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**Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre (DK-CRC): Harnessing Research and Jurisdictional Collaboration to Sustain Governance Initiatives**

Harnessing research and jurisdictional collaboration to sustain governance initiatives is a key role of the Desert Knowledge CRC. In this paper we discuss our approach to this task. We offer a simple presentation of the very real opportunity and challenge currently before us in desert Australia. We don't pretend expertise beyond our capability – the solutions for governance issues in desert Australia will be found in desert communities themselves, in partnership with the rest of the world with which they must interact. However, we are responsible for the commencement of research programs which in 7 years should have added value to these desert communities. We will focus in this presentation on how we are going about this and will invite you to support this venture.

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Australian desert populations generally are decreasing, but the proportion of Indigenous people in desert regions is increasing and is projected to increase quite significantly into the future (Taylor, 2002). These populations are highly mobile across all of desert Australia, in the Northern Territory, Western Australia, South Australia, Queensland and New South Wales. While there are social and economic grounds for managing, accommodating and maximising the opportunities arising from this demographic profile, there are significant inter-jurisdictional challenges in doing so.

Remote regions of Australia are seeing increasing problems with articulation between the concerns of remote communities and those of economic and political centres around the coastline. Tension between regional aspirations and more powerful larger centres follows a pattern which is played out at many

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levels from remote homestead to local service centre, desert towns to state capitals, and outback states to SE Australia.

Untangling the governance issues which are at the heart of these arguments, in particular their jurisdictional, remote and cultural elements, is a key task of the Theme. Distance, smaller populations and arid environments call for different solutions to technical and environmental problems; are the challenges of good governance, management and leadership also different, and if so, how? More importantly, how will we find out?

The Desert Knowledge CRC is seeking to contribute to the economic development of thriving economies throughout inland Australia. It is a new collaborative partnership of 28 partners in all - 13 universities, 5 Indigenous organisations, 5 State Government agencies, the whole of the Northern Territory Government, 5 private sector participants and the Commonwealth (see DK-CRC Update 2003). With the cash and in kind contributions of these partners, DK-CRC will conduct research and education in four key themes, which include the fundamental one of Governance, Management and Leadership for Sustainable Futures. Our work in the Governance area will inform research in all the areas of the CRC. Half the members of the DK-CRC Board are Indigenous, and this Board has singled out governance research, and how it informs DK-CRC itself, as a critical success factor for DK-CRC.

The DK-CRC is aiming at research outputs that will have good outcomes for all Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and their organisations living in the broad region of inland Australia. Stakeholders include Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments, local governments, non-government and community organisations, and private sector interests – businesses, corporations and industry associations. In the main, these groups recognise the deficit in governance and capacity and are seeking to engage in research projects that contribute practically on the ground. It should also be noted that as well as being identifiably part of DK-CRC and of the social and economic institutions of inland Australia, Indigenous people hold interests (whether recognised or unrecognised) in many of the other DK-CRC stakeholder institutions.

The key objective of the Desert Knowledge CRC in the Theme *Governance, Management and Leadership for Sustainable Futures* is to 'research and trial institutional models which will enable the capture of socioeconomic opportunities in desert Australia'. Central to this task is to build understanding throughout the community – individuals, communities, businesses, agencies and governments – about the characteristics of good governance, management and leadership in desert regions and how to build the environment that will promote these.

The major conceptual approaches through which DK-CRC will explore this Theme are:

*'Governance Models'* – focuses on the formal and informal arrangements which are in place in desert regions, and seeks to identify the elements of 'good' governance (Dodson & Smith 2003) in desert regions, including integrated approaches to service delivery, and exploring social networks as a key characteristic in desert governance.

*'Property Rights'* – focuses on the identification and removal of impediments to economic development, and the development of appropriate commercialisation models. We hope to peel away the 'policy' layers and the jurisdictional and cultural differences to arrive at some very basic concepts about how people make resource decisions. We will explore the bodies of work, such as the institutional analysis and design framework (refer Ostrom 1990, 1999) which may assist to build a common framework for people to discuss and develop their own models for effective governance institutions.

This area includes research into intellectual property and how it relates to the protection of local and traditional knowledge and appropriate, equitable, authorised pathways for commercialisation.

*'Capacity Building'* – focuses on the human, social and organisational issues associated with good governance, and will also support DK-CRC's

internal efforts to build capacity throughout its own structures and with its partners.

One of the key methods for DK-CRC's investigations is action research. We want to capitalise on the work already done elsewhere, and currently being carried out in key communities, to capture the success factors in governance. We offer the opportunity to put a research framework around existing activity to help Government agencies and communities to monitor the outcomes of their existing or proposed activities, and thus obtain a better understanding about how to replicate good outcomes and avoid bad ones elsewhere.

In this kind of research we want to support the development of research skills within Indigenous communities and within partner agencies and Indigenous organisations. There is a big legacy of mistrust about research in Indigenous communities, and we must set examples of how research can be an empowering process for local people.

Above all, in these early stages, we want to make the best decisions about our investments in research directions.

DK-CRC is currently in the process of identifying the key research directions in which its partners and stakeholders will invest, and which will progress the key research questions for governance in desert regions. This initial process is important because it will mean that DK-CRC has conducted projects in genuine partnership with desert people and that the results of its research will be used. That is, DK-CRC will not only research good governance but must also, in doing so, demonstrate its application.

Many of our partners, including some of you in this room and key representatives of other desert jurisdictions, worked with us in Workshops in Alice Springs in October to decide on the research projects that we need to begin now. We knew that we needed to scope what is already known, and that we needed to understand past successes and failures. We knew that we needed to build stakeholder understanding about these issues so that we have

their full participation in our research program. We knew that our resources to do this are currently spread throughout many partner institutions and that we need to tap these resources on behalf of desert communities. We also knew that we needed to get started, as we only have 7 years. What we didn't know was how we were going to move forward in such a difficult area, with so many partners and diverse interests in the outcome.

The Workshops moved us forward and highlighted some of the key questions towards which we should direct DK-CRC's research<sup>2</sup>:

- What is 'good governance'? Are local scale governing structures and their political processes so embedded in ongoing service delivery arrangements in Indigenous communities that they can't be objectively or independently considered? What are the appropriate forms of governance for effective service delivery? In this and other contexts, there was also discussion about the role of government, and government policy and culture as an object of study.
- To what extent are the problems faced by Indigenous communities attributable to being 'small', 'remote' or even 'different'? To what extent are their problems shared by communities across rural and remote Australia that are not dominantly 'indigenous'? (see also Dodson and Smith, 2003)
- If there is a difference, how much is this due to scale?
- If the problems faced by indigenous communities do exist across rural and remote Australia, perhaps the underlying issue in relation to Indigenous communities is that there is no language to discuss these problems properly. One example is the lack of attention that has been given to how the concepts and terms relevant to understanding 'good governance' translate between English and Australian desert languages. Another example is how problems experienced with local governance and service delivery structures in indigenous communities tend to be attributed to poor 'cultural fit' rather than analysed more explicitly, as they might be in the Australian 'mainstream', to

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<sup>2</sup> This list is not intended to be exhaustive. Many important research issues were raised, and contributed to broad agreement about the projects which now need to go forward. These projects are currently being developed and the CRC Board will make funding decisions in due course.

separate out factors that are due to physical environment and demography from those that may be due to values and styles of decision making.

- Veronica Arbon, Director of the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, talked about engagement models of governance, saying these need to replace models premised on domination. She said that ‘credibility, accountability, sustainability and authority must be central to any new model’ as long as those words are ‘constructed from new meanings. Authority for example would be a new form of authority that draws from both the wisdom of the elders and the positives of modern governance.’ (Arbon, 2003)
- DK-CRC should ultimately address questions which will have a high and visible impact in social, cultural, environmental and economic terms. It is critical for desert Indigenous communities to establish what the right questions are. There was much discussion about action research in the paths towards Territory Statehood and appropriate models for regional-scale governance.
- On the final day, devoted entirely to traditional knowledge and intellectual property, Sonia Smallacombe of Charles Darwin University gave a paper that stated the case in this area very well. I quote her introductory paragraph in full: “Most of the discussions around Traditional Knowledge at the international level remain elitist – only a few Indigenous individuals are able to participate and information regarding the discussions or outcomes is not extensively disseminated. There is a gap between the international debate and the local realities. Most Indigenous communities are faced with life-threatening issues that keep them from actively engaging in international policy advocacy work, and yet many of the issues that Indigenous people face on the ground are brought about by the implementation of policies crafted at the international level. Clearly there is a need to bridge this gap and bring more information to the people in our communities” (Smallacombe, 2003).

As an outcome of the Workshops, collaborative research proposals are being put forward. The DK-CRC Board will make decisions about the most appropriate and strategic research which will lead to the innovative change

being sought in desert Australia, with an initial aim of funding a 2 year research program to set a solid foundation for the following 5 years of DK-CRC's current partnership agreements.

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The Desert Knowledge CRC offers assistance in a key area of need in the Northern Territory and the linked regions of desert Australia. This need has been stated by the Conference itself as 'designing and exercising practically-capable and culturally legitimate governing arrangements for communities and regions that will create an environment conducive to economic development and social investment' (Conference Summary Paper).

Its diverse partners make our offer both worthwhile and complex, requiring that DK-CRC, a virtual, widespread organisation, is an effective facilitator and broker of partnerships and knowledge rather than just a 'scientific expert'. The aim of the CRC program is to ensure that the results of research are used to bring about benefits to the community by bringing end users into the research process.

DK-CRC has the critical ingredients of collaborative partnerships - among Indigenous organisations, research, business and government - and a charter to address these questions. We invite you to work with us to make sure that we do.

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