a decision not to go with Aboriginal specific employment programs. At that time, in an attempt to address growing Aboriginal unemployment across Australia, the Federal Government introduced the *Community Development Employment Program* (CDEP). This program funded organisations to develop initiatives that would offer part-time employment to Aboriginal people. It was thought that part-time work would sit well with other cultural responsibilities. Around this time, the community elected its first Aboriginal representative (and also the first woman) to Council. Council made a decision that a program that formally treated one group in the Shire differently

from other groups would be divisive and undermine respect. They preferred to look for an option that would provide real jobs for all community members. Again, this illustrates subsidiarity, with the Council relating to wider government policy in a way which best reflected local needs, relationships and agendas.

Social Cohesion, Shared Work Ethic and Cultural Difference

Subsidiarity intersects with path dependence in-so-far as this choice of Council's at this crucial transition point has had a number of spin offs. Workers who lost their jobs on cattle stations, and who had well-developed habits of attending work, organising daily life in ways that made work possible, participating in convivial activities around work in ways that support the work habit, did not lose these habits and skills but rather were able to transfer them to another workplace and other work tasks. Undoubtedly, some people left the community in the period between one industry closing off and another opening up. In addition, some cattle stations also bridged the gap, keeping on some Aboriginal stockmen until they retired or until more work became possible. Investment in the local workforce in this way also meant that the town maintained its sociability; the chasm between groups that is obvious in many settler towns did not occur here. There are no people congregating to drink in public places, or drunk about town in the daytime. Health problems and family breakdown associated with unemployment and loss of hope did not occur here. Children grew up in an atmosphere of adult responsibility. Crime is minimal and the community maintains a commitment to safety. Of course, as in any town, there are always things to attend to, and the struggle is ongoing. We would not want to present an artificially glowing picture, but, we emphasise strongly that the effects of this decision are profound, and that not to have made that choice at that time could have created circumstances that, to echo the above quote by Gary Banks (2009, p. 6) would be 'very, very difficult to remedy'.

It is 150 years since Aboriginal people encountered the encroaching pioneer settlers. From all accounts the early years of contact, after a cordial start, became treacherous, and many Aboriginal people were killed, died of disease, were sent to missions or left town. The Aboriginal families interviewed for this paper began to settle as stockmen and domestic help on the stations only 70 years or so ago. Elders today can still remember childhoods with their mobile desert families. Early in their contact with European settlers, these families had made their own decisions that contributed their part to a path dependent future. Faced with the recognition that a new way of life was happening here, and there could be no going back, the Elders decided that their way forward would be through relations

with the settler families. They taught their children to respect the settlers. These children, now adults, recount many stories from their parents that put the settler families in good light, stories of being looked after at key crisis times, of being sociable by the campfire, of caring for each other through sickness, family deaths and difficulties. Through this choice, and these actions, a path was being created that would enable Aboriginal people to stay on country, enable extended families to stay together and yet, provide children with the skills and knowledge they would need to live in this new world. Compromises were made – Aboriginal people agreed to live in ways that they refer to as ‘whitefella ways’, they began to shape their own and each others’ behaviour by whitefella norms. These actions, each small, but sometimes requiring significantly tough family decisions, were the social glue that respect and cohesion required. The work ethic became an arbiter of who was and was not welcome to stay in the towns. Family members, who wanted to drink all day, may be sent off to do it elsewhere. Culture was lived in private, celebrated between families, beyond white eyes. This could be seen as subjection to the forces of assimilation, or to white norms, but as Bourdieu (1986) says, norms are strategic behaviors, and to choose them is an act of local agency, albeit not under circumstances of their own choosing. Like all choices however, this one has had its costs. The biggest cost for Aboriginal people has been the divisions it has created between Aboriginal and Aboriginal. Blaser (2004) points out that across the world Aboriginal people have had to choose between various levels of assimilation and various levels of resistance. Those who choose mainly the former are seen by those who choose mainly the latter as cosying up to the white people. This drives wedges within families and between families that are hard to heal. What was good for the town, and for some families, was also hard on some family members, hard on relations between some families, and hard on culture.

To summarise, so far, a number of pathways have been established here, that have required investments, had consequences, and that have strengthened over time to provide the platform for any choices to be made today. For Aboriginal people, some of the layers laid down to date appear to be the decision to stay on country, the decision to live respectfully with the settlers, the decision to contribute to creating full employment in the community, the decision to live within settler articulated community norms, and to require that extended family and visitors respect this or leave. For settlers, the layers have included the choice to stay with cattle, to work skillfully with, rather than against, the cycles of drought and flood and to establish strategies for strengthening their investment in the industry. In the past, they decided to get to know their Aboriginal stockmen and their families as people, to treat them well and with respect. As Councilors, they determined to work hard at maintaining full employment in the community, to make political,

social and community activities and forums inclusive of the various people of the community, and to continue to invest in the towns. Pastoral families made decisions to re-invest personal capital in the towns, and a consequence of this is that the stores, fuel stations and hotels are able to endure the tough times, the town infrastructure is sustained and a tourism industry is growing up around it. The outcome is a strong community, where people are well housed, reasonably well off, where services are good and well used, and where people participate together in all volunteer and social activities. The choices made, and the capacity to act on those choices, have strengthened the community from the bottom up. Subsidiarity and path dependence have led to increased returns on investments, enabled a build up of behavioural routines that are conducive to further positive choices, strengthened social connectedness and produced a self reinforcing resilience that augers well for sustainability.

Summary and Implications

In this case study, the hard work in wresting full employment and social cohesion from colonial relations has been achieved by residents of the community working with their local government Council. The choices that made the present sustainability possible have been made by the people of the settlement. Their relationships, built up over time, have made it possible for people to choose to do things that they otherwise would not have done. People choose to stay, they choose to reinforce the norms that make life in such a small town bearable, they re-invest time, energy and capital to make the towns work; they weigh up the costs and determine which consequences they will bear.

There is an important, often unrecognised, role for remote local government in embedding respect in the symbolic, political, social and economic life of the community. Building the infrastructure to ensure that opportunities exist for the expression of local people's commitments is a very significant role. It is local government that must scan the external policy environment for resources, opportunities and potential threats and manage these on behalf of the community. Something like the recent threat of forced local government amalgamations would strike unknowingly through the multiple layers of social fabric that have so delicately been put together. Residents are acutely aware that discovery of a large, valuable mineral deposit in the Shire could disrupt what has been achieved. Similarly a heavy pesticide irrigation crop upstream of the Shire could threaten the organic beef industry. The settlements are dependent on the Great Artesian Basin for their water, but they cannot control its use and misuse by its many, widespread users. Settlements, no matter how isolated, cannot be insular. This huge Shire with its tiny population not only must manage its internal affairs, but

must also be actively engaged in numerous networks and committees to protect its interests.

To meet its commitments to its people, remote local government has to both exploit the advantages of remoteness and overcome the challenges of it. Through its local council, remote settlements need to engage Federal and State Governments with local issues. Housing, healthcare and education are vital to all communities, but remote settlements fare badly on funding formulae for these unless they become adept at devising local solutions and advocate strongly for the resources that will make those local solutions work. This is political work for committed locals and requires sustained leadership over a long period of time. Council staff can assist, but it is the drive of locals that makes it happen. Where it is not happening, the role of federal and state governments is to support local people so that local people can make it work.

Local leadership is crucial and leadership succession cannot be left to fate. Diamantina Shire tries to cultivate leadership through its Youth Council. There may well be leaders in the wings, who some people in the community know but do not talk publicly about. One hopes so, because leadership, in both the settler and the Aboriginal communities, formal and informal, has been, and continues to be, vital to the economic and social development of the towns. Support for leadership development in remote areas is sadly lacking. Furthermore, the universal education curricula tends not to prepare young people in remote areas for leadership and entrepreneurship.

As indicated before, all settlements, towns and cities, wherever they are, depend on government funding. It may come in the form of social security benefits or in the form of *Federal Assistance Grants* or similar. As Cape York Institute (2005) has forcefully argued, high dependence on social security in any community undermines capability development. Whereas astute use of government grants can provide jobs, build capability and produce resources that have national significance such as roads and cultural centres.

Despite significant growth in local capability, the examples of this case study suggest that external funds for public works and services will still be needed, as they are everywhere. However, increasingly local goals and state and federal goals will coincide. The settlement pursues stable social relations and infrastructure, which support a strong economy and enable a significant contribution to national economic prosperity. These achievements will be met through local initiatives, albeit differently from the ways they are met in urban areas, but the outcomes, as shown through various indicators, will be evident.

What can be learned, or is transferable from the study of these two settlements to other remote settlements? Firstly, this paper has proposed serious consideration of path dependency. The settlements in this study chose a pathway of two cultures working together towards a way of life that is largely shaped by settler values. They have created layers of social fabric as well as economic and political structures to sustain this. Other settlements, faced with different circumstances made different choices, and are today in different places. The differences are not superficial; they permeate every area of life. Each settlement will be better informed for its current decisions by recognising the path dependencies underpinning its past and present decisions.

Subsidiarity, the second concept discussed, locates at the local level the onus to reflect, analyse and determine action. It obliges other levels of government to help, but not to take over. This is less about local self determination and more about ongoing relationship and dialogue between related, but in some cases culturally different, levels of governance. Without attention to this relationship, respect will not be possible, so that no matter how many houses are built or jobs created, the spirit will not flourish.

No remote settlement benefits from complete social isolation. Peter Sutton (2009) mourns for friends lost to suicide, for young people without emotional mobility and for three year old children who have been raped in some isolated Aboriginal communities. He sees these as failures of relationship between two cultures. The challenge from his perspective is to recognise how different the cultures are and move forward together in a relationship, in ways that sustain hope in both communities. It is true that the settler populations of Birdsville and Bedourie opted not to engage with Aboriginal culture. Rather, they chose to bracket culture and build relations between people. This was a reflection of the assimilation policies of the time. However, it seems they got several things right including: the relationships and respect for people that inform day to day life; the fact that these are embedded in all social infrastructure, so that people live amongst each other, there is no segregation or ghettos; the utilisation of settler cultural capital to develop and sustain enterprises that offer full employment to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people; and the increasing inclusion of both groups in formal political processes. The Aboriginal people of these communities reflect that culture remains important. They mourn what has been lost, in terms of language and transmission to the young. Nevertheless, they say that now, building on the goodwill that has been generated; they may be able to more openly bring their culture into the civic process.

The case studies of this paper are interesting precisely because, for all their compromises and achievements, these settlements can celebrate relationships that have endured between people of different cultures, and on different sides of the colonisation divide, and full employment is one significant indicator of their success.

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