A complex balance: Mediating sustainable development in Cape York Peninsula

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines 'sustainable development' in a contemporary remote Aboriginal rural community. I argue that sustainability in Indigenous development in the central Cape York region involves an ongoing compromise between often incommensurable forms of social, political, and economic organisation. Drawing on material gathered in central Cape York Peninsula between 1996 and 2003, I conclude that development intervention is likely to fail when it is not properly cognisant of differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous ideals and ways of doing things.

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Introduction

Many Indigenous Australians face huge social and economic problems that are the result of colonial and post-colonial impacts on their communities and country. Some argue that over the past 30 years, policies of 'self-determination' and the effects of welfare dependency have compounded these problems among Indigenous peoples in northern Australia (see, for example, Neill 2002; Pearson 2000). In particular, critics have focused on problems with governance[1] in Indigenous organisations.[2] 'Good governance', governance 'concerned with creating the conditions for legitimate and capable rule, and for collective action' (Dodson & Smith 2003, p. 2), is typically understood as a foundation for sustainable development.

In international development research and policy, the concept of 'sustainable development' remains popular. The concept emphasises the need for concerted engagement with economic, social, political and environmental considerations in projects seeking to improve human living standards. The concept has been increasingly applied in Aboriginal Australia (Altman 2001; Dodson & Smith 2003), despite differences in the situations of Indigenous Australians and the poor in third world countries. Growing concern over the failure of Aboriginal development has shifted policy towards increased social control (in particular, control of alcohol and other substance abuse), market-oriented economic development, withdrawal from 'welfare dependency', and the regeneration of social fabric (Ah Mat 2003; Alcohol and Drugs Working Group 2002; *The Australian* 2003; Dodson 2003; Finlayson 2003; Langton 2002; Neill 2002; Pearson 2000, 2002). In common with international shifts, Aboriginal development discourse is shifting from the relationship between government agencies and Aboriginal people towards a 'third way' relationship between Aboriginal communities, civil society, business and government (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner 2002; Langton 2002; Pearson 2001, 2002; Porter & Craig n.d.; Schwab & Sutherland 2002, pp. 8–10).

On the Cape York Peninsula, and in line with these shifts, initiatives linking government, regional Aboriginal organisations and business partners are focusing on sustainable development in Indigenous communities. These initiatives are attempting to narrow gaps in income, life expectancy, health, education and employability between Aboriginal people and other Australians, as well as to improve 'family support networks' (see Ah Mat 2003; Department of Premier and Cabinet

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[1]   'Governance' is a collective term for the formal and informal processes, relationships, structures and institutions through which groups or communities make decisions, exercise authority and determine goals, action and responsibility (Dodson & Smith 2003, p. 1–2).

[2]   For criticisms of 'self-determination' and welfare dependency, see Neill (2002) and Pearson (2000). For criticisms of governance in Indigenous organisations, see Dodson and Smith (2003, p. 7–8), Finlayson (2003), Neill (2002, p. 31–75), Porter and Craig (n.d.), and Rowse (1992).

(Queensland) n.d.; Pearson 2001). These are laudable aims, but they engage little, beyond a cursory flagging of 'traditional Indigenous values', with less easily measured aspects of Indigenous existence.[3] This lack of engagement with Indigenous ideals and ways of doing things pervades Australia's mainstream Indigenous affairs discourse. In the mainstream discourse, more obviously 'material' poverty and social problems take priority over 'cultural' or symbolic dimensions of Indigenous life and of the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations. This bent has rehabilitated a push towards assimilation (in the guise of 'practical reconciliation') as the only rational way to sustainably address Aboriginal disadvantage (Behrendt 2002; see also Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner 2002; Altman & Hunter 2003; Sanders 2002).

Yet international experience suggests that this lack of engagement with Indigenous ideals and ways of doing things may undermine attempts at development in Indigenous communities. Internationally, 'development' has been criticised for the ways in which social and political changes are introduced via (economic) development projects. Critics emphasise 'the expansion and entrenchment of bureaucratic state power, side by side with the projection of a representation of economic and social life which denies "politics"' (Fergusson 1994, pp. xiv–xv). From this perspective, 'development' treats impoverished regions (and their populations) as unable to pursue improved outcomes without the intervention of external agencies (see Pottier et al. 2003). Conversely, grassroots research shows that development projects are more effective when they work with rather than against local values and practices (Agarwal & Sivaramakrishnan 2003; Crush 1995; Escobar 1995; Grillo & Stirrat 1997; Hobart 1993; Pottier et. al. 2003).

It is clear that Aboriginal 'communities' in northern and central Australia have deteriorated during the past 30 years (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner 2002; Langton 2002; Pearson 2000). However, we cannot assume that the current turn in Indigenous affairs is the right one, and we need to question the assumptions of proposed solutions. The pragmatic veneer of proposed interventions masks their social, political and economic character. Where such interventions are at odds with local Indigenous practice, projects and policies are unlikely to succeed.

Drawing on material gathered in central Cape York Peninsula between 1996 and 2003, I examine how a contemporary remote Aboriginal rural community is pursuing 'sustainable development', and how 'cultural' dimensions shape and constrain the community's efforts. Aboriginal organisations on Cape York Peninsula have mostly

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[3]   There is also little or no emphasis on environmental components, save where they might offer
       employment or training opportunities for Aboriginal people.

positioned themselves within the pragmatic push I described above, at least in their expressed political positions (see Alcohol and Drugs Working Group 2002; Department of Premier and Cabinet (Queensland) n.d.; Pearson 2002). On the ground, however, the qualitative factors affecting development outcomes continue to be acknowledged, although at least one regional development organisation has moved away from a strongly participatory approach based in local Aboriginal values. When organisations do take culture into account in Indigenous development projects, they typically limit their attention to the customary 'Aboriginal domain'. The relevance of cultural analysis for the operation of local Aboriginal corporations, the rationales of development projects, and the role of regional organisations themselves are all generally ignored. We can see how this limited engagement with cultural considerations can undermine development projects by examining three projects undertaken in the Coen region of central Cape York Peninsula since the mid-1990s.

An Aboriginal corporation in central Cape York Peninsula

Over the past seven years I have conducted more than two years of fieldwork in the central Cape York Peninsula region, including seventeen months in and around the township of Coen from 1996 to 1997. This ethnographic research, based on participant observation methodology, included extended data collection within the Coen Regional Aboriginal Corporation (CRAC), as well as with the Aboriginal families living in the township of Coen and across the wider region.

The Coen region, which covers much of central Cape York Peninsula, has a population of around 400 people, of whom I estimate around 70 per cent to be Aboriginal. Coen was established as a mining town in the late 19th century, and it rapidly became the service centre for the region's pastoral industry and the location for a centralised Aboriginal reserve from which indentured labour was drawn for the region's cattle stations. The decline of the pastoral industry in the early 1970s saw the sedentarisation of the region's Aboriginal population in the township and the start of their dependency on newly available welfare payments.

This situation continued until the early 1990s when, following the establishment of CRAC in 1993, the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme was introduced. The CDEP is a federal 'workfare' scheme that forms the basis of the local Indigenous economy—alongside other state benefits and subsistence hunting and gathering. The township's non-Indigenous population is now economically dependent on income generated by the local Indigenous population through direct transfer payments and via the provision of local services (including CRAC and the local school and clinic), as well as seasonal tourist business and local cattle enterprises.

Fieldwork in and around the corporation revealed that CRAC shared many of the problems of local Aboriginal organisations across northern Australia (see Dodson &

Smith 2003; Smith 2000; Sullivan 1996). But fieldwork also revealed innovative approaches that went some way towards explaining the corporation's successes. These successes, like the difficulties CRAC faced, are perhaps of more general application. In particular, they illustrate how a local Aboriginal service organisation such as CRAC involves the articulation of different cultural domains—'mainstream' or 'Western' and local Indigenous life-worlds—in its day-to-day operations. Although the local Aboriginal people, non-Indigenous employees and advisers, regional Aboriginal organisations and government departments involved in the corporation's establishment all sought to build a better future for local Aboriginal people, field data also suggests that this 'common' project involved widely divergent aspirations and values.

CRAC replaced two earlier corporations that were crippled by conflict between Indigenous families resident in the township. To assist in resolving this conflict, local Aboriginal people called on other agents, including the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), Noel Pearson (then head of the newly formed Cape York Land Council), a Queensland government employee based in Coen, and Lesley Jolly (an anthropologist undertaking fieldwork in the region). A key factor in CRAC's formation was ATSIC's refusal to fund a local CDEP scheme unless there was a single representative corporation. Consultation focused the new corporation's activities on aspirations evident among the local Aboriginal population, including an emphasis on decentralisation and outstation[4] development, land rights, the resourcing of activities on traditional lands, and town-based economic development, employment and training opportunities.

The corporation began CDEP operations in April 1993. By 1996, when I began fieldwork in the region, CRAC employed a full-time project manager and an accountant and was run by a board of seven directors, all of whom were local Aboriginal people. The design of the corporation's board, chosen each year by nominations from Coen's 'tribal groups' or 'mobs', partly explained the corporation's early successes. However, the existence of the Indigenous board was also a source of tension among local Aboriginal people, as the forms of representation prescribed by the design of the corporation were alien to local Indigenous politics (Smith 2000, pp. 385–96). The corporation's project manager claimed that the board of directors included a reserved place for each of the 'tribal groups' living in the township. This structure was designed to avoid the domination of the board by powerful families, a phenomenon common in local Aboriginal organisations elsewhere, and which had plagued previous corporations in Coen. However, the board excluded one of the major factions in the town, which the project manager said was to be represented elsewhere, or to be represented by the director for another of Coen's 'tribal' factions.

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4 Outstations are camps developed on traditional homelands across the region by local Aboriginal groups (see Altman 2003; Smith 2000, 2004).

However, members of the faction claimed that they had been politically and economically marginalised by their exclusion from the CRAC board.

Tension also arose from the expectations of CRAC's non-Aboriginal staff and employees of regional organisations that CRAC's directors could represent families and individuals with whom they had stronger or weaker kinship ties, based on a shared 'tribal' identity. In Coen, the 'Aboriginal domain' (see Smith 2000, pp. 380–4), which mostly sat outside the corporation, continued to be organised in the region's classical acephalous (stateless) Aboriginal way. Within this domain, people were predominantly concerned with accumulating, maintaining and managing social relationships. These informal, complex and cross-cutting relationships, rather than formalised institutions such as CRAC (and the reified 'tribal' groups represented on the corporation's board) served as the substantive level of local 'governance' among Coen's Indigenous population, and formed the basis for the prestige or power of key individuals (see Martin 1995; Smith 2000).

The corporation's deputy chairman explained to me the difficulties that directors and others holding prominent organisational roles faced in the Indigenous political process that he called 'keeping people happy'. He was not referring to some general social nicety, but to a principle that remained at the core of the reproduction of social life, further shaped by kinship-inflected relationships of obligation, responsibility and authority. In this milieu, when a person holds a focal position of control over land and/or resources, in particular as 'boss' for an outstation (homeland camp) or as a CRAC director, s/he must manage constant social pressures and the expectations of their peers. Anyone occupying such a role had to continually negotiate the support or acquiescence of a network of kin before making a decision rather than simply 'representing' them. To fail to do so was to risk censure and jealousy. Those in prominent roles met non-Aboriginal expectations of their 'representative' ability by negotiating with kin networks, in particular with other prominent individuals who did not hold formal positions of this kind. Thus these 'focal' men and women maintained their roles through forms of intercultural brokerage between otherwise incommensurable political and cultural domains.

Given this complex articulation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous ways, the success of CRAC in the mid- to late 1990s was all the more remarkable. Within a couple of years of the corporation's inception, the board was able to make decisions on the disbursement of funds, allocating these to one or two groups with urgent development needs on the understanding that other groups would benefit similarly over the longer term. This marked a radical shift from an earlier situation, in which directors would insist on such funds being distributed evenly, a decision based on their own interests and inability to face the pressure from the wider group of families and individuals that they 'represented'.

Success also depended on the other core relationship at the heart of the corporation: that between the board and the corporation's non-Indigenous project manager. The relationship between whites in these service positions and prominent Aboriginal people remains under-analysed. The project manager–board dyad was key to CRAC's early successes, with outsiders providing information and skills unavailable locally, and enabling directors to abstract difficult decisions from the Aboriginal domain and thus allow the coalescence of a 'whole of board' position.

During the period 1996 to 1997, though, local Aboriginal people and CRAC's non-Indigenous administration did not agree on how the corporation should be maintained. For its Aboriginal directors, and for Coen's Indigenous population more generally, the corporation provided a way of engaging with state projects that allowed people to meet both personal needs and state demands (for example, through CDEP employment), to further personal and kin-group interests, and to maintain a functional form of social life with other Aboriginal people living in the township. However, the actions of Indigenous people only reflected the ideas of 'community' and 'sustainability' underpinning the non-Indigenous administration of the corporation because of the diverse interests within the township (and on the board) and because exogenous social models were applied. This difference explained the constant attempts by CRAC's non-Indigenous administrators to limit the expression of autonomy—in particular via decentralisation—by the region's Aboriginal population (Smith 2002). 'Community' was an artefact of the project manager's steering of the corporation; it was primarily oriented to sustaining the organisation and its projects, rather than reflecting either the demographic composition of the township or the modes of interaction among Coen's Indigenous population.

An example of the project manager's attempts to maintain the corporation's sustainability in the face of intra-Aboriginal relationships occurred when pressure was brought to bear on the corporation's directors to bring the 'tribal' group represented elsewhere into the CRAC fold.[5] This would also have required the corporation to take financial responsibility for an ATSIC-purchased cattle station that was beset with financial and managerial problems. A senior man from the excluded group sought inclusion in CRAC after the corporation's success in securing funds became apparent, and because the organisation administering the excluded group's funds was itself running into serious financial and administrative problems. The focal man sought support from kin on the CRAC Board, but the project manager advised strongly against including the station because she believed management problems would undermine or collapse the corporation. The board

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[5]   During this process, I undertook observational research within the corporation's offices, and was given access to minutes of board meetings and other corporation documents for research purposes. I also discussed the activities of the corporation with staff, directors and other Aboriginal residents of the Coen region.

followed the project manager's advice and the station continued to be excluded. The minutes for the relevant board meeting simply state:

> 6.9 M—— [station] – Consideration of the consequences of them joining CRAC: Board of Director's [sic] do not agree to that issue. The Board have decided that M—— needs to remain with [their current representative organisation].

The board's vote appears to have been influenced by the advice of the project manager, which is fairly common in board meetings. This did not represent naivety on the part of the directors; rather, it illustrated the different cultural factors shaping Aboriginal and European modes of interaction. The role of organisations such as CRAC, beneficial and benevolent though they may be, 'is at best ambiguous and instead of inducing the necessary cultural adaptation … [may produce] fundamentally Europeanised institutions that are little more than dependent instruments of the European administration' (Sullivan 1996, p. 73). Such organisations are said to exist to further Aboriginal self-determination, but do so in order to meet the state- and capital-oriented requirements of wider Australian society, for 'productive labour' and 'good governance', for example. Moreover, non-Indigenous or non-local employees often control these organisations because they possess skills and understandings made necessary by the demands on the organisation from the legal, economic and political structures of Australian society. Thus despite good intentions, relationships between administrators and the Aboriginal population often continue to mirror the unequal relationships between non-Indigenous and Indigenous populations in Australian society.

It can of course be argued that the board's decision was based on informed consent. However, the way information was presented in such discussions was not neutral; in the context of local Aboriginal decision-making, where the stress is on autonomy and the situational coalescence of interests, to present a position is to assert both opinion and authority. Where authority was held to exist, or where it was politic to support it, such assertions tended to be met with acquiescence. That the project manager made the assertion, that her continuing presence was valued, and that she was white, all compounded the issue. Rather than working for them, many Aboriginal people saw the project manager as *their* boss, and CRAC as *her* organisation; this perception could be seen as a consequence of the region's recent colonial past and the continuing power of the state in Aboriginal life. In such circumstances the board would have been unlikely to disagree, and even if dissent were voiced after the meeting, for the purposes of organisational governance a decision had been reached.

In 1998, after a change in both Aboriginal control of the station and CRAC management, the previously excluded station came under the CRAC 'umbrella'. Although the station proved to be a continuing drain on the corporation's resources,

and although the Aboriginal group involved continually failed to meet mainstream expectations for Aboriginal-run station properties, the station did not contribute greatly to the problems faced by CRAC during this period.

For the project manager, it was undesirable to bring the groups and their station within the corporation and their focal man onto the board. Without her intervention, it was likely that this man could have used his connections with the board to gain their assent. By steering the situation to ensure the sustainability of the organisation, taking advantage of the 'behind closed doors' nature of the board meeting, the project manager acted in a way that cut directly across the suppositions of self-determination that CRAC's non-Aboriginal staff asserted was the *raison d'être* of the corporation. However, in doing so, the project manager acted to further what she perceived to be the best interests of the organisation and its local Aboriginal constituency. Such actions and accords highlighted the ambiguous position of CRAC and the particular form taken by the tension between administration and self-determination in local development initiatives.

Discussions with local Aboriginal people during my fieldwork indicated a general lack of 'ownership' of the corporation among the local Aboriginal population, even among the directors. Although the local population saw CRAC as an organisation that was there to 'help Aboriginal people', the corporation was also part of a local history of control of Aboriginal lives by outside forces. A former chairman of CRAC, for example, saw his role as being just like that of his grandfather, the 'king' for the Coen Reserve, who was 'put on the job to keep Aboriginal people quiet [that is, compliant with non-Indigenous authority]'. While many Aboriginal people—including the corporation's directors—saw themselves as benefiting from CRAC's existence, most saw the corporation more as an instrument of European or state administration than as an 'Aboriginal organisation'. Key to such perceptions was a distinction—clear to most Aboriginal people, but generally invisible to CRAC's non-Indigenous administrators—that the corporation involved forms of organisation and aspiration profoundly different from, although in some cases potentially commensurable with, those of local Aboriginal social life.

This limited sense of ownership involved a lack of transparency of the corporation's funds in the organisation to local Aboriginal people, despite its yearly audit. Many Aboriginal people felt 'shame'[6] and discomfort in the CRAC office environment, and white staff members often exacerbated this discomfort by policing Aboriginal entry to the offices. For example, white staff routinely refused entry to those they saw as likely to be drunk or who they considered to be unproductive or peripheral members

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[6] 'Shame' is the emotional experience of 'having transgressed the social and moral code[s]' (Arthur 1996, p. 107) of interaction that remain at the core of Aboriginal interaction in the central Cape York region.

of the community. They also often raised their voices or dismissively and paternalistically engaged with Aboriginal people's requests (Smith 2000, p. 394). At the same time, it seemed that non-Indigenous administrators at CRAC were attempting to pass on knowledge and control to the board and open the organisation's workings to other Aboriginal people who met their expectations of productive workers, or to economically and socially responsible outstation residents. The organisation and its operational plans were developed through consultation with local Aboriginal people, and the directors and Aboriginal staff were relatively comfortable in the office environment and able to raise issues with the project manager. These more positive engagements between white staff and local Aboriginal people were characterised by non-Indigenous perceptions of behaviour and aspirations seen as appropriate for the achievement of sustainable local development: sobriety, employment, good governance and the responsible management of finances.[7]

The divergence between the approach of the corporation's non-Indigenous administrators and local Indigenous values and practices eventually challenged the corporation's sustainability. An employee of the corporation stole a considerable sum of money, leaving it close to financial ruin. Following this, a new project manager was appointed; the aim was to secure the corporation from collapse. Unfortunately, securing the corporation appears to have come at the expense of financing outstation projects and with a shift to a managerial style that emphasised the economic recovery of the corporation at the expense of Aboriginal aspirations. This shift in the corporation's management approach also led to increased control of the corporation by a powerful local family, which returned the township to earlier problems of factionalism and marginalisation and threatened the corporation's acceptance by many of the region's Aboriginal families.

The new project manager was able to broker commensurability between some Aboriginal aspirations and the corporation's projects—though this task was made more difficult by the lack of funds at his disposal; but he was not able to balance the disparate Aboriginal interests manifested within the corporation. Thus many local Aboriginal people became disenchanted with the corporation, which they saw as failing to support their projects. Many saw the new project manager as interested only in town-based projects and as compromised by his support for one local Aboriginal family, whose interests were centred on the township and on projects based there. This situation left a considerably weaker (and less sustainable) corporation, with many families pursuing increasingly decentralised projects and seeking other avenues of support for their 'mobs'. In seeking to secure the sustainability of the corporation

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[7] It should be noted, however, that senior Aboriginal people shared many of these values, a result, in part, of their upbringing on cattle stations.

and secure his own position, the project manager brought an end to the coalescence of interests that made the corporation viable in the first place.

Market gardens

Another of the limits to sustainable development, again involving the relationships between Aboriginal people and white advisers, was apparent in two projects that focused on the development of gardens. The first of these saw a regional non-government organisation (NGO) finance the development of permaculture gardens at two of the region's outstations. The second involved the development of a market garden in the township by CRAC. This was the town's first Aboriginal-controlled business.

The corporation's first project manager had repeatedly told the board about the high price of 'failed' projects in Aboriginal communities and about how the community might be blamed for any such failures. As a result, the board and other focal men and women in the Coen region knew about the likely repercussions of 'failed' development projects, in particular the reduced ability of CRAC to secure further resources that would flow to their kin. Nonetheless, regional Aboriginal organisations established several unsustainable projects in the immediate region. A key feature in the establishment and subsequent collapse of these projects was their failure to take account of Aboriginal perspectives and modes of interaction.

Data collected from fieldwork at CRAC, and from long-term fieldwork at one of the two permaculture gardens established at outstations in the Coen region, illustrates how such 'failure' can occur. The consultant employed by the agency responsible for the projects 'wanted to help Aboriginal people' with a near evangelical zeal, but my observation of the project, and discussions with the outstation's Aboriginal residents, suggested that he had no real understanding of Aboriginal ways of doing things or experience working with Aboriginal groups. On one occasion this zeal led him into a direct argument with one group when he refused to compromise on the use of a tractor-mounted back-hoe for digging. The consultant presented his reasons (a mixture of ecological impacts and family history) to the group at an outstation meeting. The outstation's focal man replied that his 'mob' had spent much of their adult life 'breaking their backs working for white people' and would like to dig the garden in the easiest way possible. However, the emotional needs and meanings the consultant attached to his own way of doing things overrode any ability to compromise with the people who were, in effect, his employers. A tense and emotional standoff ensued.

After several similar episodes, many workers fell off the project. The consultant responded by attempting to lead by example, turning up and beginning work early every morning. Members of the outstation group took this to be an attempt to shame people into working, which upset them further. Eventually the consultant left and the group replanted the gardens with the vegetables they wanted to grow. A

permaculture garden at a second outstation remained unused and overgrown from the start of the project. As the project manager of CRAC later wrote in a report sent to the project's sponsoring organisation:[8]

> [t]he people wanted a conventional vegetable garden with foods that were familiar to them … [the consultant] does not listen or at least listens but fails to respond to Aboriginal persons' requests … The Board of Directors [of CRAC] were concerned about the impact of this failed project on the reputation of [the outstation's associated 'tribal' group] … There were minimal efforts made to address the 'needs' perceived by [this group] … Rather, a paternalistic approach of consistently telling [the group] of their needs for alternative plants [was employed] … I think it is most unfortunate that your organisation has not realised that it is essential to provide support of the 'kind' requested by Aboriginal people rather than provide support and rhetoric of the 'kind' deemed to be good for them.

As Chase (1980, p. 233) notes, the basis of such 'failures' often lies in indirect forms of Aboriginal resistance to paternalistic authoritarianism. The criteria applied in attributing 'success' or 'failure' are themselves typically based in European-Australian expectations of development and economic rationalism that often do not reflect Aboriginal priorities—in particular, these expectations see the sustainability of any project as being the product of continuing support among those involved; they do not see an organisation or project as desirable separate from the relationships involved in its maintenance. These complexities, which are often (if not always) a feature of development interventions in Aboriginal Australia, remain poorly understood within project design and implementation, including within 'Aboriginal organisations'.

The market garden developed by CRAC proved more sustainable, although only in the short term. Based on ongoing training by a local non-Aboriginal man with extensive experience working alongside Aboriginal people, and employing local Aboriginal people to grow foodstuffs used by most Coen households, initial tensions between workers from different local families saw the garden workforce narrow down from its original employees. But the sale of vegetables to local shops, through the corporation, and to cattle stations in the Coen region, ensured the viability of the

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8   Although the project manager stressed the need to give priority to Aboriginal needs and ways of doing things in this instance, in other circumstances she either failed to understand or chose to ignore cultural differences. The local project manager, whose day-to-day exposure to Aboriginal needs and values was far greater than that of those working for the regional body, could see that the garden project was undertaken in an obviously unsuitable way. The market garden project also exposed differences in needs and values in ways that more complex forms of intercultural articulation within the corporation did not.

garden despite problems with loss of employees. However, conflict between the project manager and the non-Aboriginal man CRAC employed to manage the garden project led to the latter's departure and the rapid collapse of the market garden project through loss of direction and staff. This conflict, which involved a clash of both personalities and approaches to the project, quickly led to a loss of interest in garden work among Aboriginal workers. This disengagement from the project again illustrates the importance of particular relationships—including relationships with non-Aboriginal managers—in ensuring the sustainability of projects involving Coen's Aboriginal population.

Outstation development projects

Another example of how miscommunication and imposed agendas affected project sustainability involved a development plan produced by a regional consultancy and commissioned by a Cairns-based Aboriginal health organisation. In common with many outstation-focused proposals, the project was based on the idea that outstations marked a 'return to country' by Aboriginal people. The consultants assumed that the development of outstation infrastructure and increased resources would see larger numbers of people living full-time at the outstation in preference to the township. Data on mobility patterns suggests that such predictions fail to grasp the continuing importance of Coen and other regional settlements in the lives of Aboriginal people (Smith 2004, p. 255). In fact, rather than a permanent move back to 'traditional country', Aboriginal people in the Coen region are far more likely to move to or from particular places in response to social, economic and political circumstances. Notably, people move to escape undesirable circumstances.

The consultants organised meetings at the outstation and sought demographic predictions for outstation use and habitation from senior men and women. In response to questions about kin returning to the Coen region from elsewhere, or the numbers of people who would move from Coen to live full-time at the outstation, the focal man from the outstation mob was wary about providing answers and repeatedly asserted that such questions were 'a bit hard really'. He was resisting commitment to any firm predictions, because neither he nor his 'mob' were able or willing to represent the likely patterns of outstation use, particularly for those not currently living at the outstation. They were well aware that the desire of regional agencies for increased use would endanger additional funding and development projects should they answer in the negative. Similarly, they apparently wished to avoid contradicting the consultants for fear of upsetting *their* desires for outstation development. The focal man and the wider outstation group appear to have been concerned with avoiding disjuncture between their responses and those obviously sought by the consultants, and failing to meet the criteria (population growth, for example) on which access to resources might have been based.

Rather than enabling 'self-determination', projects of this kind—in common with the relationship between CRAC and Coen's Aboriginal population—succeed only when they enable compromise between the aims and values of 'mainstream' institutions and their employees and local Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people in the Coen region understood 'development' as a process in which non-local agencies asserted their own needs and desires and sought the support of local Aboriginal groups for their projects. Where such engagement did not push them towards unpalatable arrangements, Aboriginal people in the Coen region commonly supported and involved themselves in such organisations and projects. They recognised the continuing existence of bureaucratic or state structures that had increasingly interwoven themselves with the Aboriginal domain, but remained unable to take control of this process. For these groups, the sustainable basis for community development lay in the successful management of relationships with exogenous agents, whether via CRAC administration or regional organisations or government departments, in ways that ensured a continuing flow of resources into the Coen region's 'hybrid economy' (see Altman 2001) without an overly detrimental effect on local Aboriginal social organisation.[9]

Conclusion

The current push for Indigenous development emphasises Aboriginal autonomy and simultaneously presumes commensurability between the values that underpin Aboriginal life-worlds and projects or policies originating from local, regional, and State and commonwealth governmental agencies. However, as illustrated in the case studies discussed above, many examples of 'sustainability' in remote/rural Aboriginal community development have depended on local institutions that mediate the dynamic and often contradictory relationship that Aboriginal people have with the state and exogenous values. Such organisations enable the reproduction of Indigenous social, political and economic structures, which provide the necessary basis of community development despite their often being incommensurable with state and market values. The social and cultural dimensions of development projects need to be stressed in order to prevent assumptions about the compatibility of such values with Aboriginal community aspirations, and to identify the complexities of inter-cultural articulation. Otherwise, what appears at first blush to be pragmatism may prove to have been profoundly impractical and unsustainable.

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[9] This paper does not engage with one of the key issues around 'sustainable development'—the potential for any real move away from the economic underpinnings of the 'hybrid' economy given the relative lack of local market opportunities.

Acknowledgements

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