Economic development and remote desert settlements†

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Abstract  Distance from markets and from the mental maps of urban-centric policy-makers means that small, remote settlements do generate economic practices locally. This paper draws on two case studies to argue that remote sustainability requires an emphasis on the local economy (the settlement and multi-settlement region), and that long-term strategies held at the local level by locals are most favourable to both economic and social life. While some settlements are clearly better positioned in terms of natural resources and opportunities, all settlements need access to supportive policy and infrastructure at national and regional levels. The paper argues that current economic policy facilitates national prosperity to the detriment of local economies. It points to the necessity for desert regions, of developing an internal economic agenda held by a local agency, in ways that bring both Aboriginal and settler cultures into economic expression.

Introduction

Regional development has not been central to economic and social planning in Australia (Beer, 1998; Beer and Maude, 2005). Remote desert settlements† are even more marginal. When they do figure, such as in the current

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† In this paper settlement means a physical place where infrastructure and services exist. A settlement may service, and be important to, a number of communities. Community is used here to refer to ‘the human assets and social networks that relate to the inhabitants’ (Stafford Smith, Moran and Seemann, 2008, p. 124). Several communities may live in, or relate to, a settlement. A community may include people who live elsewhere, but continue to relate to and/or influence events in the settlement (Guerin, 2009).
emphasis on Aboriginal settlements, the focus tends to cast communities themselves in a negative light rather than question policy fit (Moran, 2009). Decisions that impact on quality of life in the desert are largely made in urban centres, by people whose thinking, and planning priorities, are shaped by their city realities and their accountabilities to the 97 percent of the population who live in urban and coastal contexts (Stafford Smith, 2008).

For remote settlements, infrastructure and services have been inadequate, even as their natural resources have been key to national economic productivity (Davies et al., 2008). For some Aboriginal settlements, this has combined with the effects of colonization to produce despair, self-harm, family and community violence (RemoteFOCUS, 2008). Nevertheless, desert constitutes most of Australia, and is important on economic, ecological, equity and humanitarian grounds.

Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre has been studying desert settlements with a view to better understanding their sustainability. This paper does not detail the findings of that larger program, but rather draws on data, with a particular emphasis on economic sustainability in the Anmatyerr group of settlements in the Northern Territory and the two settlements of Diamantina Shire, Western Queensland (Figure 1).

The aim of the paper is to draw attention to the importance of economic development strategies that are grown up from within a locality, settlement or Shire. Whilst recognizing that all settlements across Australia, urban, regional and remote, rely on state and national government support and resources, the argument of this paper is that long term sustainability is best served through increasing levels of subsidiarity (see, for instance, Hunt and Smith, 2007). In other words, governance at the local level that is supported by, and responsive to, local people is best situated to manage local affairs. A significant role of other levels of government is to support this in all its differences, build its capacity, and provide specific infrastructure and regulatory frameworks.

The paper introduces key concepts regarding deserts and sustainability. Then, drawing on two case studies, it indicates the limitations of national and regional economic policies in providing adequate infrastructure and support for remote settlements. The case studies suggest that remote regions do contribute significantly to Australia’s productivity, but are not well positioned to benefit from that wealth. This has to do with the ways in which national and global markets operate. The case studies identify the local economy as the site where bottom up action can produce both good economic outcomes and better social conditions locally for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Community economic development (CED) frameworks offer one way of thinking about this. CED emphasizes the impor-
tance of the local economy, the ways in which communities can harness their own assets to stimulate the economy locally and the ways in which social, cultural and political development can be integrated with economic development (Kenyon, 2007).

Deserts and sustainability: an economic perspective

Two-thirds of Australia is classified as arid (45 percent of the landmass) or semi-arid (23 percent; Brown, Taylor and Bell, 2008). These areas can loosely be defined as desert and this 68 percent of the Australian land mass is home to 3 percent of the population. Desert regions then have very large landmass and extremely low population density.

Despite the relatively low settler population across desert Australia, a great deal of non-Aboriginal wealth has been built from desert resources, particularly with regard to pastoralism (beef and sheep) and mining. Indeed, Table 1 indicates that the gross regional product (GRP) of desert Australia is higher than per capita GDP. The table also compares the two...
case study sites in terms of GRP, as one indicator of performance in the Australian economy. While productivity is unevenly distributed across the desert, analysis of the case studies of this paper suggest that disarticulation of local economies to service the national economy produces desert settlement vulnerability whilst structurally privileging certain cultural groups over others.

It is not possible to consider remote sustainability without considering the aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People. Stafford Smith (2008) refers to culture as one of the desert drivers that contribute to lack of fit with urban centric mental models. Aboriginal people are the consistent population who, with circular mobility, maintain commitment to place (Long and Memmott, 2007).

An understanding of what works for remote settlements is especially important at this point in time when the media and government are turning attention to what are depicted as dysfunctional Aboriginal desert communities (Johns, 2009). In these debates, welfare economies are eschewed as contributing to passivity and dependence, and settlements are required to become economically self-sustaining. Acknowledging that economic participation requires some improvement to social conditions, the federal government recently announced the Remote Service Delivery Strategy, which will invest large sums of money in some disadvantaged remote communities to secure social conditions consistent with the rest of Australia (Karvelas, 2009). Analysis of the case studies of this paper suggests that any such strategy needs to foster capability towards subsidiarity if the service outcomes are to be sustained over time. Whilst policy explicitly or implicitly constructs Aboriginal culture as the problem, it will continue to generate negative consequences and miss many opportunities (Dockery, 2009).

**Sustainability**

The factors usually associated with the sustainability of communities and settlements are (Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership, 2005;
Davies et al., 2008; Department for International Development, 2001; Hart, 1999; Pleshet, 2006):

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

These factors are not easy to achieve and sustain. Nor would each culture accord the same priority to each. So, they cannot be simplistically applied as a guide to policy across cultural groups. One of our case study sites, Diamantina Shire, would probably be seen as meeting most of these sustainability goals, while most of the Anmatyerr group of settlements may not. The latter settlements endure ongoing interventions, many of them short lived. Considering the local economies of these two regions together provides some glimpse of the structural difficulties they both face, of the factors that are helpful and of how national and regional policy can support the local.

Settlement communities differ greatly in their priorities, what they are prepared to accommodate, their internal cohesion, and their capacity to secure resources, but vital to all settlements is what Holcombe and Sanders (2007, p. 339) refer to as ‘locally informed agency’. That is: ‘a capacity to negotiate their needs and manage their lives within the limitations imposed’ (Holcombe and Sanders, 2007, p. 340). Overriding local agency, in pursuit of national productivity, welfare savings or human rights, will undermine settlement sustainability.

The survival of tiny desert settlements is intricately tied to the shire they are located in. Local government is the least powerful of Australia’s three levels of government. Having no constitutional powers, it falls within the jurisdiction of the States and Territories. Major service provision, such as health and education, rests with the states, and the States have the power to rearrange boundaries or force amalgamations, as has recently been the case in both Queensland and Northern Territory. Local government is usually seen as the provider of facilities such as waste collection, sport and recreation facilities, building approvals and local planning. The federal government provides significant funding to local governments through grants, which supplement the local income from property rates and charges. Remote shires often have large areas of land, very small populations and few sources of revenue. Moreover, whilst federal and
state governments may seek equity across their various jurisdictions, neither can effectively deliver services in remote areas. So, remote local government must be proactive, even innovative, in providing the facilities and services that underpin social and economic development. This is difficult for all remote communities and especially challenging for Aboriginal communities (Mowbray, 2005).

In a spirit of caution, it is useful to remember that remote settlements are often studied because it is easier to differentiate settlement dynamics from those of surrounding and overlapping constituencies, than is the case in urban areas. The downside of this is that it makes visible all the struggles and failings of small settlements whilst making invisible how unsustainable major cities are.

The case studies: national, regional and local economies

As previously stated, this paper draws on data from two sites in desert Australia: Diamantina Shire in far west Queensland, on the edge of the Simpson Desert, and the Anmatyerr group of settlements, until recently known as the Anmatjere2 Community Government Council (ACGC), located 200 km north of Alice Springs and over 1000 km west of Diamantina.

Diamantina Shire is one of seventy-four Shires in Queensland. With two small towns and only one electoral ward in an area of 94,832 square kilometers, Diamantina Shire has a total population approaching 300 people. Along with a few other far western Queensland Shires, Diamantina successfully resisted forced local government amalgamations in 2008. In contrast, in the neighbouring Northern Territory, a very localized pattern of Aboriginal governance was endorsed in the 1970s that led to many small, single settlement community-based Aboriginal organizations being established to manage community affairs and delivery of services. Later, a regional tier of government was added, in terms of multi-settlement Community Government Councils, which were incorporated under the Local Government Act (Sanders and Holcombe, 2008). More recently still, in 2007, the ACGC was absorbed into another, larger still, local government re-arrangement, the Central Desert Shire. So, in Diamantina Shire, there has been stability of local government, in which settlers have dominated, for 100 years. Despite remoteness, sparse population and huge size of the Shire, it has been possible to maintain governance processes that are at once local and regional. Amalgamations and restructuring have characterized regional governance in the Northern Territory where there is also a more complex

2 This is the orthography for the language group name used by the Council. Unless, we are referring specifically to this Council we will use the accepted orthography of Anmatyerr.
relationship between local (single settlement) and regional, government, and where Aboriginal people have figured prominently in governance processes, albeit not under circumstances of their own choosing.

Many of the residents of Diamantina Shire are people of the Wangkangurru language group whose traditional country the settlement of Birdsville (but not Bedourie)\(^3\) is situated in, and settler populations, mainly from Europe. These two groups constitute 30 and 70 percent of the population respectively. This contrasts with the population of the Anmatyerr area, where the township of Ti Tree and the surrounding nine Anmatyerr Aboriginal currently occupied settlements are located. Here 87 percent of the 1000 usual residents are Aboriginal, so that this remote region would be classified as an ‘Indigenous domain’.\(^4\) Such a domain is an area in which ‘the dominant social life and culture are Aboriginal, where the major languages … are Aboriginal, where the dominant religion and world views are Aboriginal; in short where the resident Aboriginal population constitutes the public’ (Von Sturmer, 1984, p. 219).

Despite having different demographic profiles, there is much in common in terms of history of these regions. Being remote, they were both settled by Europeans much later than coastal regions; the Diamantina region from the 1850s and the Ti Tree region from 1888, when the overland telegraph line was laid down from Adelaide to Darwin. In both regions Aboriginal people had cared for country and engaged in complex trading networks for thousands of years, before being interrupted by arrival of European settlers. Pastoralism was the major attraction for European settlers arriving in both regions. Early accounts suggest relations were at first cordial, helpful and even friendly, although massacres and violence, soon followed and established the settlers’ dominant position, and their access to the richest parts of the country (Duncan Kemp, 1933; Holcombe and Sanders, 2007). The 1928 Coniston Massacre in Anmatyerr country killed upwards of 100 people. In both places, as elsewhere across Australia, poisoning of water and food supplies and splitting up of language groups, removal of children and removal of people from their lands to institutional settings secured the settler economy and destroyed the Aboriginal economy. It is well established that these processes were supported by the state and legislation.

Table 2 provides a glimpse of where each of these communities is today in terms of parity between Aboriginal and settler populations. Across weekly

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3 Bedourie is in Wangkamadla country, but the people of that country are dispersed, and it is now Wangkangurru people who live there, with respect for the traditional owners and for the country.
4 Of this 966 residents enumerated for the 2006 census, 88 percent indentified as Indigenous. Fifty-six percent listed Anmatyerr as the language spoken at home. Another 12 percent each spoke Warlpiri and Arrernte at home (Sanders, 2008, p. 283).
income, age and household size, the Diamantina community is less stratified than that of Anmatyerr or the state of Queensland as a whole. Median weekly income for Aboriginal and Settler people in Diamantina Shire is $553 and $613, respectively. Very little social security goes into the region. In the Anmatyerr region, however, where Aboriginal people outnumber settlers the weekly individual income of non-Aboriginal residents is more than three times higher than Aboriginal incomes at $768 and $213. This disparity in income is clearly related to labour force status. According to the 2006 ABS census figures, only 6 percent of the Aboriginal population were in general employment, while another 19 percent were in employment programmes.

### National economics and remote settlements

Neo-liberal economic thinking in Australia emphasizes national economic development via Australia’s performance in competitive global markets. Global capitalism has now reached the stage where multi- and transnational firms scan the world for sites for investment (Gray and Lawrence, 2001). Governments have found themselves under competitive pressure to increase incentives to attract investment, minimize regulatory restrictions and taxes and deregulate labour conditions. Loss of control over national economies has also combined with neo-liberal ideologies to pressure governments to wind back on welfare (Beer et al., 2005; Beer and Maude, 2005). It contributes to national productivity to have mining corporations, or for that matter pastoral companies and agribusiness, harvesting remote resources. However, too often, there is little return to the region they are located within, and sometimes, because of various leakages, little return to the nation (Diamond, 2005).

Diamantina is a case in point. The early economic development in the Shire was forged around the pastoral industry. Aboriginal people, working for low or no wages contributed substantially to setting up the

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**Table 2. Selected medians: Diamantina, Queensland and Anmatyerr**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Diamantina</th>
<th>QLD</th>
<th>ACGC LGA^a</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aboriginal</td>
<td>Other Indigenous</td>
<td>Aboriginal</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percent population</td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td>72.2</td>
<td>3.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Median age</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median individual income ($/week)</td>
<td>553</td>
<td>613</td>
<td>318</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average household size</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
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*Source: Compiled from Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006).*

^aACGC Anmatjere Community Governing Council.
fourteen cattle stations of the Shire. Twelve of the fourteen cattle stations, however, are now owned by four companies, which have multiple cattle stations, in some cases, across several states. They move cattle between stations and states according to climatic conditions and pasture availability. Cattle fattened in Diamantina do not necessarily go to market from there, but from stations or feedlots elsewhere, so they are not visible in Diamantina economic statistics. Increasingly, pastoral companies are oriented to global markets, for example, organic beef, produced in the pristine Diamantina area, is in high demand in Asian markets. This is good for the national economy, but may not result in jobs for locals or economic outputs of the Shire. Pastoral companies no longer procure supplies from the towns that were set up to service them, for they find it easier to truck or fly their supplies in. They tend to have urban headquarters, and use centralized websites to recruit, rather than employ locally. The old stockman and ringer are largely redundant. It is going too far to say there is detachment from place, for there are some station managers and owners whose families have been there for a long time, and who are committed to the area, its people and its unique environment. Some of these do contribute to the capital of the town through presence on Council, through input into events, and some re-invest significant personal capital in local infrastructure, such as stores and hotels. Yet, the economy of pastoralism now operates across space rather than rooted in a place, and although it is the largest industry in Diamantina, it employs few locals and only a small part of its product is visible as local economic output.

In Anmatyerr, settler-owned and -operated businesses participate in both the national and local economies. Pastoralism and horticulture are the main industries. There are eleven or more stations across the Anmatyerr region and, like the Diamantina Shire, Aboriginal stockman were essential in setting up the industry, but are now largely redundant. Because conditions are harsher than in Diamantina and therefore the industry more marginal, the stations are more likely to remain in local hands. Some stations participate in plural activities to sustain their lifestyles. For example, the owners of one station are also wholesalers for the seasonal bush harvest industry (to be discussed shortly), as well as owning a roadhouse on the main east – west bush road through their station, where they also sell Aboriginal art. The pastoral lease in the heart of Anmatyerr country – Ti Tree Station – has been owned by Anmatyerr people since the late 1970s and is now Aboriginal Land (under the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) 1978 Act. However, it is managed by a non-Aboriginal man and other than some seasonal mustering work and some small profit going to some traditional owners, there is little employment for Aboriginal people. Nonetheless, there is real value in the accessibility this ownership has given
people to pursue local customary economic activity, including bush harvest activity.

For the most part, in Anmatyerr, Aboriginal participation operates as a segregated parallel set of activities that are purely local, often informal or partially connected to the market (Rea and Messner, 2008). However, there are active attempts to change this through the local horticulture industry. Over the last two years, about forty Anmatyerr and Warlpiri men and women have undertaken horticulture training through the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP). When this training started, there was a competitive early season table grape industry in the region. However, this has since dropped off and the long-term viability of this industry is uncertain. Seasonal work continues, however, so long as the industry does.

There is no significant mining in Diamantina, while in the Anmatyerr region an Indigenous Land use agreement has been struck recently with Arafura Resources to develop a rare earths mine. Under this agreement between the Company, the Central Land Council and the Northern Territory government, the company has a contractual obligation to train and employ approximately 10 percent of its workforce as Aboriginal people, preferably locals. The value of local employment versus the fly in–fly out (FIFO) out pattern is increasingly recognized by mining companies. The neighbouring Granites mine on Warlpiri Aboriginal Land now employs almost 12 percent of its workforce as Aboriginal – though less than half of these are Warlpiri. The native title and land rights acts have been powerful economic levers for Aboriginal people. We are yet to see how this land use agreement will play out in the Anmatyerr region, but it possibly signals further local opportunities.

Regional economic development

Regional economic development infrastructure in Australia is underdeveloped (Beer et al., 2005). Where it exists, it typically adopts the same paradigm as national policy, exploiting the regions’ resources for national rather than local gain, attracting industry into the region, and workforce re-skilling to fit incoming industry need (Beer et al., 2005; Courtney and Moseley, 2008; Gray and Lawrence, 2001; Gibson and Cameron, 2005). The emphasis is generally on core regions and towns, and rarely do economic development agencies extend their reach to remote areas.

A staff survey of Australian regional development agencies indicated that they did not see CED as part of their core business, and felt obliged to pursue short-term projects and quick outcomes rather than long-term regional strategies (Beer et al., 2005).
The previous national government established Area Consultative Committees (ACCs) to mobilize business sector stimulation of regional economies. Regions were cumbersome, spanning large geographical areas that have little in common. The emphasis tended to be on towns and core productive parts of a region. Reach to remote areas was not a priority. Some local governments were able to access funds from ACCs, but ACCs did not have the capacity to support local governments to reach the stage of internal development whereby they could hold and exercise an economic agenda. The present national government is promising greater regional economic development focus under the new name Regional Development Australia (Albanese, 2009). While it is intended that these regional development entities liaise closely with local government and local communities, and while community and economic development are espoused, it will remain to be seen whether this heralds increasing commitment to subsidiarity, capacity building and infrastructure development to support local remote economies.

Diamantina Shire Council engages actively with Western Shires to assess policy impacts on their region and lobby for government resources to assist economic development, such as fibreoptic. In the Central Desert Shire, an Economic Development Advisory Board and Business Plan have now been established as part of the new governance arrangements. The Board includes representatives from the arts and crafts, tourism, primary industries, mining, general business and specialist advisors. This inclusive economic approach is one positive to emerge from the amalgamation, yet there will be many challenges for the new Shire in translating these plans into economic sustainability from within.

RemoteFOCUS (2008) argue that a key difference between settlements that are sustainable and settlements that are not is the presence of a local agency that is able to sustain focused action over a lengthy period, mobilize community support, link up the external and internal possibilities and anchor them in a form that local communities find accessible. In both Diamantina and Anmatyerr, it is the local government that must be this agency. Diamantina Shire Council with two settlements currently has full support from its communities and elected local people (now including Aboriginal representation) capable of holding a strategic agenda over time. The new Central Desert Shire is currently developing its strategies for economic and social development with four wards and multiple settlements, some of which are very small and very remote.

Community economic development

In contrast to the ways in which national and international processes operate to disarticulate remote local economies, the paper will now
consider how communities can influence their own economic and social development to fit with priorities that are negotiated locally. CED is an umbrella term for a range of social processes and ideologies that are linked by the bottom up perspective that they bring to local economies. This section overviews some key ideas of CED and then, focusing on three key components, discusses how they relate to the case studies. The three components are the benefits of holding a strong agenda locally, the strengths of building on locally distinctive characteristics, and the importance of holding economic, social, cultural and political development together. Each of these three are enhanced or inhibited according to the patterns of local relationships that have developed over time.

CED has a long and ideologically diverse history. It provides an orientation, a framework and set of strategies that can be used by communities to gain some control over their own circumstance. Yet, equally, it can be invoked by outside agents as a means of getting a local community to take responsibility for diminishing economic circumstances (and associated loss of rights and entitlements) that have been externally induced. Sometimes it is proposed as an alternative to capitalism (Gibson and Cameron, 2005), but more often it emphasizes local businesses employing local people to produce goods and services locally, for local consumption, keeping money circulating locally and plugging leakages in the local economy (Kenyon, 2007; Ward and Lewis, 2002). Kenyon (2007) proposes that it begins with local people, their relationships, their assets and aspirations and their attempts to enhance local quality of life through economic development and employment opportunities locally. It reinterprets economic activity as activity designed to produce well being according to the culture and conditions of local people (Canzanelli, 2001). Therefore, it holds together social, cultural, economic and political development (Kenyon, 2001, 2007). CED usually emphasizes the collective benefits of good local infrastructure, local efforts to build the economy, local leadership, local planning and local analysis and strategizing (Cavaye, 2003; Kenyon, 2001). Competition is acknowledged but within a framework of widening opportunities. The emphasis on local strengths and their expression through collective and associational life does suggest that CED flourishes best where certain kinds of social as well as physical infrastructure exists (Kretzman and McKnight, 1993). Capacity building is emphasized (Cavaye, 2003; Flora, 2004), as well as cross sector (business, community and government) engagement to mobilize resources. CED places emphasis on valuing what is distinctive to the local area and increasingly it combines economic development with addressing resource challenges, reducing oil dependence and managing natural resources (Cavaye, 2003; Connors, 2008; Hopkins, 2009). Economic development
can be combined with cultural development (Morrison, 2007) and with a social agenda of including groups who have been marginalized (e.g. Social Ventures Australia, n.d.). Compatible infrastructure such as Community Development Finance Institutions can facilitate local efforts towards CED (Burkett and Drew, 2008).

While neither case study site explicitly espouses a CED approach, nevertheless, there are some elements in each site that are best viewed through this framework. Diamantina Shire Council offers one example of holding an internal agenda focused on local economic development and acting strategically over the long term. When local jobs in the cattle industry began to disappear with the introduction of equal wages for Aboriginal workers, and the accompanying modernization of that industry, Council acted decisively to maintain full employment locally. In a stroke of entrepreneurial creativity, Council turned its core functions of roads and works maintenance, into a business. Through careful use of grants and contracts, and investment in heavy machinery, Council has built its resource base to the point where it can now undertake very significant works, including such things as airport upgrades. It now employs between sixty to eight people, including 40 percent Aboriginal and 40 percent women across its roads and works, plant maintenance and hire and administrative functions. Having heavy plant in the local area, Council is inevitably the contractor best situated for remote work. Therefore, the Shire’s roads are improved, which increases tourism and facilitates exports of cattle. The Shire’s assets are enhanced. The capabilities and human resources of the Shire are built and the local economy is strengthened.

Exceptional leadership (a mayor who is a long term local) is credited locally for providing the spark that brought things together. It was also an effect of local relationships between residents (citizens and their representatives on Council, and Aboriginal and settler families). Council led the initiative, but local residents take pride in this business. It built on the work habits, skills and preference for outdoor physical work that the life of a stockman had offered. It built on remoteness as a distinctive local attribute. It could not have happened without the help of Federal Assistance Grants and State government roads maintenance contracts, yet these flowed as a response to a local initiative rather than as an external intervention. Moreover, by avoiding targeted funds for Aboriginal employment (such as CDEP\textsuperscript{5}), the initiative enabled this community to avoid stratification between Aboriginal and settler communities. It continued an existing

\textsuperscript{5} The Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) was introduced in 1977 as a community development, employment creation, income support scheme requiring part time commitment from Aboriginal people. Its flexibility supported many Aboriginal artists, ranger schemes
commitment to employing locally, facilitated training, certification and qualifica-
tion. An outcome is that there is plenty of work, people earn good money, capabilities are built and young people are encouraged to return from high school to jobs in their hometown. Moreover, it provided a remote Council with funds that can be channelled into good quality social facilities.

Local economic and social developments are integrally related. Today, in Diamantina, everyone has a good house, there is no overcrowding, everyone accesses the health centres, school attendance is good, everyone works, the settlements are largely safe with low crime, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people work together, volunteer together and socialize together. Apart from aged pensions and a very small group on disability pension, little social security goes into Diamantina Shire. Aboriginal people have not only been the backbone of the manual labour force in the Shire, they also made a significant contribution to social cohesion. They achieved this, however, at a cost to public recognition of culture. Living together as one community has meant living the settler way, in an economy shaped by settler values, aspirations and logic. Loss of language, traditional practices and transmission of culture to the young has been some of the costs. Benefits, from the perspective of Aboriginal people of the area, are that they have stayed on traditional country, while equipping their children for the modern world. Aboriginal people earn fair wages, but the bulk of the wealth remains in settler hands, and although Aboriginal people are now represented on Council, most of the political power is in settler hands. Recently, an Aboriginal family started a transport operation, and Council assisted this, facilitating connections to Indigenous Business Australia (IBA)\(^6\) for business development mentoring and finance, and supporting the new business with contracts. Yet, to date, economic development finds local support where it fits easily with the settler economy.

The above economic activities are complemented by a range of smaller initiatives, such as the development of the Birdsville bakery, the annual Birdsville Races that bring some 6000 visitors to town, and the popularity of the Birdsville Hotel, stopping point for some 50,000 tourists a year heading to or from the Simpson Desert. Most of these have been developed by locals or people who have become locals, with the encouragement of local networks. All trade on what is distinctive to the area. Each new and other culturally appropriate expressions, and facilitated the sustainability of many Aboriginal organizations and remote settlements. It is being brought to an end by the current government.

6 IBA is a National Government Initiative to Assist Indigenous Australians develop assets and wealth. It provides enterprise and business development support.
Aboriginal people in the Anmatyerr region have a significant history of engagement in the governance of their Shire. Nevertheless, significant social stratification exists and this limits possibilities. For Aboriginal people, the CDEP scheme has been the major form of economic activity in recent years. It has emphasized a training, rather than a ‘work for the dole’ approach and has produced a dramatic increase in both training and employment. CDEP is now being phased out Australia wide – with the remote areas as the last strong hold (Altman, 2007), and it is to be replaced with ‘real jobs’, which in this region means employment with the Central Desert Shire. The Shire note in their ‘Strategic and Business Plan for 2008/2009’ that they can offer 255 jobs. They have instituted an Economic Development Advisory Board. It is here that opportunity for a CED approach exists. This new Shire, could, like Diamantina Shire, actively seek and train local workers and ensure positions are filled by local Aboriginal people. In this they would need to link their economic initiatives to social development, so that services are developed to provide the stability people need in order to work. A community development approach of engaging local groups or families in the visioning, planning and asset mapping processes could contribute overtime to community cohesion and capability.

In one of the few genuinely bottom up economic initiatives, Aboriginal women are active in the region with bush harvest of akatyerr (desert raisins Solanum centrale) and ntyerrm (Acacia coriacea) – selling to buyers in Alice Springs. The income for these seasonal harvests is cash in hand and dependent on networks with non-Aboriginal traders. This has been occurring for many years and there are up to 500 Aboriginal harvesters who sell to four wholesale traders. Emerging research suggests that relations between harvesters and traders are good, with the latter having benevolent intent recognizing that this is a culturally appropriate way for Aboriginal people to derive well being from their land (Walsh and Douglas, 2009). An Aboriginal Bush Producers Association has recently been formed (Cleary, Grey-Gardner and Josif, 2009), though it is still in its infancy. The lack of government involvement has been suggested by some of the traders as contributing to longevity of harvesting activity (Walsh and Douglas, 2009).

With the advantage of Aboriginal land ownership comes a greater range of alternative economies, which are only recently being recognized in central Australia. Initiatives are emerging in Anmatyerr in relation to application of Aboriginal knowledge of land and natural resource management. A ranger group coordinator has been advertised for the region to be based
at Ti Tree. Ten ranger positions will be available, managed through the Central Land Council and funded federally.

There is no shortage of good initiatives for progressing economic development in Central Australia; however, many ideas imported from outside do not secure long term purchase on the ground. Meanwhile, those pursuing local bottom up initiatives protect their activity from both local and external intervention. An explicit CED framework could potentially link various initiatives to a locally held, long-term, supportive strategy to progress local employment, social development and economic opportunities across all sections of the community. The Central Desert Shire will certainly pursue growth in economic and employment opportunities, but this will take time and will not inevitably improve the circumstances of the people for whom the area has long been home, unless it is paralleled with social and political development and intercultural engagement.

Opportunities that draw on Aboriginal cultural values are under recognized or nascent in both places. Bush products are harvested in Anmatyerr, but land and water management, art, and cultural tourism offer further possibilities. Similarly, in Diamantina Shire, the pristine environment has leant itself to organic farming, but this is always at risk to pesticides from upstream. The contribution that natural resource management could make to the economy has barely been tapped, particularly the contribution Aboriginal people could make to this. Initiative has to come from Aboriginal people, while the intercultural skills that enable local settlers as well as outsiders to support such initiatives are crucial.

Neither case study site has successfully held social, cultural, political and economic dimensions together. In Diamantina Shire, culture has been silenced in the interests of social and economic development. In Anmatyerr, social and economic stratification is an outcome of the path of development. In both case study sites, it is long-term locals who are committed to the area for economic, social and cultural reasons, and it is they who are likely to stay for the long haul. This includes settler and Aboriginal people. The local task (as opposed to regional and national tasks) is for locals to acknowledge what they have already achieved together, so as to build on their existing strengths and aspirations. It means working to bridge the divisions that inhibit planning and moving forward together in new ways. Analysing the economy from the bottom up means bringing into the conversation people from across the community whose lives are affected. Continuous engagement in CED processes will broaden the base of people able to analyse the relations between national, regional and local, so as to become more strategic at each of these levels. Making culture visible means local people developing capacity to view political, social and economic arrangements through an intercultural lens. Holding the internal
agenda firmly changes the relations to agencies beyond the community. All this requires local leadership over the long haul. The processes can be assisted by external community development workers, but the vision and effort need to be local.

Conclusion

All desert industry struggles with climate extremes, harsh conditions and seasonality. Historically, pastoralism has been the main industry in both case study sites and strategies for desert survival have included expansion over multiple sites to secure more varied conditions (Diamantina) and diversification and pluri-activity (Anmatyerr). As the pastoral industry adopted such survival strategies, the employment of non-local contract labour grew and jobs were lost to Aboriginal people, in both locales.

Both locales have struggled to expand their economies, and each has had some success. Local government has been an important contributor to that success in both places. For the most part, initiatives that have survived and prospered have been driven by local people. Government intervention has been most fruitful where it is a response to local initiative.

Anmatyerr, more so than Diamantina, has been a site of intervention for external authorities. Many projects have flowered and perished, underscoring the need for a strong internal grasp on the local agenda and the co-ordination of opportunities and resources through that agenda.

In both places, Aboriginal people have endeavoured to span their culture and the demands of the modern economy. In Diamantina, this has meant living on traditional country but within settler economic domain. In Anmatyerr, the Aboriginal cultural domain has been privileged, and some traditional activities such as bush harvest have endured, but economic survival has largely meant dependence on government transfers in a dual economic system.

There is a significant task for local, regional and national governments in brokering the top down and bottom up. Where the emphasis is top down, as in Anmatyerr, external agencies have tended to project their own ideas and aspirations and have undoubtedly been driven by need to secure short-term performance outcomes. This has been to the detriment of capacity building with local people around their ideas and aspirations. The ways in which national and regional economic practices drain resources from remote communities is rarely assessed. The capacities of Aboriginal people in remote settings to operationalize business ideas that have their origins in settler culture may well have been overestimated. Across Australia, there is a significant work underway, led by Indigenous people, to link Aboriginal cultural knowledge with natural resource management (see e.g.
NAILSMA). This requires some very intensive local developmental work. There is evidence in both places of the skills involved in two cultures working together, and this happens most effectively when locally driven. As discussed by Rea and Messner (2008), this requires intercultural effort (i.e. conscious effort by both cultures), over the long term if the strengths of both cultures are to be developed.

The analysis of this paper suggests that, first, there is a need to consider the ways in which articulation of remote resources into the national economy can bypass and impoverish local communities. This can be addressed by regulatory frameworks to ensure that companies reaping local resources employ and procure locally. This would produce a stronger relation between local resources and local economies. This happens in some mining towns, but it is too important to be left to small groups of local people to negotiate with large companies and corporations. It will undoubtedly be argued that any regulatory framework that imposes conditions on investors will make Australia non-competitive. Yet, this would be a better starting point for policy innovation, than pressuring settlements to survive on crumbs left after corporations have taken the main meal. It is at the point of economic policy that local employment and local economic return for extraction of local wealth needs to be secured.

At both national and regional levels, emphasis needs to be placed on encouraging capability in local government to develop, hold and pursue long-term local economic development strategies. Of course, this will not mean that local wealth is necessarily shared or translated into services and opportunities that benefit all community members. Yet, a combination of long-term, intercultural, subsidiary relations at the locality level and regulatory frameworks at national and state levels would provide some basis for articulating local economies and local well being.

The importance of local infrastructure, adequate credit arrangements such as no interest loans and micro-finance, and long-term input to support local development of businesses and business expertise, cannot be overemphasized. The local as residual to the national economy is an inadequate and damaging approach for remote economies. Approaches that make the local central are likely to be more promising.

Comparison of the case studies suggests that while economic policy is usually seen as the province of individual enterprise and rational assessment, it is, like all human endeavours, primarily a relationship process. Where trust and cohesion exist, as in Diamantina, the local economy prospers and translates into good social conditions. Where stranger relations dominate, national profits may soar, but so to will the social, emotional, environmental and compensatory welfare costs. A growing appreciation of the many opportunities that are present in expanding from a focus on
settler culture, as the only domain conducive to economic development, to recognizing other cultural domains as offering greatly extended opportunities requires a shift in logic. This logic is towards working interculturally, with, alongside and over the long-haul to build the local, especially the remote local, from within and to articulate local, regional and national, economies.

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