

Seeds of Sustainability: Growing Your Desert Communities

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Racing and Hand Prints images of the 2009 NAIDOC Gymkhana at the Angepena Racecourse, near Nepabunna, taken by Bernard Guerin. Used with permission. NAIDOC Gymkhana Hand prints photographed at the Research Yarning Tent Stall.

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Preamble

What can help make small remote communities sustainable?

This booklet arose out of field work for the Sustainable Desert Settlements project, a core project of the Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre.

The aim was to study mostly small remote communities to find factors that promoted sustainability. Researchers worked closely with six communities in four Australian States/Territories for up to three years.

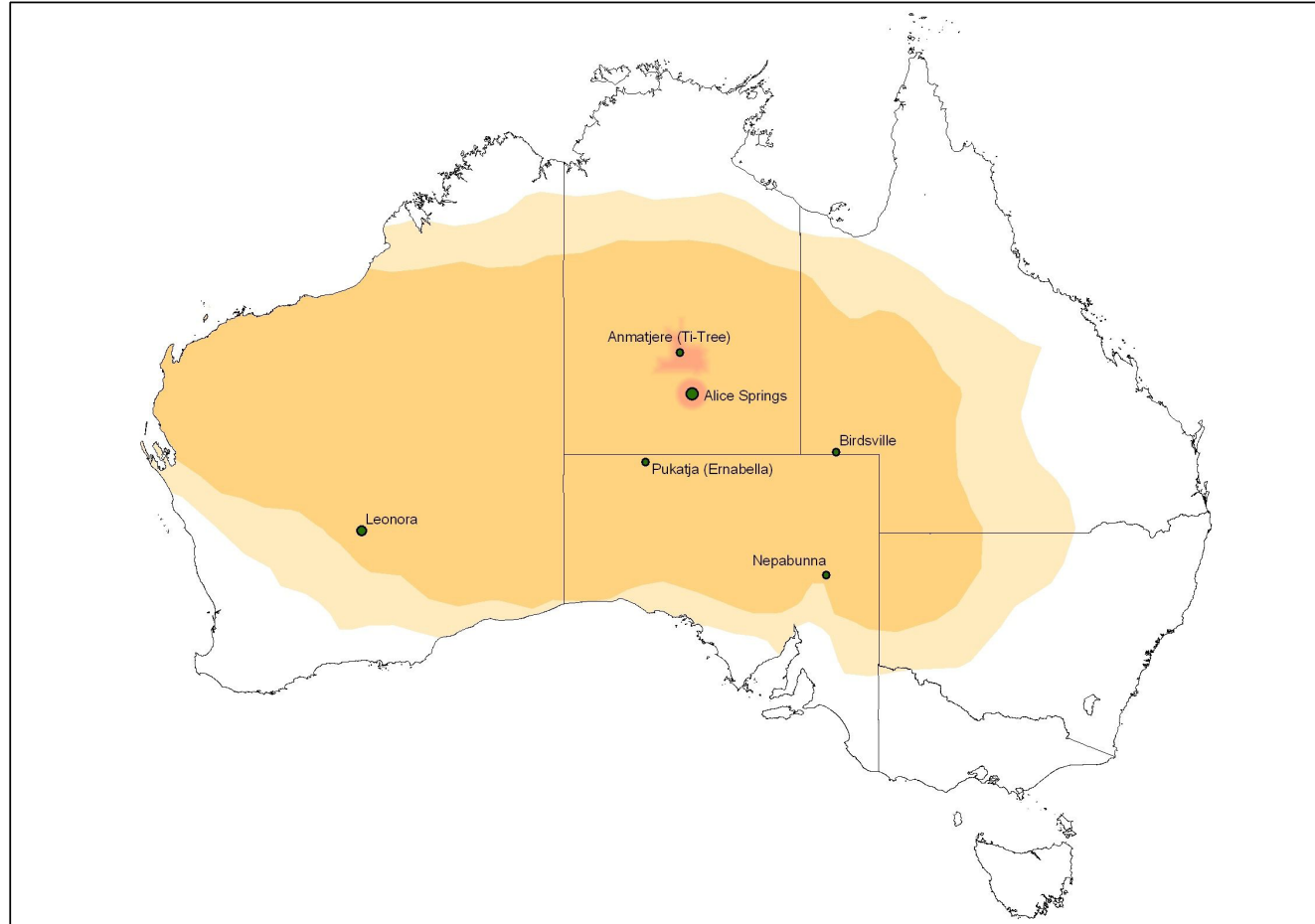
In this booklet we have arranged some of the broad lessons learned from those communities and some questions people could ask in discussions about the future of their communities.

One of the key lessons shown in our research is that:

While some people think ‘problems’ in small remote communities are because of *environmental* or *technical* issues – such as supplies of water, food, housing, fuel, medical services – many of the really difficult issues were *people* issues – such as how to live together, access to *relevant* knowledge and education, gender and family needs, leadership succession, surviving changes in government policies and managing *government memory* of community meetings.

People issues underpinned much of whether a community was sustainable or not.

Research sites





Governance

Governance is about doing things in groups

This can be challenging, even in small groups like families. Challenges often come from:

1. *People* having different points of views about what needs to be done.
2. *Resources* (money, equipment, water, relevant skills ...) being limited.

Governance in settlements is often about how to provide water, power, roads and transport plus social services such as aged care, child care and youth, sport and recreation services.

It is important that equipment brought into communities for services is carefully chosen so that local people and management can afford to look after it and repair it.

Governance in settlements is also about controlling *people's* behaviour in the settlement – for example: Is alcohol allowed? How many dogs can people have?

Governance involves having meetings where people can safely talk about important issues or things that concern them.

Meetings are sometimes formal, but informal meetings can be helpful to get *people* to talk about their points of view and to discuss how *resources* might be shared.



Governance: Decisions

Talk in formal meetings can lead to decisions about what to do

Decisions can be very specific, for example: Should the settlement hold a sports carnival on a particular weekend?

But decisions can also be about general approaches to issues. These are called *policy decisions*.

The *separation of powers* is when *general* policy decisions are up to councils and *specific* decisions about how those policies are applied to people is up to administrators.

This is meant to help councils and administrators work together.

But sometimes a *general* approach to an issue is developed from considering a *particular* case. Knowing where general decisions stop and specific decisions start is not always easy.

Good sustainable settlement governance requires give-and-take and mutual understanding between administrators and constituents, or their elected representatives.

Everyone should ask themselves: Where is the other person coming from on this? Can I understand their point of view?

This can help people work together in the hard tasks of settlement governance.





The economic core

The Aboriginal contribution to the central Australian economy

This section looks at the Aboriginal contribution to the central Australian economy.

The Aboriginal economy has different parts:

1. Direct payments – such as *welfare payments* – to Aboriginal people.
2. Spending by *Aboriginal organisations* for Aboriginal purposes.
3. Spending by *government departments* and agencies for Aboriginal programs.
4. The importance of the presence of Aboriginal people to some *industries such as tourism*.

The tourism industry is an example of a major economy in central Australia. Looking at the tourism industry can show us how important Aboriginal people are to the money that the tourism industry earns.

We found that:

Aboriginal organisations are more likely to invest in the local economy and therefore are an important part of economic development.

Creating full employment

Communities where everyone works have people who:

- Commit to everyone having a job
- Feel better when working and worse when they don't
- Are not scared of work
- Value and appreciate workers
- Respect themselves
- Like learning skills and competencies
- Contribute
- Like to have money to live and some extra money

Communities are sustainable when they:

- Employ and train locally
- Match the right people to the right jobs
- Set locally relevant high standards and coach people to reach them
- Use external agencies for training – with other communities
- Do work that means something in that community: bush harvest, playgroups, aged care.
- Break down barriers so everyone works, lives, socialises together





Communities can plan and develop by:

- Involving the whole community in planning
- Identifying local jobs, and encouraging people to build work locally
- Coaching people in work and coaching businesses in successful ways of working
- Using Council money to support local community roles and investing in local jobs and services
- Formalising informal roles through training and development plans
- Keeping money circulating locally by buying locally
- Identifying economic opportunities by drawing on local resources
- Celebrating people's work successes

Strategies:

- Have a local committee strategically focusing on the local economy
- Look at what is exported from your community – does it help local jobs and money flow?
- Recognise all the work needed to make a community function
- Identify events, tours and displays that people would be willing to pay for, including natural attractions in the region, hearing interesting stories about the past, seeing craft and art work on display or buying bush foods
- Identify a community enterprise to subsidise development
- Make sure social development leads to good housing, education and healthcare
- Build leadership through youth councils, women's groups
- Maintain networks with community people who now live elsewhere, as supporters, champions and connectors to politicians

Gender and mining

This section looks at women in mining towns

Mining sites are usually built away from communities and can be difficult for women and children to live well in. Mining towns tend to have a mostly male-dominated culture and service environment. As a result, the needs of women and families are often hard to be heard and satisfied, yet are critical to the socially sustainable functioning of the community.

Sustainable mining communities ensure women are involved in decisions that affect them and their families.

Equal pay for equal work is only the beginning of such a process.

Women and children are also concerned for the environment and their health in places where the effect of mining processes may not be known for many years.

Mining can be done differently. It can be more environmentally and socially sustainable by:

1. Creating more *employment* for women and local people, including Aboriginal youth.
2. Using *Aboriginal women's knowledge* and cultural roles to enhance the relationship and operations of mines or planning for the longer term needs of the local mining community.
3. Ensuring that women and local people are engaged in every stage of *decision-making* as a vital part of this change.



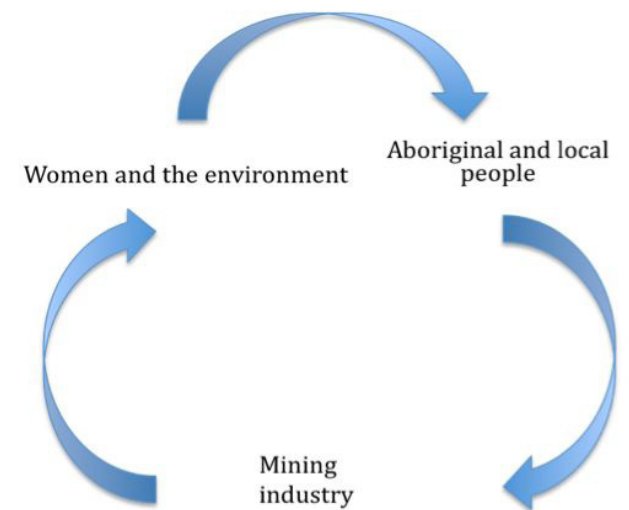


Changing things takes time because mining companies are large, complex organisations

To improve the social and local economic sustainability of mining towns, everyone involved should talk through what drives their community's future.

We recommend that community discussions cycle through the three parts shown below wherever mining companies and communities engage in talking about their town's future:

1. Think of the wellbeing of *women, children and the environment* during the mining phase and after mining finishes.
2. Think of how to involve *local people and Aboriginal traditional knowledge* and practices
3. Think of *how mining is done*, and how the town might run after the mine finishes



Young people and succession

Some small remote communities are losing young people when they go to larger urban centres for education and employment

This can have a negative effect on the community and can impact on the sustainability of small communities.

We found some good ideas for communities to think about in relation to young people:

Healthy activities

Consider what outdoor leisure, creative or sport activities are available in the area. If young people are not engaging in many creative and outdoor activities, try to find out why and work out solutions together.

Talk with people about the kinds of activities that used to be done in the community and support young people to have an interest in those activities.

Consider that some activities may be difficult in small groups for safety reasons, such as going bush.

In some communities, young people have to spend a large amount of time travelling to school and for access to sport activities. Think about how this also impacts on young people and how the community might help to support local activities. If the young population is small, older people might need to contribute to healthy activities, which will benefit the health and activity of the whole community.





Involvement in community governance and succession

Encourage and support young people to be involved in the Council and governance of the community.

Some communities are developing 'youth councils' to help include young people and their issues in the council and its decisions.

Including youth in the Council also helps to plan for the future leaders in the community by preparing the young people with leadership and governance skills and experience.

Use modern information and communication technology to educate and increase the skills of both young people and older people.

Being in a remote community does not necessarily require young people to move away for education or employment.

Where young people are skilled in modern information technologies to learn and communicate ideas, they can help teach older people these skills in return.

Communities can try to find ways to support youth in getting an education and training through correspondence courses and online education.

Consider how technology might help to provide employment opportunities for young people to stay in the community.

Work together to find these opportunities and support them.

The real size of remote communities

While some issues of sustainability are linked to the *natural and technical environments* – such as water, fuel, food, and distances to service centres – we found that more often the main issues in small communities are linked to *people issues*, such as how big your social network is beyond your town.

How people form and maintain *relationships* to survive in small, remote communities is very important.

Governments often judge remote communities solely on the size of the number of residents living in the town on census day.

We found that this was very misleading.

This can be a problem if governments want to shut down local services when a community gets below a certain size.





There are several reasons why it is important to consider all the factors contributing to community size:

- 1. It is well-known that populations of remote communities fluctuate widely depending upon season, sorry business, ceremonial business, conflicts, moving for health treatments, and lack of housing.**
 - During events such as sorry business or gymkhanas, the population can increase.
 - Towns with more appropriate housing, access to relevant resources and key services – such as education and health monitoring – tend to attract more people in and around them.
- 2. There is almost always a much larger population that is related to those in a small remote community and who support that community. They are *community members at a distance*.**

When support is needed for the community, people from far away who belong to that community show support

This is often where the *resilience* of small communities comes from – from their real size

Those living away from the community can and do contribute skills and resources

Small remote communities are rich hubs of activity focused on family, country and spirituality. They are also hubs of social networks that tie together a much larger group of people spread out across Australia.

So before suggesting that all small communities be shut down or services cut off, remember that:

Small remote communities are bigger than they look!

Sustainable communities and wellbeing

Government and public debate has focused on the problems with small remote outback communities, and what seems like a lack of sustainability and vitality

Few people ask community members how they see sustainable living and what solutions they might develop if empowered to do so.

To this end, an empowerment program has been run in Alice Springs for many years: the *Family Wellbeing Program*

This provides Aboriginal people with key directions toward social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing that in turn enable them to rebuild their lives, social strength and stability – all essential foundations to a sustainable community.





Our look at the Family Wellbeing Program (FWB) found a relationship between participation in FWB and improvement in people's self-confidence.

Participants identified *stopping violence* as a community priority and developed a vision for personal, family and community healing.

With greater self-esteem, Aboriginal people felt they could heal themselves from past abuse and grief. With greater self-esteem, they have improved their ability to develop personal relationships and a sense of hope for the community.

With much more self-confidence, people were able to help and better support others, including those at risk or experiencing crisis, children and young people, and people in their immediate social groups.

Despite these indications of improved self-confidence, the ability for people to maintain their personal and community development activities was limited by factors out of their control.

These factors typically included:

- a need for greater community ownership of empowerment strategies
- how much access they had to social and emotional wellbeing programs such as FWB
- need for more support from community organisations
- need for opportunities for training and support in community development skills



The story of Leonora by Kado and Deeva Muir





The Story of Birdsville by Jean Crombie Barr and Joyce Crombie. Seated around the painting is the entire Sustainable Desert Settlements research team.

