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Local economic development and remote desert settlements

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Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre

Local economic development and remote desert settlements

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Local economic development and remote desert settlements

Introduction:

• Decisions that impact on quality of life in the desert are largely made in urban centres
• Their accountabilities to the 97% of the population who live in urban and coastal contexts
• Desert natural resources key to national economic productivity.
• Case study sites: Anmatyerr (NT) and Diamantina (Qld)
• We aim to draw attention to the importance of economic development strategies that are grown up from within the settlement.
Diamantina Shire- locating the research
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Introduction:

• Long term sustainability combines local economic and social conditions

• Need for increasing levels of subsidiarity: governance at the local level that is supported by, and responsive to, local people is best situated to manage local affairs.

• The paper introduces key concepts regarding deserts and sustainability.

• Community economic development (CED) frameworks: CED emphasises the importance of the local economy, the ways in which national and regional can organise to support the local, and the necessity of combining social, cultural and political development with economic development (Canadian Community Economic Development Network, 2009).
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Deserts and Sustainability: an economic perspective

• 68% of the Australian land mass is arid or semi-arid. This area – loosely defined as desert - is home to 3% of the population.

• Of significant import to Aboriginal People. They make up over 25% of the population across most of the arid region

• Aboriginal population is growing, whilst the non Aboriginal population decreases.

• Per capita Desert Australia overall produces $80,000 GRP, whereas Australia as a whole is $57,000. In terms of the case study sites Anmatyerr produces $48,000 GRP and Diamantina $60,000.
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- Culture figures significantly in desert settlements.
- Aboriginal people are the consistent residential population in their commitment to place.
- Aboriginal population: a strong pattern of circular mobility within desert regions – between towns and settlements - rather than migration, as is the non-Indigenous pattern.
- New policy (remote service delivery strategy) acknowledges that social conditions must be improved before economic conditions are able to do so. However, significant challenge of balancing rights and equality with valuing cultural difference and choice.
- Whilst policy explicitly or implicitly constructs Aboriginal culture as the problem, it will continue to generate negative consequences and miss many opportunities.
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Sustainability:
The factors usually associated with the sustainability of communities and settlements are:

• acceptable access to essential services such as water, energy, health and education,
• sufficient economic activity to support and engage the population,
• good governance,
• social and cultural activities/opportunities that are desirable to that community
• meet basic resource needs in ways that do not deplete the environment
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Sustainability:

- Diamantina Shire would probably be seen as meeting most of these sustainability goals, while most of them are not met by the Anmatyerr group of settlements.
- Studies of sustainability often focused on small settlements rather than large and complex urban areas; easier to differentiate settlement dynamics from those of surrounding and overlapping constituencies.
- Our case studies suggest that settlement sustainability is associated with residents’ attachment to place, country and embedded relationships.
- Also closely associated with settlements driving development locally, using mental models influenced by local history, culture and aspirations.
- All settlements develop ‘locally informed agency’. That is: a capacity to negotiate their needs and manage their lives within the limitations imposed.
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Case studies:

• Diamantina Shire country of Wangkangurru language group – includes Birdsville. Settler population mainly from Europe. These two groups constitute 30% and 70% of the population respectively.

• Contrasts with the population of the Anmatyerr area, significant majority of the population over 88% of just less than 1000 usual residents are Aboriginal, so that this remote region would be classified as an ‘Indigenous domain’. Ti-Tree, central, predominantly non-Aboriginal town.

• Wage parity between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Diamantina, $553 and $613 respectively.

• Anmatyerr region weekly median income of non-Aboriginal residents is $768 – more than 3 x higher than Aboriginal peoples at $213.

• 2006 ABS census: 6% in general employment / 19% on CDEP.
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Case studies - history

• Nevertheless, much settlement history in common with settlers keen for cattle pasture.
• Diamantina settled from the 1850s / Ti Tree from 1888
• Initial engagements curious and friendly – violence / massacres followed. Coniston massacre Anmatyerr country 1928, 100 + killed
• Removal of children / of people from their land secured settler economic interests. Destroyed Aboriginal economies
• Supported by the state / reinforced by subsequent policies
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National economics and remote settlements:

- Neo-liberalism discontinuous with local economic development.
- Mining / multi-holding pastoral companies / agri-business tend to contribute nationally / not locally.
- PL in Diamantina: as elsewhere Aboriginal work essential in establishing the industry – were major employers.
- 12 of the 14 Shire PL now owned by 4 major pastoral companies.
- Now operates across space rather than rooted in place.
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National economics and remote settlements:

- Anmatyerr different: pastoralism and horticulture main industries, but marginal
- PL more likely to remain in local hands and some PL engage in plural economies: bush harvest / roadhouses / sell Aboriginal art
- Ti-Tree PL purchased for TO’s in late 1970s – again marginal. But value is in enabling access to customary economy sector.
- Aboriginal economic participation operates as a segregated parallel set of activities that are purely local, often informal or partially connected to the market / attempts to change with horticulture.
- Anmayterr locational advantage: 2 hours north of Alice Springs, major highway bisects region / water basin and agriculture.
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National economics and remote settlements:

- There is no mining in Diamantina, while in the Anmatyerr region an ILUA has been struck recently for a rare earth mine.
- ILUA includes % Aboriginal employment.
- Increasing recognition by miners that local employment more efficient than FI / FO.
- Native title and land rights acts: powerful economic levers for Aboriginal people.
- We are yet to see how this ILUA will play out in the Anmatyerr region.
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Focus increasingly on Regional Economic Development:

- Single remote settlements not usually sustainable
- the multi-settlement region is the level at which sustainability may be possible, and for the Australian remote context, this increasingly means local government.
- The Shire = unit of sustainability for Diamantina (280 residents)
- Anmatyerr (ACGC) not sustainable – largely segregated economies
- New Shire – now includes pastoralists / horticulturalists / roadhouse owners, etc. A positive from the amalgamation.
- ‘Economies of scale’ from 1000 residents to 4,500 (NT magic no’)
- LG biggest employer of Aboriginal people in both regions
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Community or local economic development:

- Community economic development (CED) – “action by people locally to create economic opportunities and enhance the social and environmental conditions of their communities, particularly those most marginalised, on a sustainable basis”.

- Although underlying assumptions are incompatible. Remoteness from services forces a certain self reliance that resembles the CED approach and the emphasis on local action to enhance the local economy is the significant factor.

- Diamantina turned its core function into the major local business

- Actively employing locals = 80 people. 40% women and 40% Aboriginal (including women).
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Community or local economic development:

- In Anmatyerr CDEP being replaced with ‘real jobs’
- Like Diamantina, local government likely to remain, if not grow, as the major employers of Aboriginal people.
- The 2006 census: the significant majority of people were employed as labourers or in the community and personal services sector, ie for the Council.
- Like Diamantina Shire, the significant majority of the least skilled and lower paid positions will be held by Aboriginal people.
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Community or local economic development:

- Aboriginal women active in Anmatyerr region with bush harvest of desert raisins and various species of acacia.
- Income for these seasonal harvests is cash in hand and dependant on long term networks with local, usually Alice Springs based, non-Aboriginal traders.
- In Central Australia up to 500 Aboriginal bush harvesters who sell to four wholesaler traders.
- Aboriginal Bush Producers Association recently developed
- Strong Aboriginal interest – all TEK based.
- This season Anmatyerr women (from 4 settlements) received almost $24,000. Doesn’t show up in the census.
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Community or local economic development:
- Aboriginal employment in NRM a burgeoning industry
- Recognition that TEK and local residency are significant assets
- 10 new ranger positions in Anmatyerr through CLC
- Centrefarm developing horticulture near Ti Tree, yet to see success
- the advantage of land ownership = a greater range of alternative economies – beginning to be recognised in Central Australia.
- Queensland is not so fortunate in terms of Aboriginal control of land.
- 1 Aboriginal ranger for Simpson Desert NP.
- Tourism 4\textsuperscript{th} largest industry in Birdsville – including annual races
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Conclusion:

• In both regions most employment will remain with local government: appropriate with locals delivering services to locals
• The segregated economy of the Anmatyerr region has only recently structurally changed > new Shire. However, strong culture (Aboriginal domain) resistant to external drivers. Positive: NRM and bush harvest is driven locally – economic sleepers? / horticulture not yet successful
• Diamantina shared economy and wage parity / yet cultural compromise.
• Desert strategy > diversification to manage for harsh conditions, seasonality and unpredictability apparent in many businesses.
• Reflexive subsidiarity: attach local wellbeing to regional wealth generation > combine long term inter-cultural, subsidiary relations locally and regulatory frameworks at national and state levels.
• Sustainability = presence of a strong local body > mobilise linkages / community