

1-1-2015

Identifying Tensions in the Development of Northern Australia: Implications for Governance

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Recommended Citation

Stephens, Anne Dr; Oppermann, Elsbeth Dr; Turnour, Jim Mr; Brewer, Tom Dr; O'Brien, Chris Dr; Rayner, Tom Dr; Blackwood, Gemma Dr; and Dale, Allan P. Prof (2015) "Identifying Tensions in the Development of Northern Australia: Implications for Governance," *Journal of Economic and Social Policy*: Vol. 17 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <http://epubs.scu.edu.au/jesp/vol17/iss1/5>

Identifying Tensions in the Development of Northern Australia: Implications for Governance

Abstract

Northern Australia has a population of 1.2 million people across nearly half the continental landmass. It is home to many diverse communities of people, including Aboriginal nations, descendants of European, Melanesian and Asian settlers and more recent arrivals. It is an area of globally significant natural beauty with unique ecologies. It also has strategic and economic importance to Australia. A contentious debate over the future of the region can be observed within three themes: Big development, big conservation and policies seeking Indigenous wellbeing. We argue that if the agendas associated with each of these themes and their associated agents are driven forward in isolation, the tensions between the three will compromise the health, wellbeing and economic coherence and vitality of the North. This paper presents an overview of the present governance landscape with a critique of the role of neoliberalism and neoliberal governmentality. It identifies some of the ways in which 'other' social values and ways of knowing are either marginalised or rendered invisible in these narratives of governance and development. In highlighting the tensions that result from these exclusions, we argue there is a need to both understand these dynamics, and move towards an explicit commitment to open, genuine dialogue, inclusive of the communities that reside in northern Australia.

Keywords

Northern Australia, neoliberalism, neoliberal governmentality, development, land conservation, Indigenous wellbeing

Cover Page Footnote

The authors acknowledge funding from the Northern Research Futures Collaborative Research Network in support of the Systemic Governance Research group, and the reviews from colleagues at Charles Darwin University, in particular Professor Michael Christie and Juli Cathcart.

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Introduction

In recent years, the release of a number of publications has helped stimulate a national discussion on the future development of northern Australia. Prominent examples include the Rudd-Gillard white paper, *Australia in the Asian Century* (2012); Woinarski's (2007) *The Nature of Northern Australia*; the North Australian Indigenous Experts Forum's position paper on sustainable economic development (NAILSMA, 2013), the Northern Australia Land and Water Taskforce's *Sustainable Development of Northern Australia* report (Ross, 2009), *The Coalition's 2030 Vision for Developing Northern Australia* (LNP, 2013) and Dale's *Governance Challenges for Northern Australia* (Dale, 2013a). As a follow on from the '2030 Vision', a Green Paper has been released (DPMC, 2014), and the wider policy agenda will subsequently be fine-tuned through the Developing Northern Australia white paper process under Australia's new Liberal-National coalition Government.

This paper identifies three themes which currently frame the national conversation: big development, big conservation and Indigenous wellbeing. The policy drivers behind these themes tend to be driven from the political nodes of the major population and political centres of South-Eastern Australia. The nature of northern development relate in turn to several global megatrends, explored in the recent CSIRO futures report (Hajkowicz, Cook, & Littleboy, 2012). 'Big development' is characterised by a drive to build major infrastructure projects, including dams and agricultural development, and extractive industries such as mines and liquid natural gas refineries (Barnett, 2012). This agenda is often in tension with the second theme of 'big conservation,' where northern Australia is characterised as a vast, untouched wilderness requiring preservation which is secured through terrestrial and marine protected areas. Both big development and big conservation find themselves in tension with Indigenous cultural and legal claims to land and sea country. Policies seeking Indigenous wellbeing represent a third theme, which encompasses all Indigenous issues including health, education, legal rights as well as the development of political rights and appropriate governance models.

This paper suggests that if the agendas associated with each of these themes continue to be driven forward in isolation by their various proponents, then the tensions between the three are likely to disrupt northern Australia's social and natural systems, reducing the health, wellbeing and economic vitality of the region. As a first step to exploring a more comprehensive and systemic approach to governance in northern Australia, this paper presents an overview of the governance landscape through which these themes are negotiated in practice. In doing so, it seeks to highlight the complexity of governance in northern Australia

and the need to ensure these themes are dealt with cohesively. We integrate this analysis with a critique of the role of neoliberalism and liberal governmentality in shaping the narratives of governance and development across the economic, ecological and social contexts in which each theme operates.

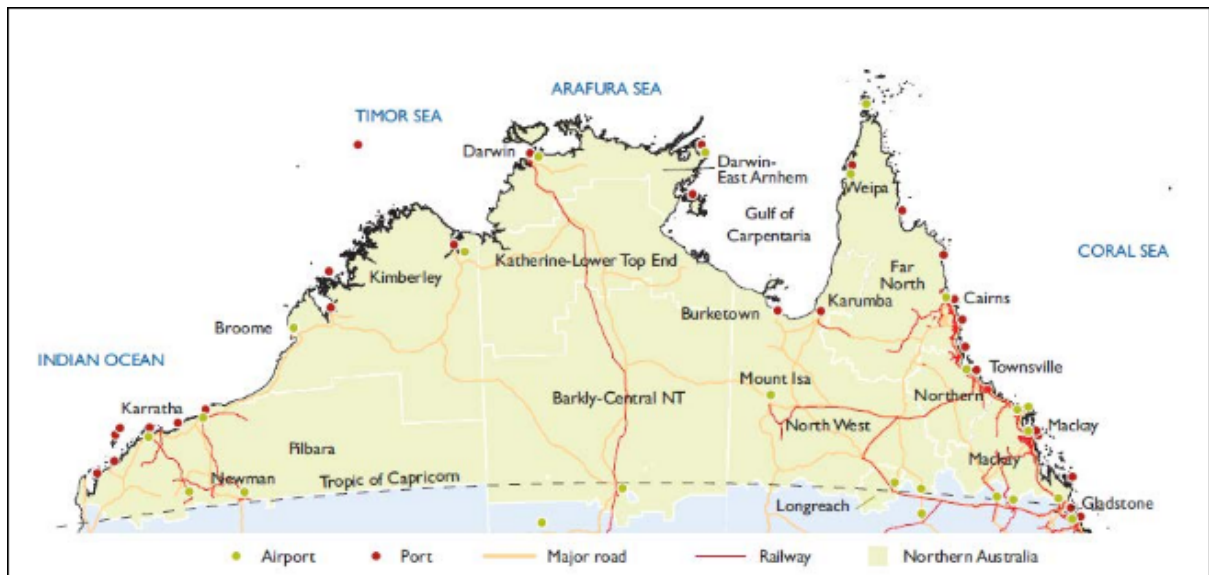
Our analysis establishes the need for an alternative account of governance in northern Australia which renders explicit the multiple agendas, worldviews and resulting tensions and which moves towards a politics of engagement that seeks a more open, genuine dialogue that is inclusive of, and respectful towards, the beliefs and values of all communities residing in northern Australia. We recognise the valuable scholarship already taking place and hope to generate further collaboration with stakeholder and research counterparts working within the various political, cultural and economic governance systems that shape the sustainability and prosperity of northern Australia. In the context of the recent re-emergence of the renewed northern development drive, we suggest that it is all the more urgent that we deal with, explicitly, the tensions and differences between these three themes, and in how they play out in the region's governance system. We suggest that such an investment of time and care upfront will mean that policies and programs are more likely to be effective over the long-term.

The structure of the paper is as follows. We begin by defining Australia's 'north'. We then explore the relationship between neoliberalism as the dominant western economic and political ideology that underpins policy in Australia and internationally (Beeson and Firth, 1998; Harvey, 2005), and liberal governmentality as a technology of governance. We then introduce our three themes of big development, big conservation and policies seeking Indigenous wellbeing to highlight that tensions arise within and between these themes as their constituent agents, organisations and communities encounter neoliberalism and liberal governmentality. The views reflected in this article represent the emerging analysis of a collaborative network of interdisciplinary scientists and governance theorists situated in academic institutions in Australia's north. These three themes are not exhaustive but were agreed to be the three major points of tension in the public debate particular to northern Australia. Throughout this paper, we refer to 'us', 'we' and 'our' to represent our work as the *Northern Research Futures Collaborative Research Network (CRN)*.

Defining Australia's 'North'

The concept of 'northern Australia' or 'Australia's north' has layers of meaning, historically constructed in geographic political, cultural and ecological terms. Primarily, northern Australia is defined by an arbitrary geographical boundary as

the land to the north of the Tropic of Capricorn (Map 1). It comprises nearly half the Australian landmass, approximately 2.8 million square kilometers. By this definition, northern Australia is home to around 1.2 million people, just under 5 percent of the Australian population (Dale, 2013a; LNP, 2013). The region is often represented as a homogenous ‘north’ in the national policy debate. The maps below indicate some of the overlapping and competing forms of governance that manage and produce a multiplicity of economic, ecological and social systems. Formal state and local government regions are overlaid by a mosaic of different Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ control of, or interests in, the entire landscape (Map 2). Multiple identities across the north are also influenced by these state/territory and local jurisdictions and language groups, as well as the dominant employment sectors such as agriculture and fisheries, mining, tourism and services.



Map 1: Northern Australia. Source: (LNP, 2013)



Map 2: Indigenous language areas of Northern Australia. The map demonstrates the approximate range and diversity of language groups in Australia.

Source: Horton (1996)

Multiple popular narratives of ‘the north’ further fragment the region. The narrative of a frontier region emerged from the later European exploration and settlement (Reynolds, 2006) and the relative exposure of the region to hostile forces during the Second World War (Instone, 2009; Morphy, 1993). This intersects with a narrative of pristine wilderness based on the North’s diverse natural and iconic environments (i.e. the Great Barrier Reef and Kakadu National Park), tropical rainforests, remote islands and the world’s largest remaining natural savannah which extends from Queensland to Western Australia (Woinarski, et al., 2007). At their extremes, both the frontier and the wilderness imaginaries operate in tension with long-established Indigenous connections to country (Prout and Howitt, 2009). Even as these disjunctures continue, Indigenous and settler populations have also merged with each other and with an eclectic mix of newer migrants with strong connections to Asian and Pacific Nation Island countries contributing to a narrative about our proximity to Asia (Dale, 2013a). These narratives compete at the local level and in the national discourse of what should constitute the future of northern Australia.

Northern Australia also has strategic and economic importance to Australia. This is evidenced by the current build-up of US and Australian military forces and the historical concerns over Asian military powers, conflicts and the current asylum

seeker debates (Ayson, 2007; McGregor, 2013; Thomas, Cooper, and Iskander, 2013). This is sometimes in tension with the economic value of the Indonesian and wider Asian market-place, accessed through northern Australia for trade opportunities, notably the beef export industry (Gleeson, Martin, and Mifsud, 2012). Both issues underlie the economic and strategic importance of northern Australia to the nation. In fact, Australia is also somewhat dependent on northern primary industry. As a measure of the wealth the north generates, the annual export value of resource extraction is at least \$96 billion which is 54 percent of the national seaport export base (Dale, 2013a) yet is generated from approximately 5 percent of Australia's population. Northern Australia's economic production helped the nation as a whole weather the latest global financial crisis.

Paradoxically, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations in the region experience high levels of poverty and social dysfunction. Well documented issues of concern in remote and very remote areas include their poorer socio-emotional well-being levels compared to mainstream Australian populations, lower life expectancy, lower employment and literacy, and higher incidence of chronic disease and disability (AIHW, 2012; Biddle, 2012; Osborne, Baum, and Brown, 2013; Stephens, Cullen, Massey, and Bohanna, 2014). Poverty is a powerful predictor of poor health. In addition, rapid social and cultural change can contribute to decreasing socio-emotional wellbeing as Indigenous people experience decreasing capacity to control the circumstances of their lives (Devitt, 2001).

Talk of harnessing the north's natural resources resonates strongly with the settler-colonial history of conquest and exploration, and the related popularist rhetoric of agricultural and industrial development is considered universally right and good. In the contemporary debate, this drive emerges from a combination of mainstream values and global interests that play out through the nation's dominant financial and political structures. Many of these structures originate from southern centres, including the Federal Government based in Canberra as well as the nation's major financial centres of Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth; all located south of the 23.5° latitude.

The political implications of this geographical concentration of political and economic power are analogous to the global North-South heuristic which highlights how the expanding agenda of economic growth from the global north is acutely felt in the south. Australia inverts this global model; here, vast natural resources in the poorer north feed consumption in the affluent south (Giljum and Eisenmenger, 2004; Weinzettel, Hertwich, Peters, Steen-Olsen and Galli, 2013). The south exports political and cultural control and environmental degradation,

and the north imports ecological, economic and social ‘unsustainability’, with boom and bust cycles impacting on labour markets, degradation of environmental services, forestry and fisheries (Wallerstein, 2011; Wallerstein, 2005). This is not, however, a hard and fast divide. Agents of these ‘southern’ governance systems live in, and operate in the north, but their ties are stronger to southern governmentalities, rather than those embedded more locally. In fact, policy settings and models of governance that have arguably failed communities and ecosystems in southern regions of Australia have the potential to resurface in the context of northern development (Cocklin, 2006; Lockie, 2007; Mercer, 2007; Rayner, 2014).

This political north-south divide is increasingly negotiated through a neoliberal lens and we explore this in terms of our three themes of big development, big conservation and Indigenous wellbeing as they have significant implications for the future of the North, its places and its people. The many iterations of this southern driven northern vision, and just as many failures (Megarrity, 2011) indicate that national level policy-makers have to think a lot more carefully about the social, political, cultural and ecological systems into, through, and with which, they are seeking to implement their policies and programmes.

Neoliberalism and neoliberal governmentality

In contemporary accounts, neoliberalism is understood as a loose political philosophy of supporting the growth of deregulated markets, justified by claims that these efficiently and dynamically enable social wellbeing (Kleinman, 2013). In its various translations to an ideology and discourse of government, neoliberalism has recalibrated the relationship between the public and the state, particularly by changing public expectations of governments concerning the provision of welfare, legislated regulations and protections (Harvey, 2005; Larner, 2000; Pellizzoni, 2011; Rose, 2013). The social wellbeing that neoliberal development enables is measured by supposedly objective indicators such as reduced tax and increased profit. Here, neoliberalism presents *empirical* indicators as *value-free*; a conceptual slight of hand enabled by the often specious axiom of market neutrality. This logic implicitly excludes from calculation the values of quality of life, ecosystem health and other cultural and intellectual ways of being, all of which can make the negative effects of the market visible.

These other social values frustrate the mechanisms that enable the market to operate and expand. They also undermine neoliberalism’s supposed inevitability, by providing a source of alternative forms of governance. We see governance as the product of a set of contingent and particular power-relations that have

assembled into a system, which attempts to manage something towards a desired outcome. This means that what governance says it does and how it may actually operate can be quite different. In this case, for neoliberal economic ideology to function, these ‘other’ social values and other ways of knowing about and being in the world, must either be marginalised or rendered invisible from the society it wishes to govern, or be rearticulated in terms of markets. Exclusion can happen through a variety of ‘othering’ techniques, which relabel a value, practice or people as ‘dangerous’, ‘subversive’ or ‘archaic’. Because neoliberalism equates the extension of the market with ‘development’, difference appears as disruption (Springer, 2010). By contrast, inclusion through rearticulation is a reframing of existing beliefs and practices in terms of neoliberal outcomes, slightly altering these practices and slowly undermining their integrity. This often appears as putting a ‘dollar value’ on practices or entities in an attempt to bring them within the reach of neoliberal markets (Bryant, 2002; Escobar, 1995).

This co-optation of a society’s non-market space is often justified by pointing to its failure to deliver wellbeing outcomes. Yet the neoliberal narrative necessarily attributes this to the absence of market availability, inefficiency at the institutional level, or failures of entrepreneurial drive at the individual level. In the countries it designates as ‘developed,’ the latest incarnation of neoliberalism has taken this agenda to the highest level, reincarnating society as post-political where decisions are made solely on the basis of a techno-rationalism attuned to the market (Swyngedouw, 2010). Pure neoliberalism is thus at best oblivious to, and at worst violently controlling of, ‘other’ values and ways of life.

These effects of neoliberalism as an economic and political ideology become more visible when we analyse governance systems using a ‘governmentality’ approach. Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, governmentality identifies the particular rationality that enables a particular form of government and a particular form of society. It does this by drawing out the conceptual logic that enables some claims to be made and others to be excluded in how the objectives and methods of governance are described, as well as surfacing the myriad of techniques and relations of knowledge and power through which this rationality comes into being (Bevir, 2010; Foucault, 1998, 2009).

In neoliberal governmentality, as a particular form of governmentality, discussion and dispute are tolerated as long as neoliberalism’s universal claims are not seriously contested. This re-frames the operations of government as a managerial function, curbing its fundamental ‘political’ dimension (Swyngedouw, 2010). Instead of robust debate, problems are deferred to expert knowledge and interest intermediation, which limits acceptable dialogue and occludes genuine political

engagement with ‘otherness’ or difference. This prompts us to problematise anew many of the co-opted terminologies increasingly applied by neoliberal governments such as ‘consensus’, ‘consultation’ and ‘participation’ that are claimed will necessarily enable ‘wellbeing’ or ‘development.’ Such terms play a central role in the national conversations about development in northern Australia.

This exclusion of difference is inherently unethical and can also result in the emergence of unexpected outcomes (Nussbaum, 2012) that undermine the stated objectives of ‘wellbeing,’ and the efficacy of governance and development decisions and programs. This paper tracks some of these multiple extensions of neoliberalism through economic and social interventions. In doing so we highlight some of the differences that are being occluded in order to progress calls for an open and explicit engagement with other ways of being. In doing so, we wish to pause for a moment and reintroduce multiplicity to the narrative of northern development as the inexorable march of neoliberal progress (Williams and Booth, 2013) (Williams and Booth, 2013) reintroducing as we do so the place of the political as moments of contestation and negotiation of narratives and governmentalities (Oppermann, 2011, 2013).

We now turn to three major themes which present broad, alternative narratives of the future development of northern Australia: big development, big conservation, and Indigenous wellbeing. Currently, each of these themes are dominated by narratives largely produced in the south, and often described and promulgated in neoliberal terms. In doing so, they occlude the array of social, cultural, economic and political systems already in place in northern Australia. This has implications for the development of northern Australia as the governmentalities these narratives bring into being, and the implicit restructuring drives that they bring into play, undermine the cultural, political and ecological systems of the north, often producing unintended damage rather than the desired benefits.

Theme One: Big development

Neoliberal policy and ideological narratives place a heavy emphasis on achieving a ‘staples’ or ‘pillar’ (Horsley, 2013) based economy in the north based on extractive resources and industrialised agriculture. The high economic value of agri-industry, energy and mineral extraction, are frequently presented as opportunities for development in the north as a ‘semi-peripheral’ region (Horsley, 2013). It is assumed that massive infrastructure projects to support resource exploitation will necessarily lead to economic growth and prosperity, driven in

part by desires to capitalise on the megatrend of rapid Asian growth (Hajkowitz, et al., 2012).

The Western Australian mining sector, however, demonstrates the proclaimed regional social benefits of conventional resource extraction models often fail to materialize. Under an optimistic reading of the semi-peripheral staples economy model, Western Australia should, in theory, see diversified development and economic growth through investment in downstream and upstream industrial linkages. While mining is capital-intensive it directly employs only 4 percent of the state's workforce. There has not been an automatic distribution of wealth in WA, and if it occurs, it is the consequence of a particular intertwining of geography, institutions and technology (Horsley, 2013).

In fact, when capitalist development works best in semi-peripheral regions, it is where there is more direct government intervention. The vast distances separating production from control and from consumers, variations of investment patterns, unstable prices and other spatiotemporal conditions, led Horsely (2013) to conclude that support from non-market institutions and interventions is necessary for market demand to function. The viability of the market has been seriously undermined by Australian neoliberal policy reforms that have “resulted in a winding back of interventionist programs aimed at ensuring socio-spatial equity, decentralised industrial development, and heavy investment in non-metropolitan infrastructure and services” (p. 297).

Neoliberal agricultural industry deregulation for example has further hollowed-out rural and regional Australia (Gray, 2001; Lawrence, 1987). Many family farms have struggled to compete as terms of trade have declined and traditional supply chains have been consolidated, demanding greater volume and consistency in the supply of products. As a result, there have been increasing farm aggregations and corporate agribusiness models of investment and production (Turnour et al., 2014), often taking the key small business innovators out of the system in peripheral regions like northern Australia.

Purely neo-liberal industrial development models have been critiqued for over fifty years (Davidson, 1965), driving the creation of alternative models of agricultural development in northern Australia. Research in Far North Queensland has found some family farmers surviving deregulation through governmental support for developing new regional supply chains, value adding and diversifying into agri-tourism based on the region's competitive advantages (McCarthy, 2014; Turnour, et al., 2014). Such an approach might capitalise on the shifting emphasis in Asia from quantity to quality (Deloitte, 2013; The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2013), highlighting the multiple ways of rendering neoliberal governance. In this

case, Australia has positioned itself as a stable and long term supplier of safe and healthy foods and fiber which return a premium rather than trying and compete on price and volume in bulk commodity markets.

The Northern Australia Land and Water Taskforce began a dialogue among Indigenous, industry and conservation interests on the development potential of northern Australia based on available land and water resources (Ross, 2009). The Taskforce estimated that the gross value of northern agricultural production could be increased by 40%, from 2000 levels, based on innovation in existing agricultural production systems, biotechnology and farm management practices. Owner/operator families could continue to be an important part of the pastoral industry, and irrigation development could be based on a large number of small-scale irrigation systems, rather than large scale agricultural developments based on new dams. Highlighting these alternative governance approaches opens to negotiation the relationships between national and multi-national corporations and local economic, social and environmental agendas (Dale, 2013a).

Despite these complexities, the large-scale corporate agri-industrial model seems to be emerging as the favoured approach to developing northern Australia. This excludes and precludes comprehensive analysis of the values behind, and outcomes of, such projects. When, for example, public funding to de-risk large scale development is diverted from resources for new infrastructure, research and development investment in established agricultural industries and regions adjusting to changing climatic conditions and deregulation.

Theme Two: Big Conservation

In tension with the big development push is a predilection to see non-urban parts of the north conserved as an empty, pristine wilderness. Many Australians think of the north as a nature sanctuary extending from the Great Barrier Reef west to the Kimberley (Woinarski, et al., 2007). This connects to the ‘Going, going... gone’ megatrend where fear of species extinction drives campaigns to promote the protection of unique habitats and biodiversity (Hajkowicz, et al., 2012). This notion of nature as wilderness, without cultural context, has a long pedigree in Western thinking: it featured in the Bible and was central to much medieval European folklore as the ‘other’ of civilisation, culture, and community (Nash, 2001; Stephens, 2013). Because European settlers failed to observe Indigenous civilisation, culture and community as such, they instead saw Australia and northern Australia in particular as the ultimate form of wilderness. Some of these ideas about nature fused with the rise of modern environmentalism in the 1960s

and 1970s. Today, northern Australia is idealised as a pristine ‘other’ to be protected from human intervention.

However, the post-settlement environmental impacts experienced in northern Australia, including the introduction of exotic pests, the introduction of grazing animals and the alternative use and management of fire, have already had a profound and negative affect on endemic ecologies and landscapes in those regions (Bradshaw, Field, Bowman, Haynes, and Brook, 2007; Fisher et al., 2014; Russell-Smith et al., 2003). In fact, in regard to the Northern Territory in particular, Woinarski (2014) claims that the perception of a largely intact natural system is an “illusion,” as the total biomass of non-native species “very substantially” surpasses that of common native vertebrates.

While there is a need for dedicated management to halt degradation, many campaigns and decisions are driven by southern goals and perspectives. It is speculated that the Queensland’s highly controversial Wild Rivers legislation was designed to placate growing concerns over conservation arrangements throughout Queensland, particularly from voters in the state’s urban electorates. That legislation has effectively been repealed. However, an equally controversial decision under the draft *Cape York Regional Plan* (DSDIP, 2013) enabled some of these objectives to be carried through, specifically by declaring the Steve Irwin Wildlife Reserve and the Wenlock River on Cape York Peninsula as Queensland’s first ever ‘strategic environmental area’ (Newman, November 20, 2013). This caused the scrapping of mining and port development plans at Pisolite Hills near Mapoon (Cape Alumina, November 22, 2013) in response to the original media campaign in southern Queensland for the preservation of the reserve. However, members of the nearby township of Weipa and Aboriginal community of Mapoon questioned the decision, the ability of high profile conservation campaigners located in the south to sideline locally based economic development discussion.

Theme Three: Indigenous wellbeing

Thus far we have highlighted tensions that emerge from debates between big development and big conservation refracted through neoliberal economic agendas and neoliberal governmentality. The place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and culture is also a major theme – if often unspoken - of the northern development debate. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have paid, and continue to pay, a heavy price as a result of European settlement and the ongoing hegemonic expansion of the settler state. This is played out in terms of policies framed to address the ‘Indigenous issue’ of lagging quality of life

indicators and the deeper failure of policy makers to understand and engage with Indigenous culture and governance systems (Altman, 2009; Osborne, et al., 2013). One of the most recognised indicators of Indigenous inequality, for example, is life expectancy. Life expectancy in 2010-2012 was 69.1 years for Indigenous men (compared to 78.7 for Australian men) and 73.7 years for Indigenous women (compared to 83.2 for Australian women) (Behrendt, 2013). Nationally, the current gap in life expectancy between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian population is estimated to be 11.5 years for males and 9.7 years for females (Commonwealth of Australia, 2014). Life expectancy is affected by a range of factors such as education, employment, housing, exposure to violence and poverty which in turn impact on health risk behaviours and the physiological impact of stress.

Fragmented, welfare-oriented, inflexible and annualised government programs have proven to be incapable of building lasting human capacity (Dale, 2013b). Policies regarding Indigenous wellbeing can be complex amalgamations of neoliberal economic agendas, the drive to extend liberal governance, paternalism and southern political expedience. The *Northern Territory Emergency Response Act 2007*, or 'Intervention', as another example of desire to extend government control, manipulation of local issues for southern agendas, was introduced by the Howard Government in haste. The trigger, the *Little Children are Sacred* Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse (Wild and Anderson, 2007), exploited national shock over the state of Aboriginal children and introduced stringent social management of families and communities, placing severe limits and controls over their own self-determination. Indigenous activists foresaw the Intervention as a means by which to control Aboriginal lands. Some, such as McMullen (2013), have gone so far as to argue that neoliberal ideology created and justified a new land grab opportunity for the exploitation of minerals and the transfer of Aboriginal 'wealth' to the capital managers. They suggest that the Intervention has taken away from Aboriginal elders what small amount of negotiating power they had had with governments (Christie, 2014).

Remote communities are often post-colonial constructs; the outcome of invasion, land alienation, warfare and colonial incarceration, and they are held up against a clinical discourse of viability that is seldom applied to other non-Indigenous communities, large or small, in remote Australia (Prout and Howitt, 2009). Neoliberal governmentality at work in this space can include/exclude individuals and groups from this more honest dialogue and implicitly establishes the ontological and epistemological terms upon which negotiations of power and value are made. On occasions where the imperatives of governments representing the State are at odds with local preferences, "higher level authorities typically

respond by placing limits on local political leaders, to discipline them through administrative arrangements to adopt pre-defined norms and practises” (Moran and Porter, 2014). Indigenous culture, people and places, are often forced to conform to the market values of neoliberalism and liberal governance; accessing basic services that are increasingly being mainstreamed, and to ‘develop’ non-urbanised communities or migrate them to urban areas in order to engage in economic activity (Altman, 2010; Prout and Howitt, 2009).

In this context, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander socio-economic disadvantage is reduced to a set of empirical technical challenges to be resolved through an expert-driven, bipartisan consensus-based politics. Under contemporary national policy instruments including the Close the Gap and the National Indigenous Reform Agreement (NIRA), an economic future based on deregulation, welfare-state retreat, and individual responsibility was envisioned and can be measured in financial input and statistical outcome terms. “It is all just a simple equation, dollars in, statistical gap-closing outcomes out...” (Altman, 2010). This failure to genuinely recognise and engage with existing Indigenous systems of governance is in large part because Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies are so often unknown to, or questioned by policy makers (Christie, 2014). The contested space between traditional and government knowledge systems has been described as the cultural interface where things are not clearly black or white, Indigenous or Western (Nakata, 2007).

When efforts at better engagement are made, Aboriginal leaders continue to express ‘dismay’ at the facile level of consultation between government and their communities, arguing that there is a “continued tendency of government and industry to react to Indigenous interests, culture and the associated forms of land tenure and rights that recognise cultural obligations, as barriers to northern development: as inconveniences to be avoided or managed away” (NAILSMA, 2013, p. 6). Today’s Indigenous estate, land that was until recently perceived to have no commercial value, includes some of the most biodiverse, but at risk, lands in Australia. Threats include feral animals, exotic weeds, changed fire regimes, pollution, and inevitably, climate change (Altman, 2010). Despite their legitimate ownership, cultural heritage and connectedness to their lands, Indigenous people are not seen to offer genuine solutions to these problems. Recently, a representative of the North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance (NAILSMA) summarised this problem by stating that:

“... [P]resent structures and processes, which attempt to fit Indigenous interests to frameworks developed by and for other interests, are not working and arguably cannot work. ...

Indigenous people must take a much stronger position. We must determine the conditions under which we will invest our land, knowledge and futures in commercial ventures and, just as critically, the conditions that co-investors will need to meet to gain access to Indigenous assets.” (NAILSMA, 2013, p. 1)

A contrasting tension between Indigenous people and big conservation arises from a romanticised view of Indigenous people as guardians of the pristine landscape (Ellingson, 2001). However, this perspective also ignores Indigenous peoples’ desire for the self-determination of their economic futures. Both narratives of unabated development and neo-eco-colonialism idealise the north and its Indigenous inhabitants, and in doing so occlude its people and places from defining their own future. This imposition, one often promulgated and funded from the nation’s south, is not abated by tokenistic community engagement (Dale, 2013a) which fails to manage competing concerns and therefore continues to damage trust within the communities residing in the north, and between the north and south.

Establishing a means by which the south can perform a more sympathetic and genuine engagement that values Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contributions and ways of being might begin with jointly determining what constitutes ‘improvement’ when addressing issues of inequality. This can, in itself, be difficult as one knowledge system cannot legitimately verify the ‘claims to truth’ of the other (Agrawal, 1995; Nakata, 2007). But making explicit the knowledge complexities that Indigenous people confront as they move forward in their efforts to ‘decolonise’ knowledge, assert Indigenous-led analysis, reassert Indigenous ‘ways of being, knowing and doing’, or generate new knowledge to transform Indigenous social conditions, is important (Nakata, 2012). Place and time are critical in requiring policy makers to embrace new approaches involving decentralised place-based negotiations (Christie, 2006) and in adopting a process by which Indigenous individuals and collectives interact with, contribute to, draw from, and of course potentially reject, values and practices of dominant Australian society, in a considered and informed manner that provides for “real choices as to where to go and how to get there” (Martin, 2005, p. 134).

Implications for governance and development

The multiple systems through which our government and non-government organisations operate distribute power across complex and interdependent networks of information, resource flows, movements of people and changes to the eco-scapes (Innes, 2010). Within this complexity we have identified three key

spaces in which different systems and values for northern Australia are being negotiated: big development, big conservation and policies for Indigenous wellbeing. Tensions within, and between, these three themes constitute the major challenges facing the governance of the future development of northern Australia.

Whilst the vision for the north might appear relatively simple and logistically rational, grand historical failures of this vision alert us to the need to have an accurate analysis of and sensitivity to, existing local systems of governance, cultures and values. Pure neoliberalism and western governance systems tend to fragment those systems that are already 'in-place' undermining the capacity of governance to achieve sustainable outcomes. Without a more integrated and systemic mode of engagement to explicitly and openly negotiate the development of northern Australia, we are likely to see a continued failure to undertake development (either big development or big conservation) in a sustainable way that produces real benefits to local communities. Running headfirst into a unilateral vision of the north could mean this new phase of northern development will end up leaving the north in a weaker position, across the economic, environmental and social spectrums. One of the key challenges global megatrends presents to governance in Australia, which the resurfacing trend of northern development highlights, is negotiating how these futures emerge from real, grounded day-to-day negotiations of values and material capacities.

We have drawn attention to the hybrid, complex and often implicit ways in which 'development' happens. In doing so we have highlighted the biggest global trend of all, neoliberal governmentality. This coupling of neoliberalism and liberal governance, is so entrenched as to escape notice and yet fundamentally shapes our range of possible futures. Neoliberalism frequently and effectively forecloses dissent, conflict and the possibility of a different future both overtly and implicitly (Larner, 2000; Peck, 2002), there is an urgent need to enable open discussions in which the values and assumptions of the ontologies and visions of the participants are rendered explicit and placed on an equal footing.

How are we to move beyond a neoliberal governmentality which is blind to its own operation and occludes or undermines existing systems? We have suggested that in the first instance there is a need to make these operations visible, and observe how they come into tension with those existing systems, in order to understand and deal with them in productive and ethical ways in particular situations. In doing so, we would move to an analysis of governance that improves its real traction 'in place' – not through a will to control, but through an honourable and open engagement with 'otherness' that might exceed the norms of neoliberal governance.

We recognise multiple methodologies already go some way to addressing the concerns raised in this paper namely the lack of systemic engagement at multiple scales and genuine attention to the people and places of people whose lives are directly impacted by northern development agendas. For example: The Governance Systems Analysis (GSA) framework (Dale, 2013b) provides a systemic approach to the analysis of poly-centric and multi-themed governance environments; Critical Systems Thinking (CST) (Midgley, 2000) enables the analysis of incommensurability and enables a systemic intervention methodological process that is mindful of difference; participatory action research and learning frameworks endorse reflexive practices from the bottom up, and also, place-based approaches such as 'Ground-Up' (Christie, 2006; Christie, 2014) approaches which are rooted in local knowledges and practices. In future work we intend to address these tensions in Northern Australia by systematically engaging with these literatures.

This paper has identified that northern development needs to be able to identify and work with the particularities of northern Australia's diverse populations, values, cultural and ecological places, whose value exceeds, and may not be reconcilable with, market based approaches. To resolve the disconnect caused by governance systems driven by neoliberal governmental rationales, we suggest there is a need for the encouragement of participatory 'spaces' across development, conservation and Indigenous wellbeing that recognises ontological, epistemic and power differences more explicitly, and enables a more honourable and open form of engagement. There are several mediums through which a more open vision of northern development is being created. The problems raised by northern stakeholders such as NAILSMA indicate that improved forms of governance in the north need to become an open question, rather than an implicit technology. The development of northern Australia requires a space for participative negotiation of decision making that is at once decolonising and generative. We need new governance systems that enable real engagement with local peoples and places, dealing more openly with what they believe at the fundamental level, what they want, and what they are genuinely willing to do to make it happen.

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