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Sustainability of Remote Communities: Population Size and Youth Dynamics

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Sustainability of Remote Communities: Population Size and Youth Dynamics

Abstract

Fieldwork in two remote Aboriginal communities in arid South Australia found diverse considerations for sustainability. For Nepabunna in the Flinders Ranges, the main resource and environmental concerns were less problematic than social issues such as population mobility and the small number of young people remaining in the community. Pukatja in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands, on the other hand, contends with serious resource and environmental issues. Both communities had sustainability issues for young people that looked similar but which were very different. For Nepabunna, because the number of young people has decreased, there have been flow-on effects of services being threatened, a lack of companionship for those remaining, and concern about future leaders. Pukatja has many young people but without access to better secondary education and employment, boredom is reported to have detrimental effects. All these issues have implications for policy formulation, in particular, the lack of contextualising the evidence for policy has meant that solutions to sustainability issues have not worked. For Nepabunna, policy that is determined by resident population size fails to recognise a larger dependent community, not necessarily resident. Government support for involving relatives and the wider community — who are not necessarily resident in the community — is one possible way to promote community sustainability despite population fluctuations. The real problem, then, is that government laws and policy are typically formulated as general or abstract propositions designed to be implemented in the same way over very diverse contexts. A sustainable, appropriate policy system needs to allow for locally created, managed and implemented policies to ensure rapid and context-driven adaptations to whatever contingencies occur. Our research found that a context driven policy process is more appropriate for diverse, small, remote communities.

Cover Page Footnote

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Introduction

There are many well-known factors that influence the sustainability of small, remote communities in Australia. The primary factors usually referred to are the challenges of finding employment opportunities, access to education, and the collateral costs associated with living far from concentrated urban areas — such as accessing a sustainable electricity supply and other services (Guerin and Guerin, 2009). Many of the remote communities in Australia are also in arid regions, meaning that water, growing plants for food or shelter, and protection from heat and dust are also issues. Remote and arid living also has consequences for relationships since many family members are far away, as are those who control the services (see Guerin and Guerin, 2008 for more details).

In this paper we consider our field work from two remote sites in South Australia with primarily Aboriginal populations to illustrate some less obvious factors that affect the sustainability of small, remote communities in Australia, and which have implications for policy decisions. Further, the comparison of two remote communities with very different sustainability issues highlights the complexities of developing and applying policy to accommodate this diversity. Overall, by reflecting on the unique aspects of two different remote communities, we found that policies developed using broad generalized approaches can appear useful or convenient to policy makers, but are problematic in practice. The following quote illustrates the implications of policy development and its effects in communities:

Plus, as a rule — a most fixed and strict rule, it had long struck Choubris — it was the people who had to make things work on the ground who ended up paying for such sweepingly over-generalised judgements. The principle seemed to apply to high-ups of all distinctions, whether the height was literal or metaphorical (Banks, 2008, p. 42).

We will first broadly describe the research sites and discuss the sustainability issues at each site. We then compare and discuss various issues across the two sites. Finally, we explore how the uniqueness of communities might be forged into better social policy formulation.

The Research Sites

The sites, Nepabunna in the Flinders Rangers and Pukatja (Ernabella) in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands, were chosen through a variety of purposive and opportunistic factors. They exemplify different sorts of remote regions so we anticipated interesting differences, but they were also communities we had worked with previously, so doing field work in these two places could build upon the relationships already developed. The communities

were both interested in the topic, which was one they had long been considering, so this fitted well with their needs. A lot more is known and has been written about the history and people of Pukatja. For this reason we provide more history about Nepabunna and the people than on Pukatja.

Nepabunna: Adnyamathanha Country in the Flinders Ranges

Nepabunna¹ is in the northeast region of South Australia (SA), about 70 kilometres east of Leigh Creek and 600 kilometres north of the capital city, Adelaide. It is in the Northern Flinders Ranges, just south of the Gammon Ranges National Park. The colonial history is typical of Australia, mostly consisting of long periods of hardship and exclusion of Aboriginal peoples by the settlers (Brock, 1985, 1993; Mattingley and Hampton, 1998; Ross, 1989).

Nepabunna is currently home to about 50 of the Adnyamathanha group, who have lived in the broad area for centuries. Kin of the Adnyamathanha group live in the town of Nepabunna as well as in the local area, and further away in Quorn, Hawker, Port Augusta and Adelaide. The nearest town is Copley, about 65 kilometres to the west, with the major coal-mining town of Leigh Creek five minutes drive from Copley. About five kilometres west of Nepabunna is Iga Warta, a relatively successful Aboriginal-owned tourist and accommodation setting that was established by one of the Nepabunna (Adnyamathanha) families in the 1970s.

The 2006 Australian Bureau of Statistics (2007a) Census reported 49 persons (29 males and 20 females) and 11 families resident in Nepabunna on 8 August 2006. The Nepabunna Council maintains its own records of residents of the community, and at July 2008 there were 74 people documented as residing in Nepabunna, from infants to an 81 year old, and slightly more males than females (41 males and 33 females). In August 2009, however, community records suggested a substantial decrease in the population with only about 50 people residing in the community. We will discuss this decrease in the population below.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006 census information for the Statistical Local Area (SLA) of the Unincorporated Flinders Ranges (UFR), within which Nepabunna is included, provides some indication of further demographics relevant to Nepabunna (ABS, 2007e). This SLA includes a large area of land of 66,335 square km, just north of Port Augusta and as far north as Marree, east to the South Australian - New South Wales border, and to the west, along the eastern boundary of the Lake Torrens National Park. In this SLA of the UFR, there were 227 people who identified as Aboriginal (54 percent male and 46 percent female) and 816 as non-Aboriginal (55 percent

¹ The community is in the process of changing its name back to the original *Nipapanha*, and is giving local Indigenous names to streets.

male and 45 percent female), and a population total of 1,099 persons (including those who did not identify Indigenous status). Therefore, 20.7 percent of the population in this area identified as Indigenous and the only Australian Aboriginal language reported in this area was Adnyamathanha² with 55 (24 percent of the Indigenous population) speaking an Australian Indigenous language at home (ABS, 2007e). The other key demographic characteristic is that the Aboriginal population of this area is young, with 43 percent aged less than 24 years compared to only 30 percent of the non-Aboriginal population within the same age bracket. Note that this refers to the population for the whole of the UFR, not Nepabunna in particular.

Sex-Age Structure. The population based on data from the Nepabunna Council illustrates the greater proportion of males than females living in Nepabunna and also illustrates a high proportion of residents aged between 10 and 49. The non-Aboriginal population of the UFR, however, is much older, but, similar to Nepabunna, is slightly male-dominated. However, due to the very small numbers of people in the community, any slight changes in the population would result in drastic influences on this population structure. For example, changes to the very young or very old population in Nepabunna would especially have a significant impact on the population. This is discussed more below.

Family and Language. The resident population of Nepabunna mostly comprises four large families, but it is not clear how many people in Australia consider Nepabunna to be their ‘home’, whether they reside there or not. One way to estimate how many people consider Nepabunna home would be to determine how many people consider themselves to be part of the Adnyamathanha group, (which is the language group of Nepabunna), both within Nepabunna and the wider area, as well as Australia as a whole. However, these data are not available in the way that the Australia census data are collected. An alternative is to look at the data for speakers of the Adnyamathanha language. These data are available from the ABS Census (2007b) as well as from the 2005 AIATSIS and FATSIL National Indigenous Languages Survey and the Australian Indigenous Languages Database (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2010). The 2006 Census found that 107 people (57 males and 50 females) in Australia reported speaking Adnyamathanha at home, but only 47 (27 males and 20 females) of those lived in the UFR (ABS, 2007e). This indicates that approximately 20 percent of the Aboriginal people in the UFR are Adnyamathanha speakers (47 out of the 227 resident in the UFR). The Adnyamathanha language (Yura Ngawarla) is considered to be ‘severely endangered’ (AIATSIS & FATSIL, 2005), but the high proportion of speakers

² Strictly speaking the language is *Yura Ngawarla* but is commonly called Adnyamathanha (AIATSIS and FATSIL, 2005).

in the Flinders Ranges is promising and could potentially position Nepabunna and the Adnyamathanha people as a rich cultural and linguistic resource for South Australia and Australia more generally.

Community Governance. Nepabunna is governed through the Nepabunna Council, an elected group, with a Chairperson. Because of the small size of the community, however, the same people are typically on this Council, or at least members of the same families. This is not a product of cronyism, but is a further reflection on the social consequences of small numbers.

When talking to people in the community they are clear that a serious issue for Nepabunna is the small number of people living there, and the lack of incentives for people to move there. A few people have moved to Nepabunna in their retirement or near retirement, but many more young people and families have moved out. Recently, for example, an Adnyamathanha man who was not quite retired visited and ended up staying to live in the community. Shortly afterwards, however, two families moved to Port Augusta which drastically reduced the number of young people in town. The result of this recent movement is that there are now very few young people in Nepabunna (although not the rest of the region or the Unincorporated Flinders Ranges area), especially people less than 20 years old.

For all these reasons, people in the community spoke to us about the size of Nepabunna as a clear sustainability issue for them. This involved either finding ways to attract families back to live in Nepabunna, or finding events that would draw them back for short periods, thereby adding to the social and economic sustainability.

Most people in the community, however, understand that limitations regarding employment prevent people from coming back there to live. However, older people in the community believe that there are plenty of activities in Nepabunna when the beautiful natural surroundings are considered and they report a long history of activities tied to the environment and land. Younger people we talked to, however, who may not have had a history of such activities, are more likely to suggest that there is little to do in Nepabunna and it is 'boring'. Younger people may consider 'things to do' as the kinds of activities that would be available in the larger urban centres and that are not available in Nepabunna. For example, from informal talks with people in the community it seems that younger families are spending more time in Leigh Creek and Port Augusta seeking entertainment and events. 'Leisure boredom' is a concern in rural and remote communities as it is also linked to detrimental behaviours (Patterson and Pegg, 1999). Also, with a relatively small population and with children away all day at school, the impression of being lonely or bored can be increased. Finally, some community members expressed to us the difficulty in organising events, at least partly due to the wider community being spread across long distances.

Schooling. A Primary school operated for many years in Nepabunna but was closed in the mid-1990s. The building is currently used as accommodation for visitors to the community. The closure of the school has resulted in the necessary bussing of children to schools in Leigh Creek. Travel time is approximately 1.5 to 2 hours each way, or nearly four hours per day. Children, therefore, leave Nepabunna at 7.30 am each day of the school week and arrive back in the community about 4.30pm.

The long travel to school is a strain on the children. It also means that there is a long drive for any events with parents, such as a school play at night or teacher interviews, or if children do not use the bus because they stay after school for sport practice. This discourages participation in school events for students and parents. A more subtle disadvantage of transporting students long distances to attend school is that this leaves the town deserted for most of the day for most days of the week. It is quiet and facilities such as the playground are rarely used. On the positive side, however, we have heard it said that the children get a broader education in a bigger school, despite the travel, and the children have told us that they appreciate their involvement in sporting teams and the availability of sporting equipment which is extensive at the Leigh Creek schools. Nevertheless, it can be difficult for students to participate in after-school activities due to the long trips required.

Economy. Like most small, remote communities, there are few real employment opportunities compared to living in a city. Some community members are on Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP³) payments that involve working on community projects, while others are employed through the Council, on nearby stations, or at the tourist venue at Iga Warta. There is an Indigenous Protected Area (IPA) called Nantawarrina which provides six full-time jobs at present managing the lands through government support for IPAs (Braham, 2007). There is a bush produce garden that could potentially be developed as another source of employment for the community.

Services. The main shopping is done in Leigh Creek, which has the only supermarket in the region. This is about 70 kilometres from Nepabunna and most families visit it about once a week for supplies. We conducted a food basket survey in Leigh Creek in September 2008, and at least one other survey has been done in the past. The standard Healthy Food Access Basket⁴, to

³ Initiated in 1977, the CDEP program provided work for its participants in lieu of unemployment benefits. Participants worked for days per week at award wages for the number of hours that equalled their entitlements from unemployment benefits. In effect it was/is a “work-for-the-dole” scheme.

⁴ The cost of the Healthy Food Access Basket (HFAB) is based on a standard list of food items that could feed a family of six for two weeks.

supply six people for two weeks, was \$466.02, which is high in comparison to other urban and remote locations (Burns, C. M., Gibbon, P., Boak, R., Baudinette, S., and Dunbar, J. A., 2004; Harrison, M. S., Coyne, T., Lee, A. J., Leonard, D., Lowson, S., Groos, A. and Ashton, B. A., 2007). For example, it is much higher than that calculated only one year earlier by Willis, E., Pearce, M., McCarthy, C., Ryan, F. and Wadham, B. (2007) - \$287.22 in Nepabunna and \$248.17 in Adelaide. The much higher cost of food in the region has wide ranging impacts and is a common concern in remote communities (e.g., Lee, A.J., Leonard, D., Moloney, A. A. and Minniecon, D. L., 2009).

Unlike some remote communities, Nepabunna has a reliable source of electricity via the main grid in Leigh Creek. Electricity provided to the community is purchased at market prices with no subsidy. There are occasionally blackouts due to a range of technical or other problems, but strategies are being put in place to rectify this problem.

Telephone access in Nepabunna is provided via a solar powered landline with a battery backup system. About half the households have a computer although only few are linked to the internet via a modem. The main Council office has a limited range broadband system that provides internet access nearby. With internet usage becoming more popular and necessary for education, a new system of charging for internet access and allotting equitable time is being developed.

Nepabunna has three sources of water: bore, rainwater, and recycled sewerage. As part of a South Australia-wide study on water supplies, data were gathered on this situation and solutions suggested (Pearce, Willis and Jenkin, 2007; Willis, E., Pearce, M., Jenkin, T. and McCarthy, C., 2004; Willis, E., Pearce, M., McCarthy, C., Ryan, F. and Wadham, B., 2008). The bore is not suitable for drinking but is used in all houses for everything except drinking (showers, washing, watering, etc.). The bore water has a high heavy mineral content, and while not toxic, will lead to kidney stones and other problems if consumed over a long time (Pearce M, Willis E, McCarthy C, Ryan F and Wadham B., 2008). It is not certain how reliable the bore is but most people believe it is a good supply that will last some time into the future. Discussions with Council indicate that a new, and much deeper, bore is likely to be sunk which potentially could result in a more permanent supply of better water, hopefully more potable.

Rain water is used for drinking, but in summer and sometimes over long periods of drought, rain water can become sparse. It is collected from the large gymnasium roof and is diverted to large community rainwater tanks. This water is pumped to all houses for inside drinking water. All houses also have smaller individual rainwater collection tanks (mostly 13,000 litres) but these seem to be used only for outside drinking and are not pumped into the house. Household rainwater tanks were installed in such a way that rainwater is only

collected from half the roof, resulting in a loss of valuable rainwater. While this might be able to be corrected and solutions are being investigated, it is likely to incur much expense. Finally, recycled sewerage produces a supply of grey water for use in the bush tucker gardens as appropriate, but the gardens are not currently functioning. This grey water supply is located out of the town and would be costly to pump this supply into town for other grey water uses. In any case, most of the town has utilised environmentally and climate appropriate sustainable native plants which require little or no watering.

For health services, Pika Wiya Health, a government-funded service which is based in Port Augusta, runs a clinic in Nepabunna. A nurse has been based there for many years and one of her sons, who is also now a trained nurse, works in Copley and relieves for her sometimes. The Clinic has basic equipment and does numerous blood tests and other basic health diagnoses and treatments. Major injuries or conditions require treatment at either the Leigh Creek hospital or Hawker. The nurse provides transportation in these cases which takes valuable time away from the clinic and can result in extensive delays to treatment because of the long drive.

Cars are individually owned and maintained and are heavily relied upon to access supplies and services. The Community Council has a couple of 4WD vehicles and a van. Only the van is available for general use and it must be booked and partially paid for. It is usually for families or sports teams to travel to Port Augusta or other more distant towns. Many of the children's football matches are 3-5 hours drive away.

Travelling to Copley is about 66 kilometres and it costs around \$25 in fuel to get to the nearest fuel bowser. Most families do this trip once a week and get their food, fuel and other supplies. Some families reported travelling to Copley and Leigh Creek more frequently than in the past to access entertainment and fast-food outlets, as well as basic supplies and necessities.

The majority of travelling appears to be to Copley and Leigh Creek for supplies, including all food and fuel. Other trips are to visit those in hospital in Quorn and Hawker, and to Port Augusta for supplies not available in Copley or Leigh Creek, or to visit family. Travelling greater distances, such as to Adelaide or further afield does not appear to happen frequently.

Challenges for Sustainability. Drawing upon what has been outlined briefly above, there seem to be several issues facing Nepabunna that relate to the sustainability of the community. The key issues are:

- Finding employment opportunities;
- Building enterprises for employment;

- Maintaining the Health Clinic and perhaps increasing its capabilities through more equipment or staff;
- The consequences of a small population, either attracting more Adnyamathanha back to stay or increasing the number of events available for people to attend;
- Improving education opportunities; and
- Making fuel and food options more equitable.

While some of these are not new or unique, others we will see are specific to Nepabunna and its social context.⁵

Pukatja/Ernabella: Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Country in the far north of South Australia

Writing an overview about the Pukatja community (commonly known as Ernabella) is daunting because far from being a remote, little-known settlement, Pukatja has had over a century of regular visits by researchers, missionaries, and government officials, and has had many books and papers written on various themes about the settlement and the people (e.g., Bonner, 1988; Coombs, 1977; Edwards, 1966; Hilliard, 1968; Mattingley and Hampton, 1998; South Australia Centre for Economic Studies, 1994; Toyne and Vachon, 1984; Yengoyan, 1993). Researchers have been visiting Pukatja since at least 1933. For this reason we will give less of the history of this region.

Pukatja is in the northwest of South Australia (SA), 30 kilometres from the Northern Territory (NT) border, on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands (APY Lands). It is nestled in the Musgrave Ranges and boasts some beautiful surroundings. In terms of social location, it is home to 600-700 mostly Pitjantjatjara speakers who have lived in the area for centuries. Kin are spread around the area and, significantly, into the north across the NT border and to the south as far as the SA coastline. The nearest large town is Alice Springs, which is about 480 kilometres to the northeast. There is a spread of small towns in and around the APY Lands including: Amata, Iwantja (Indulkana), Kalka, Kaltjiti (Fregon), Mimili, Murputja, Oak Valley, Pipalyatjara, Umoona, Umuwa, Waturu, Yalata, Yunyarinyi (Kenmore Park), as well as many smaller homeland outstations.

Sex-Age Structure. In 1977, Coombs reported 354 residents of Ernabella, the 2001 Census reported 446 (ABS, 2006), and the 2006 Census reported 332

⁵ It is also interesting that these have not changed much in many years. Zeman (1978) conducted a short research profile of Nepabunna and found similar patterns.

persons usually resident in Pukatja (ABS, 2007c). In 2001, 87 percent (389) of the residents reported being Indigenous (ABS, 2006) and in 2006, 286 (86 percent) of the total identified as Aboriginal (ABS, 2007c). From these data we can see that the documented total population of Ernabella was similar in 1977 and 2006 but was a higher in 2001.

Using the 2006 Census data for a closer breakdown (ABS, 2007c), there were 135 (43 percent) Aboriginal males and 151 (53 percent) Aboriginal females living in Pukatja. The age structure of the Indigenous population in Ernabella reveals a much younger population in Pukatja compared with the whole of South Australia. Ernabella has a median age of 24 for the Indigenous population, which is slightly older compared with the median age of 20 for the Australia-wide Indigenous population. This is much younger compared with the median age for Australia as a whole which is 37 years (ABS, 2007d).

Family and Language. The resident Indigenous population of Pukatja mostly comprises Pitjantjatjara-speaking Anangu families. Although Nepabunna's Australia-wide community might be estimated by exploring Adnyamathanha language speakers, Pitjantjatjara is a language spoken across the APY Lands and throughout Central Australia. In Pukatja itself, the 2006 Census reported 254 Pitjantjatjara speakers (116 male and 138 females), (and was the main Indigenous language spoken in Pukatja), while across Australia 2,657 people reported speaking Pitjantjatjara (1,264 males and 1,393 females) (ABS, 2007f). The Pitjantjatjara language is considered to be a strong language (AIATSIS and FATSIL, 2005).

Community Governance. Governance has several layers which includes the Pukatja Council with an elected Chairperson and formerly, under CDEP, had some administrative help in the office. The APY Lands as a whole also has a Council — the APY Executive — which has an elected Chairperson. The APY Executive works with AP Services to provide some of the servicing responsibilities such as roads, housing repairs, construction, and waste management.

Economy. There are many organisations and facilities based in Pukatja with various employment opportunities. The art centre, *Ernabella Arts*, is the major income earner for Anangu, the Aboriginal people who live in Pukatja. Teacher employment through the Ernabella Primary School is another main employer of Anangu. Some Anangu are employed through the Nganampa Health Council's Pukatja Health Clinic, and on occasion income can be earned via agistment for cattle. Pukatja also has the AnTep program (mentioned again below), a TAFE, and a council office, though staff employed in these are usually not Anangu. Until mid-2007, CDEP payments kept most families engaged in work and with an income but the CDEP program has undergone substantial changes in recent years (see *Uniting Care Wesley*, 2008, for more details). At the same time, major services were allocated to outside interests

(run from Umuwa and Port Augusta) which has negatively impacted on sense of determination and ownership of an economy. While there are opportunities and projects aimed to develop skills and enterprises in the community, the seemingly constant changes to how services are delivered and by whom, and the instability of employment options are proving to be a burden on the community.

Schooling. The Ernabella Primary School is located in Pukatja and was established in 1970. The University of South Australia has run the Anangu Teacher Education Program (AnTEP) for over 20 years, providing early education qualifications to local Anangu. Most graduates are employed by Ernabella Primary or other nearby schools. The Primary School operates bilingually. Educational attainment data from the 2006 Census in Ernabella shows that a greater number of Aboriginal females had higher levels of schooling completed compared with Aboriginal males, and that the majority of non-Aboriginal people living in Ernabella had completed Year 12 or equivalent.

Services. Before the 2007 changes to the delivery of the CDEP program, much of the town servicing was done through that scheme by community members. Since then, AP Services have taken over with many fewer local employment opportunities. There is a water and reticulation supply through six main bores pumped into three storage tanks and treated with UV disinfection. There is an effluent collection system for all houses that is disposed of to the west of the community. Electricity is generated through diesel generators run through the Electricity Trust of South Australia (ETSA). Bringing the diesel into the community is costly and the cost is likely to rise with increases in oil prices. This supply also serves Umuwa and Yunyarinyi. Finally, most of the housing in the community is in desperate need of repair. More housing that is appropriate and of better quality is needed.

Challenges for sustainability. Like Nepabunna, there are many challenges for sustainability in Pukatja. The key issues are:

- Finding or creating employment opportunities;
- Building enterprises for employment;
- Maintaining the water supply;
- Developing sustainable and cost effective electricity supply;
- Providing equitable fuel and food options; and
- Providing more housing and improving the state of housing.

Factors for Sustainability of Remote Communities

Similar and Dissimilar Features of Sustainability

Comparing Nepabunna and Pukatja emphasises how every remote community is very different and that broad solutions do not go far. There are two main issues that look similar between the two sites and are common throughout desert and remote Australia—employment and enterprise building. Mostly due to location, there are limited opportunities for an economic base but with improvements in technologies such as those via the internet, the distance and location should not be a barrier to enterprise building or to educational possibilities.

One interesting key feature that is similar between the two sites, and, indeed, Aboriginal Australia more generally, is the young age of the population—Pukatja has a high proportion of young people and so does the Unincorporated Flinders Ranges (UFR) area. The differences are that Pukatja has a larger number (about 300) of people in general than Nepabunna (about 50), so any proportion belies the actual number of young people, and that Nepabunna as a specific place has had a dramatic decline in the number of young people. This illustrates that despite having a similar looking key feature—very young populations, there are vast differences between the two actual sites.

There are two other common sustainability-related issues for remote communities, education and housing, that are concerns for both Nepabunna and Pukatja, but there are also important differences between these two communities. For education, Pukatja has a Primary School within the community but Nepabunna does not. Nepabunna had a functioning primary school but this was closed about 15 years ago and children are now transported to Leigh Creek. For both communities, students need to go away for secondary School. For example, children in Pukatja often go to Alice Springs, Port Augusta or move to Adelaide and board. In terms of housing, Pukatja has poor housing and not enough houses, whereas Nepabunna has mostly fine houses but not enough to attract more people back to town. So while on paper it could be said that both sites share the sustainability issues of education and housing, in reality their issues are very different and the solutions need to be very different.

The other sustainability issues we have noted above are a feature of one but not the other community, again showing the diversity of issues for remote communities. For example, while Nepabunna has a good non-potable bore water supply, Pukatja has potable bore water but the supply is being questioned for long-term use. Nepabunna has a sustainable electricity source but Pukatja must rely on diesel generators that are very expensive to run. Below we now summarise the main unique issues for the two communities.

Unique Sustainability Issues for Nepabunna

Although there are a myriad of issues for Nepabunna, the issues related to the small size of the population are perhaps the most critical concern. Of particular concern is the lack of younger people and families still resident in Nepabunna. What we would like to draw out from this are the trickle-down effects and the policy implications. When a small community population starts to get smaller, several things happen.

Lack of Companionship and Entertainment Infrastructure. Discussions with some residents of Nepabunna aged in their mid- to late-20s (but called 'young people' by the locals), found that they were not bored when they were children living in Nepabunna and they thought that there were many things to do. Further discussions found that they most often went into the bush with a group of friends or relatives from Nepabunna, or were involved in activities such as hunting, horse riding, or swimming in water holes with friends or relatives from Nepabunna. The problem now is that currently there are not enough teenage children to go on such outings together, a side-effect of such a small population. If some kids wished to go bush together, they would only be able to muster one or two others, which is not as safe as in earlier times when they went in groups of up to a dozen.

Early on in our field work we heard people remark how they had plenty to do when they were young but the young people nowadays were bored and did not do these same things. However, exploring this issue more, we can see that the young people nowadays have several other barriers to doing these very same activities even if they wished. In particular, the lack of peers in town to join in activities is a major concern and results in more sedentary or isolated activities such as playing computer games and watching television.

Changes in Service Provision. A major shock for the people in Nepabunna occurred over a decade ago when the primary school was closed because the number of children could not support its costs. As mentioned, this led to children being bussed to Leigh Creek which, while it has some advantages for the children, primarily in educational and sporting opportunities, has also had a large negative impact on the town. The community is very quiet most of the day with few people around and there is less incentive to build infrastructure relevant to children or social activities. This has probably led to more families moving out and is a reason for young families to not move in.

Another side-effect of reduced population in a small community is that government policies often look closely at the official number of people present to decide whether delivering services is worthwhile. This happened with the primary school and could potentially happen to a number of other services. There are frequent rumours that remote hospitals and clinics will be closed, or remote communities more generally (Altman, 2006).

A bigger point we wish to argue here relating size to services however, is that focusing on the total number of *residents* underestimates the size of community many-fold. This has become a problem because many politicians have begun calling for small towns and communities, especially those of less than 50 residents, to be closed down or have all services removed.

Despite having only about 50 residents in Nepabunna our view is that the size of the community is much larger. Many people, though not residents, still call Nepabunna home, and spoke to us of only feeling truly at ease when they travelled to Nepabunna. As well, each year about 150-200 people travel to the NAIDOC Gymkhana run by the Nepabunna Council on nearby Angepena Station. A settlement may have only 50 or 60 permanent residents – but it often has a network of many hundreds of others who have moved away for work or education, but who still maintain strong connection to their original home and country.

This ‘invisible’ population is often deeply attached to its roots and returns to the settlement from time to time, and can provide money, social support, knowledge and skills when they are needed. People may come back to their home settlement for an event – a marriage, funeral, a sports meeting or other gathering – and in the process they bring resources and expertise which help the resident community to sustain. For example they can provide advice or funding to help with new business enterprises or community facilities.

It can work both ways, as well. The non resident population – who may live in the big cities and towns, also provide a stepping stone for young members of the community to find jobs or gain an education (cf. In New Zealand: Guerin, Nikora and Rua, 2006; Nikora, Guerin, Rua and Te Awekotuku, 2004; Nikora, L. W., Rua, M. Awekotuku, Te Awekotuku, N., Guerin, B. and McCaughey, J., 2008; Teddy, Nikora and Guerin, 2008). They can remain advocates for the small home community, no matter where they are, retaining a strong attachment and spiritual connection to their country.

This means that we need to start seeing desert settlements as something much larger, stronger and more diverse than what the mere census data reveal about how many were living there on a particular night. The community has strengths, resources, skills and connections that are not immediately apparent. We also need more detailed questions in the census data to document the real population of small settlements. Without better questions of language groups or tribal affiliation⁶ we cannot see the whole community and plan services in the best way. This point should greatly change the way social policy is formulated for these regions.

⁶ As occurs in the New Zealand census for example.

Unique Sustainability Issues for Pukatja

Governance. One of the two specific key issues for the sustainability of Pukatja, which has developed gradually from our observations, is that of governance. Decades of government-led governance structures, the constant changing of policy and operations, the lack of true consultation and community engagement, and the inability to plan ahead in such an environment (Smith, D., Edwards, N., Martens, P. J., Varcoe, C. and Davies, B., 2008) have all had negative impacts on the capacity of the community of Pukatja to function.

From a Government's point of view, some of the issues in governance and policy fluctuations are due to the remoteness of such settlements, that the situation is unique and changing, and therefore needs constantly updating — all of which is difficult from a distance. The local people, on the other hand, do not disagree with this but suggest that for these very reasons *the local people are the best ones to be governing*. The more things change the more engagement and consultation is actually needed, consultation that mostly involves listening, and this is difficult at great distances.

Young People. The high proportion of young people in Pukatja is also a sustainability factor but a very different one to that of Nepabunna. Here the issue is the large number of young people rather than just the proportion. While there is a primary school, young people must travel to Alice Springs, Adelaide or Port Augusta for further education. This restricted access to education and employment opportunities for remote young people eventually results in a social exclusion of those young people who continue to live in remote communities (Alston and Kent, 2009; Golding, 2001). There are also few entertainment opportunities for young people beyond traditional activities, and while some government services set up programs for the young people, these have the same problems over such a distance to make them difficult to succeed. This has led to a number of problems with young people in the APY Lands over the years, primarily drug use, and many local residents link these to boredom and lack of activities and work for young people.

The Uniqueness of Remote Communities

We have seen several issues for sustainability in these two communities, some of which were similar and many of which were different. Moreover, many of the issues “looked” the same at one level, but when more time was spent pursuing the context for those sustainability issues, in reality they were very different. Both sites have issues with youth, for example, but these were very different and therefore have different policy implications. When comparing the issues we come to the conclusion that each community is very different despite appearing similar when looked at with a wide lens.

While this paper did not report explicitly on solutions to sustainability issues in these two communities, it should be clear that solutions will also be very different and must embrace the changing, flexible nature of living in remote locations and the differences between communities rather than apply one-size-fits-all approaches. This also suggests to us that the local community members are probably the best ones to be running things since they know the changes, differences and flexibilities better than anyone else.

The real problem, then, is that government laws and policy are typically formulated as general or abstract propositions designed to be run in the same way over a very diverse group of contexts and situations. To keep the sameness, it is often the case that people who are all trained in the same way are the ones who are preferred to implement policies and programs, albeit this may be alongside people who live locally. However, this is where the real issues for sustainability seem to lie. A sustainable, appropriate policy system needs to allow for locally created, managed and implemented policies to ensure rapid and context-driven adaptations to whatever contingencies occur. Overall, our conclusion is that we need a context-driven policy process.

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