Abstract

Facilitating the voluntary mobility of Indigenous Australians off their ancestral lands to areas where better education and job opportunities exist, and where there are higher standards of services, is one of the principles that underlies the Council of Australian Governments’ National Indigenous Reform Agreement. For many Indigenous Australians who live on Indigenous-owned lands in remote Australia, the future lies not in being “yarded up like cattle” but in being on their homelands, where kinship, culture and ecological knowledge serve as reservoirs of creative alternatives to state development projects. This desire to remain on country has seen Indigenous Australians in remote regions build innovative, community-based development projects, combining their own knowledge systems with science to provide benefits to their country and communities, as well as to Australia more broadly.

Keywords

Aboriginal, alternate development, Caring for Country, Garawa, Waanyi

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Introduction

Once the government cleared us off our lands by shooting us and putting chains around our necks and dragging us off. Then, long time later, they said “Here’s your land back, we don’t need it”. That tall man he poured the sand through that old man’s hands. That made us real happy and we began to move back home. Government gave us a bit of help to get back and set ourselves up. But you know what? They never really took those chains off from round our necks, cos now they slowly pullin’ on them. They pullin’ us off our lands again and yardin’ us up like cattle in town. They pullin’ us off our land by not giving us schooling, health and housing services on our homelands. They not helpin’ us. They sayin’ to the parents if you don’t send your kids to school we gonna stop your money and send you to prison. But there aren’t no schools, so the parents have to move off their country to live like white man in town with no culture. (Interview, Jack Green, (Garawa) at Borroloola, Northern Territory, Australia, 17 April 2012)

There are major statistical disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. The most significant is life expectancy. At the national level, for 2005–2007, life expectancy at birth for an Indigenous male was estimated to be 67.2 years, 11.5 years less than life expectancy at birth for a non-Indigenous male (78.7 years). Life expectancy at birth for Indigenous females was estimated to be 72.9 years, 9.7 years less than life expectancy at birth for non-Indigenous females (82.6 years). Indigenous life expectancy at birth differs across the states and territories, and the lowest for both males and females is found in the Northern Territory, estimated to be 61.5 years for males and 69.2 years for females (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009). In education, Indigenous students, especially in the Northern Territory, are performing well below non-Indigenous students in other regions of Australia against standard measures such as the National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2010). Other disparities can be found in infant mortality, employment and median weekly personal incomes.

Alleviating disparities through development

The capacity to alleviate disparities by improving the conditions of existence is at the centre of development theory and practice. Yet how to achieve this is highly contested (Edelman & Haugerud, 2010). Is development solely about improving the conditions of existence or is it, as others have argued, a historical process of commodification, industrialisation and globalisation that creates the very problems it is trying to solve (Escobar, 1995)?

Within the development discourse, there are also contested positions on the role of “traditional” culture. Some romanticise it, some see it as a reservoir of knowledge to draw from, while others demonise it (Edelman & Haugerud, 2010; Escobar, 1995, 2008).

Such ambiguity, both of development and “traditional” culture, is problematic as it provides opportunities for states to use development discourse as a legitimising strategy for state control (Cooper & Packard, 1997). This is what is occurring through the Australian Government’s Indigenous development policies across remote Australia, especially in the Northern Territory (Altman, 2007).

Australian Government responses to disparities between its citizens

In 2008, seeking to rectify some of the disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, the Australian Government, through the Council of Australian Governments,
launched the National Indigenous Reform Agreement (Closing the Gap) (Council of Australian Governments, 2009). This represents just one more attempt by Australian governments to impose on Indigenous “development”.

The Closing the Gap framework focused on six targets – Indigenous life expectancy, infant mortality, early childhood development, education and employment – and sought to reduce disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations.

An analysis of the Closing the Gap framework and its establishment reveals two significant flaws. First, it was developed without consultation of Indigenous peoples. Second, it uses a single lens to examine urban, rural and remote areas, thus obscuring the diversity and complexity of Australia’s Indigenous peoples’ circumstances, histories and aspirations for the future. By obscuring this diversity, the Australian Government bypasses its obligations under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which recognises that Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. Furthermore, it is “by virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development” (United Nations, 2007, art. 3).

In place of negotiating with Indigenous peoples to freely determine their aspirations, state agencies imaginatively construct one amorphous Indigenous population with remediable socio-economic disparities and no unique rights as Indigenous peoples. In this way, the Australian Government’s Indigenous policy “treat[es] people and cultures as abstract concepts, statistical figures to be moved up and down in the charts of ‘progress’” (Escobar, 1995, p. 44).

The Closing the Gap framework articulates goals to incorporate Indigenous peoples living in remote locations into mainstream education and training and the market economy by “promote[ing] personal responsibility” (individualism) and “engagement and behaviours consistent with positive social norms”, and moving people off their ancestral lands by “facilitating voluntary mobility by individuals and families to areas where better education and job opportunities exist, with higher standards of services” (Council of Australian Governments, 2009, p. E-79). This is in accord with the dominant narrative, which states that Indigenous “development” can only be achieved by rejecting “traditional” culture, and moving from ancestral homelands to townships to embrace the mainstream and its market economy.

The Closing the Gap framework has also shaped other state policies, too many to explore in this brief paper, designed to alleviate disparities, such as the Australian Government’s Indigenous Economic Development Strategy 2011–2018 (Australian Government, 2011a) and the Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory initiative (Australian Government, 2011b), which is essentially a 10-year continuation of the Northern Territory Emergency Response.

Indigenous agency

The dominant ideas and practices about Indigenous “development” promulgated by the state through the Closing the Gap framework, the Indigenous Economic Development Strategy and the Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory are built solely around individuals, problems and deficits. This way of thinking about Indigenous “development” is rejected by many Indigenous peoples whose ancestral lands are situated in the Northern Territory. Instead, they promote an alternate development approach to alleviate disparities between themselves and non-Indigenous citizens and to take control of their futures. This approach seeks to reverse what they see as the destructive social and cultural change that had come about from people being separated from and thus losing management control of their ancestral country and its resources, along with the marginalisation of their decision-making structures.
Distinct Indigenous forms of land tenure (common property regimes), along with their own cultural and social capital, are being used as the building blocks for a new development pathway that is very different to the Closing the Gap framework and other government policy initiatives. These Indigenous building blocks are not only bringing social benefits to remote communities; they are also bringing environmental benefits to wider Australia, through the protection of ecosystems and ecological processes (Altman & Kerins 2012).

The connection between Indigenous Australians managing their own lands – some 20% of the Australian continent – and national priorities in the areas of carbon pollution reduction, climate change mitigation and biodiversity conservation are highly subordinate to the dominant “mining Australia” discourse promulgated by Australian governments. Yet Indigenous Australian’s participation and knowledge in these areas are vital for maintaining the ecosystem services on which we are all dependent.

The Garawa and Waanyi peoples’ development approach

Here I draw on one particular example of Indigenous agency to adopt and shape state support to their own particular needs, highlighting community-based development initiatives that are already in place and improving the conditions of existence for the Garawa and Waanyi peoples in the south-west Gulf of Carpentaria in the Northern Territory of Australia.

The Garawa and Waanyi are two closely related and neighbouring peoples. They speak similar languages, share much of the same system of customary land tenure, have long-standing ceremonially relationships and have historically intermarried (Trigger, 1982). Archaeological records indicate Aboriginal people have been resident in the southern Gulf region for at least 30,000 years, if not considerably longer (Pickering, 1997, p. 96). The Garawa and Waanyi lost all their land, beginning in the 1880s during state development of the pastoral industry. Those who resisted where shot (Roberts, 2005). Development could be measured by the dramatic increase in the stocking rates, which corresponded to the dramatic decrease in the Indigenous population in the region (Roberts, 2009). To survive, once their land and resources were usurped, some Garawa and Waanyi people were forced to provide their labour for rations and, later, meagre wages, while others endured life in the mission at Doomadgee, which has been described as “a history of infantilising surveillance underpinned by Australian law” (Trigger & Asche, 2010, p. 92).

The state development project of pastoralism in the south-west Gulf was a failure. Its decline is attributed to a number of fundamental barriers to production, such as poor grasses, infertile soils, remoteness, lack of infrastructure, low occupancy and near-zero inputs of capital, labour and management (Holmes, 2010).

This failure provided an opportunity for Garawa and Waanyi peoples to reclaim some of their land in the form of failed pastoral leases through the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976. In 1984 they reclaimed the Nicholson (Waanyi/Garawa Aboriginal Land Trust) and, in 1990, Robinson River (Garawa Aboriginal Land Trust). These land trust areas cover some 20,000 square kilometres (see Figure 1).

When the land was restituted to its owners, it came back in a degraded state. Heavy grazing had in places removed vegetation, exposing skeletal soils, increasing erosion, and damaging waterways. Feral animals and invasive weeds were also spreading, damaging sensitive habitats and competing with native flora and fauna. No compensation was paid for the damage to the land or the loss of economic opportunity as occurs in New Zealand Treaty of Waitangi settlement processes. This meant that when Garawa and Waanyi families returned to their
land they had degraded natural capital, making development aspirations extremely difficult.

The families, who moved back onto the Nicholson from the mission in Doomadgee, in Queensland, and other places where they felt corralled, tried to make a living, but with little financial capital, degraded lands and little infrastructure, it was tough. Supported by the Australian Government Community Development Employment Program (CDEP), they were running small herds of cattle for domestic consumption, keeping gardens, hunting and fishing. The CDEP scheme provided the equivalent of participants’ unemployment benefits as a block grant to community-controlled organisations, which applied these funds according to local aspirations to community development and employment. At first, they were receiving health, education and housing services through the Burramana Resource Centre based in Tennant Creek, some 600 kilometres to the west. For a number of reasons,
service delivery started to break down in the mid-1990s. Without support, families were again forced to move off their country (Green & Morrison, 2012).

With the move off their ancestral lands back to regional townships, and into overcrowded housing, the region began to experience a pattern of destructive late dry-season wildfires, some extending over 16,000 square kilometres in size, which were further degrading habitats, emitting carbon and placing increased pressure on native species. The wildfires were also burning out feed on neighbouring pastoral properties, making their marginal existence even more difficult. Non-Indigenous pastoralists blamed Indigenous people for the fires, increasing the tension between non-Indigenous and Indigenous residents of the south-west Gulf.

In 2004, the region was declared a fire natural disaster area by the Australian Government, and senior landowners saw an opportunity to use this major environmental threat to their benefit. In 2005, working with the Northern Land Council – the peak Aboriginal organisation for the region administering the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act – landowners began a series of community-based planning meetings, which are still occurring across the region as projects progress and in-depth consultation continues. These meetings involve dozens of families and are almost always held on country, away from the stress of township life and in places where people could see the changes occurring to their country from environmental threats, or associated absence of customary practices. These types of meetings are important, as many Garawa and Waanyi families have been dispersed across a vast region. They provide opportunities for wider kin groups to reconnect and make decisions about managing their common property, and work out ways of protecting their country and its biodiversity, and in the process, accrue benefits to themselves. Meetings help affirm customary decision-making processes and build consensus between families and across groups.

They provide an important opportunity for people to take control of their future development. Importantly, they also introduce children to country and facilitate the passing of cultural knowledge between generations.

Community-based planning, in addition to helping landowners take ownership and set the direction of their own projects, introduces people to new knowledge and information systems that can play an important role in managing vast areas of land with high biodiversity and cultural values. In using these new knowledge and information systems, in combination with their own knowledge systems, landowners were able to make some decisions about how they would go about replacing this destructive pattern of wildfire with their own customary early dry-season mosaic-burn fire regime.

Important collaborative partnerships were also developed at these meetings with organisations such as Bushfires Northern Territory and the Tropical Savannas Cooperative Research Centre, which, working with landowners, placed over 50 fuel load monitoring sites on Aboriginal lands to measure greenhouse gas emissions. These fuel load monitoring sites provide valuable baseline data to the Garawa and Waanyi, which will allow them, through their fire abatement, to participate in future carbon trading initiatives.

Through winning competitive Australian Government natural resource management funding, first through the Natural Heritage Trust and then the Caring for our Country programme, Garawa and Waanyi people were at last able to access financial resources to implement their management plans to change the destructive fire regime and to create meaningful employment for some of their people in a very remote region with few mainstream employment opportunities.

What they have managed to do in the last five years is to dramatically alter the destructive fire regime of the south-west Gulf, something that government agencies had failed to do for over a decade. In its place, they have implemented an early dry-season mosaic-burn fire regime, which
Building from the bottom-up is significantly more beneficial to flora and fauna fecundity and, importantly, emits far less greenhouse gases (methane, nitrous oxide) into the atmosphere. This is a significant breakthrough and has opened up economic opportunities for carbon trading and income generation.

Building on this success, Garawa and Waanyi peoples are developing an Indigenous Protected Area plan of management for Nicholson River, which will see some of their land included within Australia’s National Reserve System, further generating income and employment opportunities. This plan is beginning to detail aspirations for small-scale enterprises, such as feral animal management and tourism, along with environmental monitoring projects. Discussions have also recently begun between neighbouring language groups in the south-west Gulf to develop a land management company to facilitate regional decision making for sound environmental governance, to employ people, to hold funds and, importantly, to invest income from land management back into community development projects.

It is through community-based projects, which recognise and build on cultural knowledge, reinforce kin relationships and customary law, create employment and introduce new knowledge and skills, while also protecting the environment, that the Garawa and Waanyi see themselves moving from being marginalised to taking control of their own futures and, in the process, closing the disparities between themselves and non-Indigenous Australians in a manner they define and control.

Conclusion

Top-down policy initiatives, such as the Closing the Gap framework, fail to recognise an alternate development approach, which, while small and locally oriented, has been highly successful in recent history. The success of this approach is particularly noteworthy as it follows a series of state development projects in the south-west Gulf that, since colonisation have brought few, if any, benefits to the Indigenous peoples of the region. The failure of the government to support Indigenous aspirations to remain on country through appropriate provision of basic services, which constitute a citizenship right yet are often not available on country, and the associated efforts to move people off their ancestral lands threaten the development and conservation gains of the Garawa and Waanyi. The Australian Government needs to begin developing policies in consultation with its Indigenous peoples, recognising and nurturing cultural diversity, as well as the fundamental logic that the land was returned via Western legal processes, to allow Aboriginal people to live and work on their ancestral lands. Indigenous Australians are undertaking work that is of national importance and in the environmental interest of the Australian state. Investment in, or compensation to, these important community-based Indigenous initiatives must be made so that an economically and culturally diverse society can flourish.
References


