

## Indigenous Regional Futures: Data Needs for Good Governance

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In Alice Springs, 6 months ago, at the inaugural Indigenous Economic, I stated in a paper on trends in the socioeconomic status of Indigenous people, that the Northern Territory had a serious economic development problem (Taylor 2003). Forget the railway, forget the Timor Gap, forget tourism, and mining—the one feature of the Northern Territory economy that distinguishes it from all other jurisdictions is the fact that fully one quarter of its adult population (incorporating the bulk of Indigenous adults) remains overly-dependent on welfare and structurally detached from mainstream economic benefits.

Presently, Aboriginal people own half the land base of the NT, account for 25% of the adult population, yet receive only 11% of the Territory's gross personal income. If the focus is solely on income derived from mainstream employment, then that share is reduced to just 4%. As Jack Ah Kit pointed out, this is largely because most Aboriginal people are not in the workforce, and even of those who are, half depend on low wage CDEP.

Because of a youthful age profile and continuing high fertility, the Aboriginal population is set to expand rapidly – doubling in size in many regions within a generation.

Because of the widening gap between growth in numbers and growth in jobs, my prediction in Alice Springs was that the socioeconomic status of Aboriginal people would worsen without a sea change in the policy response. Business as usual is simply not possible because the downstream costs of inaction would be much greater than the upstream costs of action.

Six months is clearly a long time in contemporary Territory politics. The pledge made at the Alice Springs conference by Minister Scrymgour to engage Aboriginal people as partners in economic development has since been pursued, and not least by the implementation of the *Stronger Regions Policy*. As we have heard, the focus of this is to strengthen regional governance. As the background notes to the conference remind us, 'governance' is not the same as 'government'. 'Government' means having a jurisdictional control, whereas 'governance' is about having the processes and institutional capacity to be able to exercise that control through sound decision-making. *Good* 'governance', on the other hand, is all about the means to establish this with the ultimate aim of achieving the social, cultural, and economic developments sought by citizens. As

for good regional governance, Jack Ah Kit summed this up as how 'we' best organize ourselves to make decisions – stressing that who 'we' are defines the region.

With these thoughts in mind, my task is to briefly reinforce the case for regional governance, and then address fundamental issues about measuring outcomes.

## **(SLIDE 1)**

### **Why regions? What are they?**

Almost 90% of non-Aboriginal Territorians live in urban centres, mostly in Darwin and Alice. In stark contrast, three-quarters of Aboriginal people are widely dispersed in relatively small settlements on their own lands occupying around half of the Territory's land mass. The extent to which this difference in residential distribution reflects real lifestyle choices has to be factored into any policy formulation. Clearly, the sheer scale of continuing ties to country requires that opportunities for economic and social development must be established in the places that people want to, and actually, live.

While Aboriginal lands in the NT are remote from most mainstream economic activity, these are not the declining regions that we associate with outback NSW, Queensland and South Australia. They are demographically resurgent, resource rich, and have long-term stakeholders anxious to do business. Many so-called 'Aboriginal communities' are in fact emerging towns of significant size—a generation from now, for example, Wadeye will have more people than present day Nhulunbuy! While it may have been easy in the past for politicians to overlook the bush, sheer weight of numbers and associated needs make this increasingly difficult in the future.

In recognition of past neglect of the Territory's own backyard, from the government side the *Stronger Regions Policy* signals a conscious effort to move away from a silo model of planning and development focused on specific sectors such as Asian trade, the growth of Darwin, tourism, the pastoral and mining sectors, and urban-based servicing of Aboriginal communities, towards an approach which views Territory development as an integrated whole with the development strengths and weaknesses of one region impacting on all others. It is thus an equity and efficiency-based model, with needs assessment, equalisation of resource allocation, and measured outcomes as the key drivers. From the community side, it is seen fundamentally as a rights issue, restoring lost sovereignty over decision making. However, as both Jack Ah Kit and Robert Lee noted, because this is about 21<sup>st</sup> Century governance, to do as much with efficient service delivery and economic development as about customary forms, the appropriate scale is inevitably regional.

What, though, do we mean by regional? How do we define regions?

There are three basic approaches to determining regional boundaries, and these can produce quite different types of regions.

**Formal Regions:** the key defining features of formal regions are uniformity, coherence, common identity and homogeneity. Thus, we can put boundaries around things that are held in common and distinguish the distribution of one group or phenomenon from another. For example a language or land owning group.

**Slide 1.** shows the region and communities serviced by the Ngaanyatjarra-Pitjantjatjara-Yankunytjatjara (NPY) Women's Council. This area is broadly described as the Western Desert Language region within which people share strong cultural, linguistic, and family affiliations. Interestingly, it is also the catchment for Maruku Arts and Crafts which markets distinctive cultural artefacts (punu) from the same region. In the arid zone such regions tend to be larger in area than in the tropical savanna and coastal areas.

**Functional Regions:** As the name suggest, these are identified according to their function. They can, and often do, incorporate many different groups of people but they display a certain functional coherence—an interdependence of parts. For example, a network of towns and dependent smaller communities identified by the pattern of flows of goods, services and people. The term hinterland captures this notion well. The size of functional regions thus depends to a large degree on the nature of the goods and services that generate flows of people. The catchment area of a regional hospital service, for example, is larger than that of a local health centre. **SLIDE 3** shows functional regions across remote Australia based on the journeys made by Aboriginal people from all communities in order to access major services such as banks, shopping and hospitals. The data for this map are drawn from the 1999 CHINS.

**Administrative regions:** These represent the current boundaries of governance, and for better or worse, invariably provide the framework within which planning decisions are made and services delivered. Numerous examples, exist. The one shown here in **SLIDE 4** is that of ATSIC Regions in the NT

**NT Government definition:** It is interesting to consider the NT government definition of a region in light of these concepts as spelt out in its Stronger Regions Policy (**SLIDE 5**). When it comes to deciding on boundaries for regional governance no doubt some combination of regional definitions will be brought to bear, with a possible trade-off between formal cultural regions given the need for economies of scale and recognition of existing service delivery frameworks.

“an area that the people in it see as a region and that the government agrees should be treated as such; where a reasonable **community of interest** exists; where there is capacity to achieve **economies of**

**scale** in the achievement of outcomes; and where there is demonstrated capacity or need for **whole of community** action to cooperate in the achievement of **shared objectives**”

(Northern Territory Government 2003).

**Actual Regional Governance Boundary—Thamarrurr:** Only one region has been gazetted to date under the new arrangements for regional governance—the Thamarrurr Region in the south western Top End. This boundary was determined following a series of workshops and consultations held over several months between NT government officials and the numerous clan groups in the vicinity of Wadeye and Palumpa to explain the purposes and intentions of the *Stronger Regions* policy. Final determination of the regional boundary was made according to instructions obtained via these workshops.

Aside from the Thamarrurr Region which is now gazetted, the sorts of possible regions mooted include the Tiwi Islands, Greater Darwin, Kakadu/Coburg/West Arnhem, East Arnhem, Groote Eylandt, Maningrida and surrounds, Pine Creek/Coomalie/Douglas-Daly, Katherine, Katherine East (Nyirranggulung), Katherine West, Roper River, Gulf region, Anmatjere, West MacDonnells, Alice Springs, Warlpiri communities and the Tanami, Southern Arrente, Southern Central (Imanpa, Mutitjulu, Kaltukatjara), and Barkly.

While such groupings might appear intuitively sound, complexities are almost certain to arise in seeking to establish boundaries for the purposes of representing regional ‘communities of interest’ with ‘shared objectives’ as the boundaries between one region and another are inevitably blurred (Morphy 1999). Clearly, if boundaries for regional governance are to instill an innate sense of representation, common purpose, and joint planning, as specified in the Strong Regions Policy, it is essential for subsequent *good* governance that considerable effort is applied to their careful design.

If experience tells us anything, the tendency seems to be that formal regions will produce more numerous, smaller, and tightly defined areas, compared to regional boundaries based on functional and administrative criteria. Indeed, we have heard already (in the case of Nyirranggulung and Sunrise Health), (and the same goes for Thamarrurr and the SW Top End PHCAP zone), that new Regional Authority boundaries may not necessarily match the boundaries set for different service delivery arrangements. Logically, one would have thought that these would align as far as possible. The consequences of creating a new tier of regions that may or may not align with existing service delivery arrangements is not clear at this stage, but it is something that will need to be thought through at an early stage. Maybe this issue revolves around which functions the new Regional Authorities acquire, and which ones they cede to other regional arrangements.

### **Baseline profiles: how do we know what's changed?**

In order to maximise the positives from regional governance, it is central that any consequences of development should be managed rather than arbitrary. A fundamental step in establishing mechanisms for such management and informed decision-making is the construction of a baseline profile of social and economic conditions at the outset. Without this, it is difficult to determine the subsequent effects of one course of action over any other. Accordingly, under the *Stronger Regions* policy, the need to measure outcomes from a baseline is to be written into development plans negotiated between government and Regional Authorities.

As an example of this, the Shared Responsibility Agreement signed earlier this year between the Thamarrurr Regional Council, the Northern Territory Government, and the Commonwealth, clearly identifies this need in setting out as its first objective “the establishment of partnerships for achieving measurable and sustainable improvements for people living in the region.” In deciding what measures were required to inform both Thamarrurr and government about such progress, these were determined partly by the development priorities identified by the Thamarrurr clan groups, partly by the need to inform government processes, and partly by the availability of public information specific to the regional population.

Currently, the profile covers the demographic structure and residence patterns of the regional population, its labour force status, education and training status, income, welfare, housing and health status. Also provided are projections of the regional population to 2023 (a generation from now) so as to encourage forward thinking and to anticipate needs with a view to hopefully responding to them before they are realized. This capacity to project and plan for future needs population levels is an essential part of regional governance, as Robert Lee reminded us yesterday. All too often in Aboriginal Affairs, policy has been ‘reactive’ by responding to historic levels of need thereby creating a constant sense of catch up. What is required for good governance is a ‘proactive’ methodology which seeks to anticipate and plan for expected requirements. In this way, the intent of regional agreements can be translated into a required quantum of program and partner commitments over a given timeframe. This issue of identifying future needs leads naturally to a discussion of capacity building for regional governance, and I shall use the experience of Thamarrurr as an example.

### **Partnerships and capacity building**

The process of developing a baseline profile of the Thamarrurr regional population involved a large number of agencies and individuals from within the Region itself, and from Territory and Commonwealth agencies. Data for a

customized area such as Thamarrurr do not simply exist somewhere sitting on a shelf conveniently waiting to be picked up, they need to be requested, even cajoled, from a variety of sources and then locally assembled and interpreted.

An early test of partnership arrangements in the context of developing the baseline profile was the extent to which Commonwealth, Territory, and local community agencies could, and did, deliver on access to relevant data to support the construction of social indicators. In the Thamarrurr exercise, these boundaries have mostly been tested and established and the range of data items secured are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Data items secured for the Thamarrurr region from various Commonwealth, Territory, and local agencies**

<b>Population</b>
ABS census counts and ERPs of Indigenous and non-Indigenous population by 5 year age and sex for Wadeye town and outstations as a group.
Community approval and assistance in conducting a census producing single year Indigenous and non-Indigenous age and sex capable of manipulation by community working groups into section of town, individual outstations, and clan groupings.
Clinic estimate of 'active client' Indigenous and non-Indigenous population by 5 year age and sex
Thamarrurr Housing Office population list to estimate service population
Age and sex of Centrelink customers
Age and sex of regional residents on the electoral roll
Number of Indigenous persons registered with Medicare with a usual address in Thamarrurr
<b>Labour Force</b>
Census data on labour force status, industry, occupation, hours worked, employment and non-employment income by Indigenous status, age and sex
CDEP participants by age, sex, and occupation
Special survey data on individual occupations and skills
Centrelink data
<b>Education and training</b>
School enrolments by age, sex and grade level
School attendance by age, sex and grade level

School Multi Level Assessment Program (MAP) test results for Year 3 and 5 reading and numeracy
Enrolments by training provider category by field of study by certificate level and accreditation category by outcome status by Indigenous status, age and sex
<b>Housing</b>
Housing occupancy rates
Housing stock by occupancy and number of bedrooms
Housing stock by repairs needed
Estimates of housing need
<b>Health</b>
Chronic disease incidence by age and sex
Growth characteristics of under 5s
Regional food costs compared to elsewhere in NT
Cost of family food basket
Fresh food variety, quality, availability
Unique hospital patients by Major Diagnostic Code (MDC), 5 year age and sex
Hospital patient separations by MDC by 5 year age and sex
Birth weights
Active client population for clinic by 5 year age and sex
Clinic staffing classification by Indigenous status
<b>Justice</b>
Reported regional property offences and offences against the person
Persons in adult correctional centres by last known address and birthplace (Wadeye)
Juveniles in detention by last known address and birthplace (Wadeye)
Adult conditional liberty caseload according to office (Wadeye)
Juvenile conditional liberty caseload according to office (Wadeye)
Conditional liberty order commencements by office (Wadeye)
<b>Welfare</b>
Centrelink payments by type and number by 5 year age and sex, and \$ amount
Non-employment income estimates from the census

As seen from the data list, a wide range of public domain information can be gathered at the regional level to provide for the construction of broad brush measures of social and economic well-being. In using these, however, it is crucial first of all to have reliable estimates of the population they are intended for. Globally, this requires reliable totals. Program-wise, it requires reliable breakdown into infants, mothers, school-age children, youth, young adults, middle-aged, and older people. Let me give you just one example of the importance of getting this right. As part of the KRSIS in 1996, one of the indicators I developed was a school enrolment rate for children of the Kakadu region. At that time, the NT government, using official census counts of the school age population, produced an enrolment rate of 120%. For my part, using

Gagadju Health estimates for the school age population, a much lower enrolment rate of 53% was produced. Which one is the most appropriate for planning?

In Thamarrurr, because of concerns regarding the accuracy of official population figures, the community organized to count itself, in August 2003. As a consequence, it now has a baseline demographic database of the usual residents of the region, plus an estimate of the regional service population, with which to consider the size of current and future needs. This process was an important exercise in capacity building for governance as it involved key local people in collecting and verifying their own population data to be used for their own purposes. No longer do Canberra or Darwin tell Thamarrurr who they are, Thamarrurr tells them!

Furthermore, it allows Thamarrurr to project where they are likely to be a generation from now, in the year (2023). Consider the implications for regional governance of the data shown in Table 2.

**Table 2. Distribution of resident Aboriginal population by select age groups: Thamarrurr region, 2003**

Age group	2003	2023	Net change	% change
0-4	350	642	292	83.4
5-15	626	1,140	514	82.1
16-24	396	672	276	69.7
25-49	530	1,075	545	102.8
50+	132	304	172	130.3
Total	2,034	3,833	1,799	88.5

With this information, the council now knows that just to achieve a very modest goal and keep the regional employment rate at its current very low level of 14%, the number of adults in work will need to double over the next 20 years. Also, with the school age population rising to well over 1,000 within a generation, Tobias' case to government for up-grading the school to secondary status is a strong one indeed! As for health issues, the fact that it is older age groups that will increase fastest over the next 20 years has substantial implications for health spending and provision of facilities in the region, given the chronic nature of mostly lifestyle disease. Finally, in planning to address housing needs, there is no way that IHANT standards can be met under existing funding levels given the current regional occupancy rate at 16 persons per functional dwelling. What does this mean for governance in this expanding region of rural Australia?

Just to finish, this database is not an end, it is just a beginning. The information systems that inform regional governance should be ongoing, constantly updated, and expanded where necessary, and the task should be seen as a core function of governance involving all partners to Regional Agreements. Indeed, one measure of success in terms of establishing good governance, is that Regional Authorities begin to assume the capacity to compile their own statistical measures of progress (obviously in partnership with government agencies who often hold the necessary data), and to progress in stages to their interpretation, presentation, replication, and dissemination with the ultimate goal of applying them to decision making for regional planning. As with many aspects of Indigenous life, all of these processes are presently done *for* communities *by* outsiders. With appropriate resourcing to provide training and skills development for local personnel, the *Stronger Regions Policy* presents a unique opportunity to build internal capacity for regional planning. The sense of ownership and participation in the planning process that this would provide, and the control of the information flow that informs it, is central to good governance and community development.

## **References**

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