

DESERT KNOWLEDGE CRC

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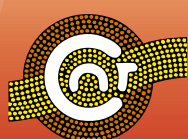
Desert Services That Work: Year One Research Report

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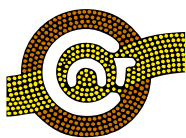
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1. Introduction

People working in the administration of Aboriginal affairs all over Australia tell a similar story: they are overwhelmed by the complexity of the system they work within and feel policy-makers don't listen to them. At a time of unprecedented change in the policy environment it is becoming increasingly urgent to understand what is happening in the service system, ensure the capacity needed to manage the system is built and technological and governance solutions to improve the system are found.

This project addresses the second of the outcomes proposed for the Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre (DKCRC): 'Remote desert communities that are more sustainable to support the presence of desert people, as a result of facilitating access to more attractive services that are delivered more efficiently' (DKCRC 2008).

The project is directed by a steering group that includes a range of people engaged in Aboriginal affairs: Aboriginal leaders and entrepreneurs and non-Aboriginal service providers. The steering group has revised and endorsed the following five research questions to guide the project:

1. What are the characteristics of the interplay between demand and supply of services according to the perceptions of consumers and service providers engaged at the local interface?
2. What conditions permit successful practice to develop between consumers and service-providers?
3. At what scales of governance should different service delivery functions be assigned in order to optimise both demand and supply based criteria?
4. What are the service type and delivery style priorities of consumers within a specified budget framework, and what is their capacity to participate and willingness to contribute to those services?
5. What are the critical issues and strategies required to improve the service system, including the strengths and weaknesses of different technology and governance options?

The steering group has specifically directed the project to adopt the following changes:

- undertake a sophisticated engagement with the supply chain in government, including the intergovernmental dynamics between the Australian and state/territory governments
- limit the scope of the project to two categories of services: housing and governance
- respond to local government reforms and to the Australian Government's Intervention as this unfolds across the research sites
- seek out research sites where groups have their own income through mining royalties or private commercial enterprises
- adopt a strategic communications approach in order to maximise the uptake of research results by governments
- satisfactorily complete research questions 1–4 before embarking on research question 5
- incorporate secondary data sources from government, especially those that evaluate and critique its own practice

At the steering group's most recent meeting in November in Alice Springs there was considerable enthusiasm about the emerging research results. The group endorsed the relevance of the results, the application of complex adaptive systems thinking and the continued focus on governance.

The scale of this project's operations is a great strength. Eight partners have combined to form the project: the Centre for Appropriate Technology, University of Queensland, University of South Australia, Murdoch University, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, CSIRO, James Cook University and Charles Darwin University. The 17 researchers and three PhD students under Core Project 5 (CP5) form an unusually diverse inter-disciplinary team. Most have long-standing relationships with the communities and services providers across the five research sites, and six researchers are spending extended periods of time living at the field sites.

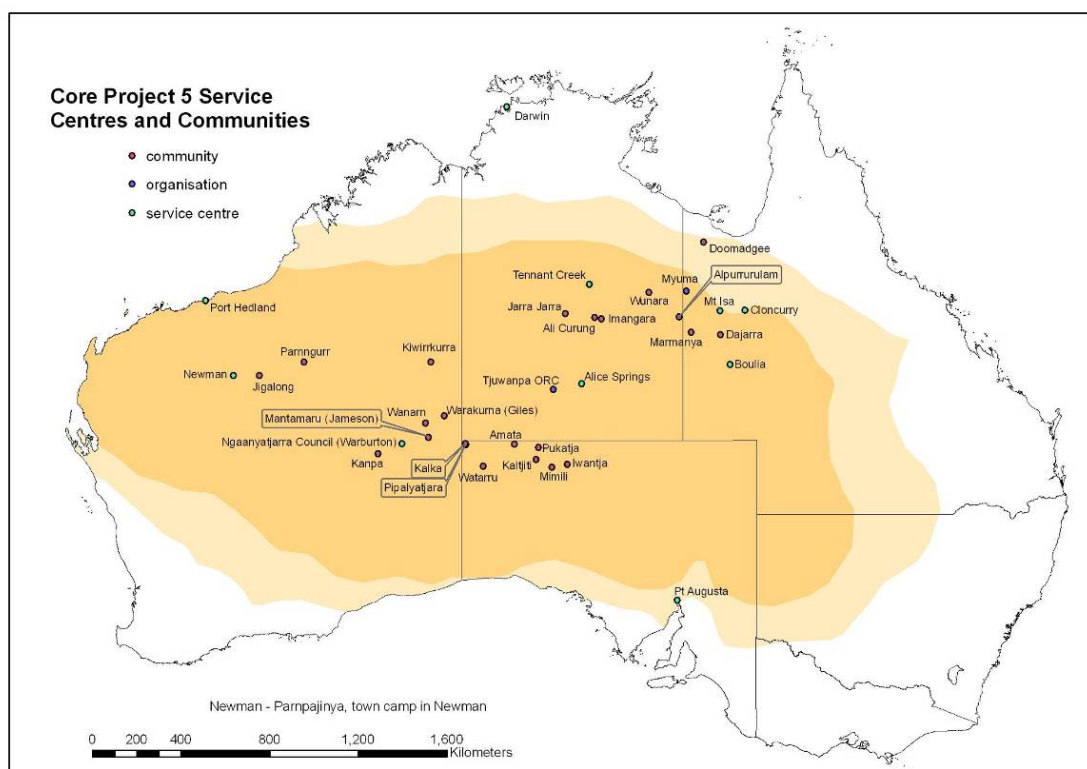


Figure 1: Research sites

The researchers were organised into five teams for each jurisdiction. In accordance with guidelines laid out in the project's field manual (Moran & Staughton 2007), the five teams completed annual research reports covering the findings of their first year of research activity. These reports contributed to this final report. The five cross-jurisdictional specialists on the CP5 team met in Alice Springs in late January to help the Core Project Leader synthesise the final report. This was subsequently workshopped in February at the annual face-to-face researcher workshop in Perth. This report thus represents the culmination of a considerable body of work undertaken during the first year of the project.

It is important to stress from the outset that the work is research-in-progress. The main focus of the first year of activity was research questions 1 and 2. This exploratory research has provided a better understanding of the issues and established a more robust framework from which to approach the remaining research questions (3, 4 and 5) over the remainder of the project.

2. Background and context

2.1 Georgina River, Doomadgee, Queensland

Aboriginal mobility and culture is a defining feature of the Georgina River region, which straddles the Northern Territory/Queensland border. Urandangi is an important settlement located on one of the perennial Georgina River waterholes. These waterholes support Aboriginal travel and trade, and the Georgina is a principal north–south travel route. They were, and remain, important places of Aboriginal social interaction. European settlement at Urandangi began with the establishment of a store in the 1880s, which serviced local pastoralists and drovers taking stock down the Georgina.

In the early 1900s, during a time of significant upheaval and sickness, Aboriginal people obtained government rations and medicines at Urandangi. Urandangi has now become a significant residential, social and service centre for Aboriginal people from north-west Queensland and eastern Northern Territory (Long 2005). There are actually two settlements at Urandangi: Urandangi itself and

Marmanya. Urundangi consists of the Urundangi hotel, a small number of private houses and Aboriginal households living in camps on blocks of land privately owned by Aboriginal people. Marmanya is a small discrete Aboriginal settlement established several kilometres from Urundangi in 1984, which comprises six houses and a community hall.

Dajarra is a small remote town 150 kilometres south of Mt Isa by sealed road in north-west Queensland. Dajarra is a unique settlement because it has a high Aboriginal population by proportion, such that it can be described as an 'Aboriginal town'. Dajarra was established as a railway terminus that supplied northern Australia with stores and, more importantly, serviced the cattle industry as a trucking centre. Aboriginal people from the Georgina River region began to migrate to Dajarra in the 1930s. In the 1960s and early 1970s there were a series of government-enforced migrations of Aboriginal people from the Georgina River to Dajarra. There were two reasons for these migrations: the closure of the police station at Urundangi and the pressure the authorities placed on families to send their children to school at Dajarra. In time, Dajarra became an important social and service centre for Aboriginal people. It became home for the families that settled there.

Wunara is a small settlement of five houses on the Barkly Highway in the Northern Territory. It was established in the 1990s after a successful land claim. Although road trains carrying goods between the Northern Territory and the east coast of Queensland pass within a kilometre of the settlement every day, community members must drive several hours to access services. The settlement is close to the place where a roadhouse servicing interstate traffic was once located (Barry Caves Roadhouse, now demolished). In recent years there has been a resurgence of activity at Wunara as traditional owners spend more time at the settlement. Services to Wunara are subject to the tension that results from the settlement's location near the Queensland/Northern Territory border. While government services and some supplies (including cooking gas) can be accessed to the west at Tennant Creek and Barkly Roadhouse, other services (including shopping, education and employment) are accessed to the east in Camooweal, Mt Isa and Dajarra. Many of the traditional owners live in Dajarra and Mt Isa. This is an example of a compromise between commitment to country and access to services, yet with the Barkly Highway at the settlement's doorstep there is significant potential for this situation to be alleviated. This is an important case study for CP5 because it is an example of a settlement that is endeavouring to grow in a political and service climate that is withdrawing from such development.

Doomadgee is a large discrete Aboriginal settlement with a population of more than 1000 people. It is located about 500 kilometres north of Mount Isa and about 100 kilometres south of the Gulf of Carpentaria coast. The Aboriginal people who live at Doomadgee originate from a large area along the Gulf Coast and inland, from Borroloola in the west, to Burketown in the east. They include several different tribal groups, especially Ganggalida, Waanyi, Garrawa, Yanyula and Minginda. The settlement was established as a mission by the Christian Brethren, who deployed a very strict doctrine of cultural assimilation. The ankle length frocks worn by women are particularly illustrative of their influence.

The pastoral industry's links with the outside world were also significant during this time. The mission was established considerably later than other missions in Queensland, and Doomadgee people had had a long period of contact with the region's cattle stations and towns by that time. The mission was quick to capitalise on the pre-existing local expertise and made Doomadgee a labour pool for the pastoral industry. In 1965, 274 employment agreements were signed for Doomadgee people to work for 74 pastoral properties across Queensland (Long 1970:153). The Doomadgee Mission itself was divided into a number of fenced paddocks which were stocked with small herds of cattle, mainly for self-sufficiency purposes, but also to provide a useful training opportunity for young men before being sent out to work. Doomadgee has had local government status since 1988 and the Doomadgee Aboriginal Shire Council was created in 2007. Shortly after the transition to full shire status in January 2007, the Queensland Government announced it would investigate an amalgamation of local councils; councils that were fiscally strong were to take over other councils on their boundaries which were not performing well financially. Doomadgee was identified as a 'weak' council; it was extremely weak financially, and was earmarked for possible amalgamation into the adjoining Burke Shire.

2.2 Ali Curung and Barkly Shire, Northern Territory

Ali Curung is situated 370 kilometres north of Alice Springs and approximately 175 kilometres south of Tennant Creek. The settlement has a population of approximately 320–360 people, who predominantly represent three of the language groups within the Barkly region: Warlpiri, Kaytetye and Alyawarra. The Ali Curung Council and a range of government and private service agencies are responsible for delivering services to residents of both Ali Curung and Imangarra, a smaller neighbouring settlement. The Ali Curung settlement, formerly known as Warrabri¹, was constructed from 1955–1957 and opened in 1958 (Lea 1989). Many of the people who settled in Ali Curung had been moved from Phillip Creek Mission.

Phillip Creek Mission was established at the end of 1942 and was operated first by the Aborigines Inland Mission and subsequently by the Native Affairs Branch of the Federal Government. The primary purpose of the Phillip Creek settlement was to move Aboriginal people from the vicinity of the Tennant Creek township. Tennant Creek was increasingly being utilised by outsiders who were moving into the town for mining (Nash 1984). Unreliable water supplies at Phillip Creek eventually forced the relocation of the settlement to Ali Curung in 1958.

Ali Curung's current population is approximately 340–360 people. This figure was derived from the results of a recent housing survey and household numbers collected during the fieldwork period. However, the general population can rise and fall significantly in line with sports weekends, sorry business/funerals and other important social and cultural events.

The Ali Curung Association Council is currently the representative council, although it will be abolished when the Barkly Shire Council is created in July 2008. The Council is made up of six councillors elected from the community and one elder. Under soon-to-be-repealed Northern Territory legislation, an association council does not have jurisdiction over land and is essentially an incorporated organisation that pursues the common purposes of its members. Accordingly, the Ali Curung Council is working towards addressing its community plan which has the following vision statement: 'to progressively increase the standard of living and quality of life for all residents of Ali Curung'.

Tennant Creek is 500 kilometres north of Alice Springs and is the main town in the Barkly Tablelands. It acts as a service centre for cattle stations, mining industries and the Aboriginal communities in the surrounding area, including Ali Curung. Tennant Creek's current population is around 3330; almost 50 percent of the population is Aboriginal. When the Northern Territory Government announced reforms to local government in January 2007, Tennant Creek Council unsuccessfully objected to the absorption of the Town Council into the proposed shire structure, as none of the other major towns in the Northern Territory were losing their municipal status. From 1 July 2008, Tennant Creek will become the administrative centre for the Barkly Shire, an entity larger than the previous region administered by the Tennant Creek Council. The Shire will have a population of over 7500 people, 67 percent Aboriginal. The Shire will have representatives from Aboriginal communities and the Tennant Creek community. The previous community councils will be abolished and settlements will instead have 'local boards' to advise the Shire Council about local issues and service delivery. The new arrangements purport to streamline the administration of all settlements by scaling up and improving services through shared resources. It is also thought that it will encourage the development of business enterprises in areas such as road building. The proposed structure continues to be contested, as illustrated by the new impetus behind the development of the Alyawarra Ingkerr-Wenh Corporation, which seeks to provide services to Alyawarra people across the Barkly and into Queensland.

¹ Warrabri is a European derived name which combined the two original language groups resident at Ali Curung, Warlpiri and Warramungu, into a single name.

2.3 Newman, Pilbara, Western Australia

Research in Western Australia is centred on the mining town of Newman, which also acts as the service centre for the Pilbara region in the north-west of Western Australia. The Pilbara is vast and sparsely populated. It has a population of only 40 000 over an area of approximately 500 000 square kilometres. Newman is 1186 kilometres north of Perth and 458 kilometres south of Port Hedland. It is responsible for the generation of a large quantity of state and federal income through the mining industry. Newman was built by Mount Newman Mining Company (now BHP Billiton Iron Ore) in 1967–69 and was originally named Mount Newman town. In 1981 Newman began the process of normalisation: management of the town was given to the Shire of East Pilbara and people other than BHP Billiton Iron Ore employees could settle in the town.

The Western Desert is located to the east of the Pilbara and forms the principal boundary of the research area. The research area includes the settlements of Newman, Jigalong and Parngurr. The local Martu people number between 600 and 800. They retain strong cultural connections to the land, largely as a result of how recently they have made contact with settler society. The Martu people in Newman primarily live in East Newman in public housing and in Parnpajinya, a discrete town settlement located on the edge of Newman on the main highway. Although the Martu homelands lie east of Newman, the area of land around Newman has been passed to the Martu who are custodians of the land. Newman now serves as a major service node for the Western Desert.

Old Parnpajinya is the name of a waterhole located close to a station where the Martu and Nyiyaparli, the traditional owners, worked together throughout the twentieth century. The Nyiyaparli have since moved north-west but maintain links to the land. When Newman was opened up to the general public in the early 1980s Aboriginal people began to camp at the current Parnpajinya, close to the infrastructure of Newman. During the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s various government interventions were undertaken at Parnpajinya. Consultations in relation to housing, alcohol management, employment, education and training were conducted in 1989, 1991, 1992, 1994 and 1997. The infrastructure on the site was bulldozed after flooding and damage caused by cyclone Vance in February 2000. Residents were moved into public housing in East Newman. Many residents stated that they wanted to stay on site at Parnpajinya; other Martu preferred to stay in Newman town. A layout plan was completed in November 2000. This was followed by a community development process which began in 2001 and 2002.² There are currently 13 community houses in Parnpajinya.

The growing presence of the mining industry has contributed to confusion about the roles and responsibilities of industry and how this works with the traditional scope of government and community. Socially, the Pilbara is characterised by high income differences between the mining community and the Aboriginal community, and the latter experience life expectancies 20 years less than the Australian average.

2.4 Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands, South Australia

The Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands were first established in 1921 by the South Australian Government. Extended droughts in the 1920s and between 1956 and 1965 in the Great Victoria and Gibson Deserts led many Pitjantjatjara to leave their homelands with some of their traditionally more westerly relations, the Ngaanyatjarra, and move east towards the railway line running between Adelaide and Alice Springs in search of food and water, thus mixing with the most easterly of the three peoples, the Yankunytjatjara. Beginning in 1950, many Anangu were also forced to leave their homelands due to British nuclear tests at Maralinga. They refer to themselves today as Anangu, which originally just meant people in general, but has now come to imply an Aboriginal person or, more specifically, a member of one of the groups that speaks one of the Western Desert languages.

² <http://www.dpi.wa.gov.au/regional/1950.asp>

European depredations continued, and in response the South Australian Government finally supported a plan by the then Presbyterian Church to set up the Ernabella Mission in the Musgrave Ranges as a safe haven. This mission was unusual because they did not systematically attempt to destroy Aboriginal culture as was common on many other missions. After four years of campaigning and negotiating with government and mining groups the *Pitjantjatjara Land Rights Act* was passed on 19 March 1981. This granted freehold title to over 103 000 square kilometres of land in the far north-western corner of South Australia. The APY Lands are part of the much larger country that belongs to the Ngaanyatjarra, Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara people; it covers 350 000 square kilometres of South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory. This region is known as the ‘tri-state’ or ‘cross-border’ region. Settlements in the cross-border region share strong language and cultural ties that operate irrespective of state borders.

The estimated total population of the APY Lands is 2600, which comprises approximately 10 percent of the Aboriginal population of South Australia. The population is comparatively young, with 34 percent aged under 15 and only 9 percent over 55 years. The total Anangu population in the cross-border region is estimated to be 5000. There is a considerable amount of mobility throughout the whole region to access services and for family, ceremonial and other purposes.

The main settlements in the South Australian APY Lands region are Pukatja (Ernabella), Pipalyatjara, Kalka, Murputja homelands, Amata, Kaltjiti (Fregon), Iwantja (Indulkana), Mimili, Watarru, Anilalya homelands, Turkey Bore and Tjutjunpiri homelands. Umuwa is the administrative hub for the APY Lands and is where the APY Executive and a number of regional Anangu organisations have offices. Pukatja is the largest settlement on the Lands. The settlements range in size from approximately 650–800 people (depending on time of year) at Pukatja, 366 Kaltjiti (Fregon), 264 Amata, 220 Mimili, 190 Iwantja (Indulkana), 114 Pipalyatjara, 223 for the Anilalya homelands, with the smaller homelands groups having less than one hundred people. The larger settlements on the Lands have community councils elected by local residents, which are incorporated councils in their own right and predate, in most cases, the coming of the *APY Land Rights Act*.

The *Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Land Rights Act 1981* (as amended 2005) established the APY Executive as the governing board with responsibility for the management, use and control of the Lands. In addition to the APY Executive and the community councils a range of Anangu-controlled organisations exist, some with a history that predates the APY Executive. The Nganampa Health Council, the NPY Women’s Council, AP Services, APY Land Management and PY Media are Anangu-controlled organisations, quite separate from the APY Executive; each has their own elected Board of management and constitution. These bodies are regional service organisations. PY Media and NPY Women’s Council in particular have responsibilities for service provision to a wider area across the tri-state region. AP Services is an Anangu-controlled organisation that provides infrastructure, construction, essential services, road maintenance and support services for the functioning of the APY Lands. APY Land Management provides environmental, feral animal control and land management support as well as having an interest in the development of small enterprises such as cattle, pastoral and tourism projects. In addition there is a major network of locally based Anangu community-controlled arts centres called Ku Arts and an active PY Education committee, which coordinates Anangu education services and activities.

To add to the complex array of governance bodies, a new consultative forum, Tjungunku Kuranyu-Kuta Palyantjaku (TKP) (which means ‘working together for our future’ in Pitjantjatjara), has been established. TKP was established in 2005 with 13 members. Seven are directors of Anangu regional organisations and six represent Commonwealth and South Australian Government interests. One of TKP’s significant initiatives (which is operating as a COAG trial) aims to establish rural transaction centres, known as PY Ku. It is proposed that the PY Ku Centres will be one-stop-shops for service delivery, with meeting/training rooms, video conferencing facilities, offices for hire with internet access and administrative support, a public access internet area, a front counter and staff office, kitchen facilities and a radio broadcast room. They will be staffed by Anangu (Nicholls 2007, Urbis Keys Young 2006). The PY Ku initiative is the subject of the current study.

2.5 Ngaanyatjarra Lands, Western Australia

The Ngaanyatjarra Lands are located in a remote area of Western Australia bordering the APY Lands of South Australia. Ngaanyatjarra is a dialect of the Western Desert language family. Most speakers of this language family, which includes Yankunytjatjara and Pitjantjatjara, live in the central desert of Western Australia, the south-west corner of the Northern Territory and the north-west corner of South Australia. They are separated only by non-Aboriginal jurisdictions (see Ngaanyatjarra Council 1983:10–23). Similar to the use of the term *Anangu* on the APY Lands, the term ‘Yarnangu’ is commonly used throughout the Ngaanyatjarra Lands to distinguish Ngaanyatjarra people from non-Aboriginal people and from more distant Aboriginal people.

There are ten settlements on the Lands: Blackstone (Papulankutja), Jameson (Mantamaru), Patjarr, Tjirrkarli, Tjukurla, Wanarn, Warakurna (Rockhole), Warburton, Wingellina (Irrunytju) and Kanpa. The combined population of all twelve settlements on the Lands was recently estimated to be 2747 (Brooks & Kral 2007:24). The land is held by two entities: Ngaanyatjarra Land Council (AC) and Yarnangu Ngaanyatjarraku Parna (AC). Ngaanyatjarra Land Council holds part of a ‘bundle of rights’ in the form of 99- and 50-year leases over reserve land and Yarnangu Ngaanyatjarraku Parna holds part of the ‘bundle of rights’ in the form of native title.³ The Ngaanyatjarra Land Council was incorporated to hold the leases from the West Australian Government. The Land Council’s membership is substantially the same as Ngaanyatjarra Council and it meets at the same time (LCBC 1992:36). Yarnangu Ngaanyatjarraku Parna (AC) became a Registered Native Title Body Corporate following a consent determination over a large part of Ngaanyatjarra traditional Lands.

The Ngaanyatjarra Lands are jointly serviced by the Ngaanyatjarra Council and the Shire of Ngaanyatjarraku. Ngaanyatjarra Council was incorporated under the Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act in 1981. Ngaanyatjarra Council is an umbrella organisation that includes Ngaanyatjarra Health Service, Ngaanyatjarra Council Representative Body, Ngaanyatjarra Community College, Ngaanyatjarra Land Management Unit, Ngaanyatjarra Media and enterprises including Ngaanyatjarra Services, Ngaanyatjarra Agency and Transport Services and Indervon Pty Ltd, which owns and manages the Alice Springs Caltex franchise. Membership of the board of directors is decided by the members rather than by a formal constitution and comprises the chairs of each of the twelve Ngaanyatjarra settlements. In 2006 the membership also resolved to reserve four positions on the Board of Directors for women. The Shire of Ngaanyatjarraku was incorporated under the *Local Government Act* (WA) in 1993 by an agreed division of Wiluna Shire. This has excluded from the shire two settlements that are serviced by Ngaanyatjarra Council: Cosmo Newberry (Laverton) and Kwirrikurra (East Pilbara).

2.6 Methods

This project follows an ‘action research’ approach, largely by evaluating ongoing programs being delivered by governments and the private sector. In action research, theory and practice are held to be of equal importance (Kemmis & McTaggart 2003:386). The aim is to articulate theory and practice in relation to one another through critical reasoning about how the two interact. The aim is not to develop forms of theory that stand above and beyond practice, as if practice could be controlled without regard to the idiosyncrasies of practitioners or the myriad of situations that confront them in their daily lives. Nor is the aim to judge practices in the absence of the theoretical frameworks that provide a means to assess whether they are irrational, unjust, alienating or unsatisfying (ibid 387). The research thus involves ‘reaching out’ from the specifics of particular situations, as understood by the people within them, to explore the potential of different theories to help to illuminate practices and how they might be transformed. Equally, the research involves ‘reaching in’ from the standpoints provided by different theories to explore how they can help practitioners take a critical view of the problems and issues that occupy them in practice.

³ Personal communication, Leanne Stedman, Ngaanyatjarra Council General Counsel.

Speaking about Aboriginal settlements, Howitt et al. (1990:2–3) argue that the research process should directly benefit the community and be viewed as a dialectic learning process over time, such that social research is not divorced from social process. Proponents of qualitative research in the tradition of critical theory are never satisfied with merely increasing knowledge. Instead they seek the empowerment of individuals, with research becoming a ‘transformative endeavour unembarrassed by the label “political” and unafraid to consummate a relationship with an emancipatory consciousness’ (Kincheloe & McLaren 1994:140). Advocates of action research take a similar emancipatory stance: ‘to help people to recover and release themselves from the constraints of irrational, unproductive, unjust and unsatisfying social structures that limit their self-development and self-determination’ (Kemmis & McTaggart 2003:385). Coming from the perspective of international development, Harris (2002:494) argues that ‘research priorities should be set by the practical problems that development involves, more than by the puzzles that are generated out of theoretical speculation’ alone.

In reality, field-based research during the study had two aims: the first was to address the research questions of the project; the second was to deliver practical benefits to the communities concerned. A defining feature of the project was the employment of Aboriginal research workers in field research; ‘community collaborators’ were involved in paid research activities such as conducting surveys, facilitating, translating and reporting.

The project encountered several difficulties when researching the practice of actors on the supply side. The limitations of academic researchers to undertake this research were recognised from the outset, and the original project design included the secondment of departmental officers as researchers into the team. All attempts to gain this level of commitment from government were unsuccessful. The researchers then endeavoured to gain access themselves. An experienced departmental officer helped to draft the field manual (Moran & Staughton 2007) which includes a five-page section on principles and protocols. Still, the research team generally encountered difficulties in ‘selling’ the value of the proposed research to government, certainly much more so than to community stakeholders. In order to gain some buy-in from government it became necessary to locate the research within ongoing projects and programs of government, in a monitoring and evaluation role. Using action research methods, the project positioned the research against the following projects:

- In the Northern Territory a comprehensive Shared Responsibility Agreement⁴ (SRA) was evaluated in collaboration with the Ali Curung Community Council and the Tennant Creek *Indigenous Coordination Centre* (ICC). Researchers also worked with the Northern Territory Government to inform a local government reform process in the Barkly Shire.
- Along the Northern Territory/Queensland border researchers worked with three settlements (Dajarra, Urandangi and Wunara) to improve their interactions with service providers, including working on a comprehensive SRA at the large discrete settlement of Doomadgee.
- In South Australia the study has begun an evaluation of PY Ku, a COAG trial initiative of rural transaction centres in six settlements on the APY Lands (Mimili, Amata, Fregon, Watarru, Indulkana and Pipalyatjara).
- In Western Australia researchers worked with BHP Billiton Iron Ore to improve community engagement and employment (Newman and Parnpajinya). On the Ngaanyatjarra Lands researchers focused on the supply chain of government, largely in the context of service provision under a Regional Partnership Agreement.

The social and political complexities involved in reaching the necessary agreements and ethics approvals required careful negotiation and took considerable time to finalise. In doing this a strong network of relationships has been established for the remainder of the project.

⁴ Shared Responsibility Agreements are agreements between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and groups and Australian governments based on the principle of mutual obligation. The principle of mutual obligation requires both parties to contribute towards making the agreement work. They have been completed in relation to initiatives addressing nutrition, community safety, business support, skills development and a range of other community needs. In return, communities have made commitments such as improving school attendance, controlling substance misuse and being involved in youth recreation activities. The initial agreements are generally single-issue with an intention in the longer term to develop more complex and comprehensive agreements encompassing the entire planning framework in a community.

Within the broad suite of methods that constitute qualitative and participatory research, the actual methods used varied across the different research sites. The research process adopted at Ali Curung involved an intensive community process and extended periods of fieldwork by Alyson Wright. Community-based researchers were employed by the project to help with information dissemination, method design, data collection, review and analysis. The methods used include focus groups, semi-structured interviews, workshops and observations. Secondary data sources were also accessed, including housing survey results 2005–2007 and CDEP data from 2006–2007.

For the case study on the Ngaanyatjarra Lands Patrick Sullivan adopted ‘social field analysis’ (Sullivan 2005a), where ‘cultural clusters’, including both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal actors, are viewed as social fields of intercultural interaction. The study was predominately based on ethnographic observation, recorded in narrative form, made during two extended field trips. This was supplemented by both structured and open-ended interviews. Instead of taking part in development projects, as action research usually requires, the researcher produced targeted information for Ngaanyatjarra Council and the Shire on priority issues identified by them. Narratives about the progress of the Regional Partnership Agreements (RPA) and about individual SRAs were developed to illuminate the dilemmas of service delivery. This was initially from the perspective of the communities in need of services (the demand side), but this was then to be supplemented with information from the supply side, especially FaHCSIA, the Kalgoorlie ICC and various Western Australian State Government agencies.

In Queensland, Stephen Long undertook a series of short field trips over a twelve-month period. A range of ethnographic field methods was used, including participant observation, photography and surveys/interviews. A semi-structured survey instrument was designed in response to prompts suggested by the field manual. Initially local leaders, elders, community representatives and senior staff of local community organisations were approached to gain their support for participation in the project. Participation was then sought from householders and those who were interested, and local field workers (community researchers) assisted. Dajarra participants expressed the desire for householder-based research interactions, in order to provide everyone with an opportunity to participate, instead of meetings with selected community members and large community meetings that can exclude people. Male and female community collaborators were engaged in each settlement to assist field research; one of the community collaborators also conducted interviews. Although some work has commenced on the supply side, the research has thus far focused on the demand side, with household surveys conducted in Dajarra, Urandangi and Wunara. A similar survey instrument was used in each of the three participating settlements, although it was tailored to the specific service issues that were identified as priorities during the initial fieldwork. Householders were selected on a rather pragmatic basis; that is, as many willing participants as possible were found and interviewed within the time available.

In South Australia, Deirdre Tedmanson exhausted the entire year attempting to negotiate the complexities of approvals from regional agencies. At the end of the first year no fieldwork had occurred on the Lands, but considerable data was assembled at a regional governance level. Methods used include interviews, observations at meetings and reviews of public records. Fieldwork will be ongoing over the remainder of the project.

In Western Australia, Natalie McGrath relocated to Newman in the Pilbara and Martin Anda visited for several one-week periods. Long-term residence allowed participatory observation methods to be explored through participation at meetings (including facilitating a Martu women’s group), observation of day-to-day life of Martu in Newman and within institutions at schools. Weekly reflections were drawn from daily recordings and were compiled into monthly field reports. A range of other participatory methods was used, including semi-structured interviews with the supply-side actors, issues mapping with Martu using participatory problem tree analysis and a housing survey instrument. Throughout 2007 the Western Australian research became increasingly focused on the role of BHP Billiton in facilitating Martu developmental processes through:

- a) an emerging participatory development approach within the company
- b) the partnerships with the company and how they can be used strategically by BHP Billiton to lever improved service delivery by government for the benefit of Martu people.

Beyond the methods used by individual researchers, there was an additional method: the interpretation and analysis arising from meetings and the various electronic forums the team used as it operated as a specialist interdisciplinary think-tank. In practice, this meant that issues arising from work in one area have been subject to useful commentary and critique from others experiencing similar or contrasting situations. This internal peer-review process brought both an increased level of rigour to the project and also a higher level of interpretive insights than would ordinarily have been possible from separate endeavours.

As is also evident from the above methods, the study was primarily based on perceptions of success that were held by key actors practising in the system, including, as it turned out, the researchers themselves. Accordingly, we defined *success* in a pragmatic way: the effective and sustainable achievement of intended outcomes from the perspective of the primary actors involved in its practice. The researchers acknowledge that perceptions are subjective and differ according to the nature of the endeavour and the particular viewpoints of the practitioners involved. It is possible for a group of practitioners (of both cultural systems) to be collectively deluded about the success or failure of an initiative (indicated otherwise by external measures and judgements); just as it is possible for service providers to become collectively deluded about the success or failure of an initiative measured against quantitative indicators alone. A basic premise of this study is the liberal assumption that people are able judges of their needs and that they are qualified to subjectively measure success. Versions of this basic principle can be restated in terms of consumer choice in a market economy, or citizen freedom in a democracy, or empowerment in community development. It has been necessary for the researchers to remain alert to practitioners' differing judgements regarding the success of an endeavour, and maintaining this awareness will be an ongoing challenge for the project.

Porter et al. (1991:208) effectively captured the paradox involved here in their critical analysis of a large international aid project in Kenya:

... no development workers should fool themselves into thinking they know, as a matter of course, the people's real interests better than the people themselves, but it is also true that the people can be wrong about their best interests. Their knowledge many be incomplete and their choices may be as easily subject to political manipulation as the development workers'. This paradoxical situation can be alleviated by participation, but ultimately, the paradox is inescapable.

2.7 Problem statement: The mismatch between demand and supply

The low level of urbanisation in remote and very remote Australia (primarily desert regions) has permitted Aboriginal people to continue to assert their social and cultural traditions more strongly than those in regional and urban Australia. Arguably, this explains the particular hybrid and intercultural nature of governance in remote desert settlements. These settlements operate in an extreme economic context that arises from limited economic opportunities, the small size of settlements and large distances between them, the lack of human and institutional capital and the high level of mobility between and within settlements (Stafford Smith et al. 2008). Due to low levels of personal savings and disposable income, Aboriginal settlements have historically failed to attract private sector consumer services such as banking (Taylor 2002:19). While other Australian settlements and most settings in developing countries are underpinned by a market economy, remote Aboriginal settlements are characterised by the very lack of one.

Nonetheless, services providers have proliferated because of the commitment of the Australian state to the alleviation of disadvantage. Service provision is administered by the three levels of government in Australia –federal, state/territory and local – each with separate administrative requirements. Non-government organisations and private providers also play a role, generally operating under service delivery contracts from governments. The services collectively provided cover most aspects of life,

including housing, water, telephones, power, roads, rubbish, health, education, banking, police, justice, aged care, sports, unemployment, child protection and income support. The local economies of remote settlements are dominated by these publicly funded services.

The present state of public management practice in Aboriginal affairs has been much influenced by the principles of new public management (NPM), which have driven reforms since the 1980s. NPM is based on the principles of efficiency, cost effectiveness and dismantling big government, with an increased focus on 'outcomes' and 'end users'. The major areas of reform involve privatisation, decentralisation and managerialism. Each of these NPM reforms have been found wanting, both empirically and theoretically (Rhodes 2002:6–11). Notwithstanding the benefits that flow from an improved client focus, the ways that NPM reforms have often played out in practice have over-emphasised the top-down controlling aspects of objective performance at the expense of the decentralised client focus. In particular, NPM reforms introduced into the public service a multitude of new and more independent actors with a variety of motivations, aims and objectives. This has increased the labyrinthine qualities of Aboriginal affairs governance.

Aboriginal self-determination policies (introduced during the 1970s, but most active during the '80s and '90s) also contributed to the complexity of Aboriginal affairs governance. Decentralisation in Aboriginal affairs occurred on a massive scale through the incorporation of community-controlled organisations and led to a plethora of statutory authorities, local government councils, health services, housing associations and other community organisations. Rowse (2005:214) argues that the rise of this 'Indigenous sector' was the most significant product of the self-determination era. Yet despite various efforts to decentralise management, many services have become so tied up with accountability requirements and complicated administrative instruments (much of it based on NPM principles), that it has led to what O'Malley (1996) describes as 'governing from a distance'. More recently, policy reform in Aboriginal affairs has followed 'third way' politics, overlaying the system with 'joined-up (whole of) government', partnerships, quasi-commercialisation, 'mutual (shared) responsibility' (Sullivan 2005b) and the 'mainstreaming' of services away from Aboriginal-specific programs.

Many of these recent changes in Aboriginal affairs were also influenced by the impact of neoliberalism, the political-economic philosophy that emphasises the benefits of markets, the rule of law and the need for individual and property rights. Craig and Porter (2006) chart the history of neoliberalism in international development, beginning with structural adjustment programs (e.g. deregulated currencies, privatisation of public services) foisted onto developing countries by multilateral aid organisations such as the International Monetary Fund. While the excesses of structural adjustment retreated through the 1990s, neoliberalism came to dominate international development practice, largely under the banner of poverty reduction and 'good governance'. In its approach to poverty, neoliberalism rejects the pursuit of equity through redistribution and emphasises moral discipline, security and (again) markets. Neo-liberalism favours citizens' rights and dismantling 'big government', but paradoxically it is accompanied with a corresponding reduction in elected local government and political leadership. Neoliberalism thus comes to be characterised by (a) vertical arrangements to deliver services downwards, (b) moralising about local obligations, and (c) a punitive policing system to oversee both (a) and (b) (Craig & Porter 2006).

These characteristics of neoliberalism are readily recognisable in the recent policy history of Aboriginal affairs. Representative Aboriginal structures were undermined by the Federal Government through the late 1990s and early 2000s and resources withdrawn from them, culminating in the abolition of the Aboriginal representative body, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC). Contrary to the benefits claimed by joined-up or whole of government strategies, what emerged instead is what Craig and Porter (2006:25) describe as *quasi-territorialisations*: vague organisations that are ineffective in service delivery and have little accountability. Commercialisation (e.g. contracting, privatisation) and rescaling (e.g. regionalism) gathered pace, and confusing arrangements involving the different levels of government resulted. For example, in 2007 in the Barkly region of the Northern Territory, local government reforms and council amalgamations confirmed Tennant Creek as the service centre for the new Barkly Shire. At the same time the Federal

Government awarded the tender to manage the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) Scheme in the Barkly to Alpururulam Community Government Council, located 600 kilometres away at the region's most remote boundary. This demonstrates how the dual policy instruments of regionalism and privatisation operating through different governments has led to countervailing centralisation and decentralisation effects.

The Federal Government Intervention that commenced in the Northern Territory in July 2007 and changes to federal programs affecting remote Aboriginal settlements in other states signalled a major return of government to the field of Aboriginal affairs and consequently a massive increase in funding and government staffing in remote Australia. At the same time these settlements are undergoing major local government reforms. In 2007 alone, both the Queensland and Northern Territory Governments announced the amalgamation of local councils, a process that has, in addition to provoking popular protest, given rise to further uncertainties about governance structures in the immediate future.

The emerging governance system for Aboriginal affairs is highly complex in terms of the number of agencies and actors involved. The service delivery system is forever undergoing reforms – whether NPM, privatisation, neoliberalism, emergency interventions – all have led to an increase in the number of agencies and programs. Decentralisation to local organisations has progressed despite the knowledge that there is not the local demand or the capacity to deal with it, leading to increased reliance on non-Aboriginal employees. Unlike the economic market, there is no necessary correlation between demand and supply. Reform is seldom informed by end-user perspectives or independent evaluations of past programs.

A study at Kowanyama on Cape York in Queensland indicates the extent of the increase in administration that has resulted (Moran 2006:240, 409–414). From 1991 to 2002 the number of agencies dealing with the Shire Council increased by 50 percent from 41 to 64. In 2002 Council finances were drawn from 45 different programs from 23 different funding providers. The number of new programs launched exceeded the number of old programs closed, resulting in an annual increase in the quantity of administration to be processed (see Figure 2). Aboriginal leaders were overwhelmed by the demands of governing their 'self-determination', largely arising from an increasingly complex 'rationality of accountability' (see Rose & Miller 1992). From their perspective there was a need to reduce the administrative workload and for less complexity and more stability in the external service system. The Kowanyama study suggests that the quantity of administration was increasing at a greater rate than local capacity could match, effectively leading to a widening gap between local capacity and administrative workload (see Figures 2 and 3).

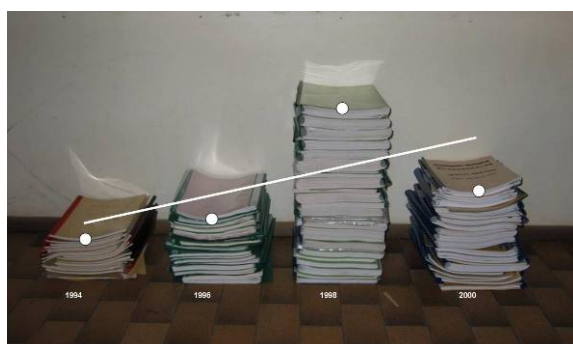


Figure 2: Increase in volume of Council minutes at Kowanyama

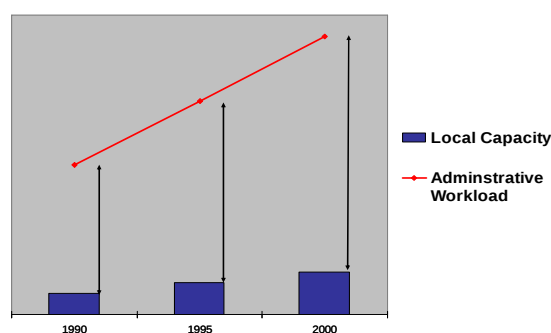


Figure 3: Hypothesised increase in capacity gap

Similarly, a study of the effects of a major whole-of-government coordination trial at Wadeye in the Northern Territory found that the quantity of administration had not decreased, in fact the number of funding programs had increased from around 60 to more than 90 (Gray 2006:9). Notwithstanding the need to build local capacity, a decrease in the administrative workload would also narrow the gap in capacity and should act as a positive catalyst for the increased employment of Aboriginal people in

governance. In the words of one Aboriginal leader: ‘we are climbing the ladder, but its growing faster than we can climb.’

The Commonwealth Government has acknowledged this ‘growing ladder’ itself in the past year and acknowledged the failings of policy in practice through a number of reports, including:

- an evaluation of how to reduce ‘red tape’ (Morgan Disney 2006)
- evaluation reports from the COAG trial sites⁵ and a synopsis review (Morgan Disney et al. 2006)
- audit of ‘whole of government Indigenous service delivery arrangements’ (ANAO 2007)
- key indicators from the *Overcoming indigenous disadvantage: Key indicators 2007 report* (PC 2007)

A substantial commentary is growing about the increasing difficulty of undertaking Aboriginal governance and in response to the government evaluations noted above (Sullivan 2005b, Dillon 2007, Dillon & Westbury 2007, Hunt & Smith 2007).

2.8 Theoretical position

This project was inherently interdisciplinary in its approach, as reflected in the backgrounds of the project team members: social science, engineering, economics, political science, environmental science, architecture, human geography, law and anthropology. This was a reflection of the ‘real world’ nature of the problem under investigation, which was not soluble within the narrow confines of any one academic discipline.

The project began with an application of economic theory, which is still evident in the title and in the language of demand and supply, but it then moved across multiple theoretical frameworks. Had the research remained true to economic theory, concepts such as the following would have been used: supply, demand, disequilibrium, shadow prices, market failure, rationing, collective action, free riders and command economy. Concepts could have been forced into these boxes, but much would have been lost. The same would apply had the project fitted all matters into any other single discipline’s concepts and theories. Rather, the project pragmatically utilised theories from a range of disciplines as it sought to answer the question: how can the system reduce the mismatch between demand and supply of services?

Broadly, the research worked its way across five theoretical frameworks as depicted in the table below. The first is based on the economic model of demand and supply. The second is based on the liberal political science model of rights and responsibilities. The third is an anthropological or community development model of culture and modernity. The fourth drew on complex adaptive systems theory to understand the feedback loops and adaptation operating in the system. The fifth is a governance framework of policy and practice. Despite their epistemological differences, each of these frameworks describes a two-way tension operating between the end-users and the external institutional environment.

⁵ <http://www.facsia.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/indigenous/publications.htm>

End-user	The mismatch	External institutional environment	Theoretical/ disciplinary perspective
Consumer	Demand Supply	Market/State	Economics
Citizen	Rights Responsibilities	State	Liberal political science
Aborigine	Culture/Tradition Modernity/Integration	Multi-cultural Australian society	Anthropology
Actor/Agency	Feedback/Manipulation Adaptation	Complex adaptive system	Systems theory
Client	Practice/Localism Policy/Regionalism	Service providers	Governance

The research has consistently applied demand/supply language to a non-market welfare situation in an attempt to emphasise the right of the consumer to make choices and to express satisfaction and dissatisfaction; that is, consumers are the best judges of demand. But demand/supply language does not adequately account for the socialised consumer with the governance and cultural imperatives that operate in Aboriginal societies. The citizenship/rights language is more democratic, but it is potentially illiberal and paternalistic. The argument can effectively become ‘we know what human rights are and you are going to have them’. Notions of both consumer and citizen embody concepts of freedom and liberty, but neither captures the intercultural nature of interactions between trusted insiders and trusted outsiders; for this it was necessary to draw on anthropological and community development methods and theory. The realities of the interactions occurring between Aboriginal people and the outside world thus require a range of theoretical perspectives if they are to be fully illuminated. The use and development of these theoretical frameworks will continue to inform the research during its second phase, as will the ideological assumptions that underpin them.

An Aboriginal settlement is not isolated, nor is it autonomous; rather, is intertwined in a dialectic relationship with the wider society. This study is concerned with the mismatch between the demand and supply of services. As shown in the table above, this dialectic relationship can also be expressed in terms of rights/responsibilities, or tradition/modernity, or feedback/adaptation. The utility of these concepts for the ensuing analysis is mostly directional, since in reality demand and supply are inseparably intertwined. It is at this crumbling coalface of Aboriginal affairs, at the indeterminate place where policy is dialectically in tension with practice, that this study is positioned.

3. Characteristics of demand and supply (research question 1)

What are the characteristics of the interplay between demand and supply of services according to the perceptions of consumers and service providers engaged at the local interface?

3.1 Problems of supply

All of the study sites indicated a bewildering complexity of actors, agencies and activities. The interactions at play were characterised by superficiality, resulting in complacency in both the demand and supply actors. The ramifications of this are that supply-side actors control the decisions and resources, and then measure the value of the service against supply-side criteria. Indeed, in the absence of effective evaluation mechanisms that take into account the realities of local demand and inputs, a supplier could, in theory, proliferate in the absence of any effective demand for their service. People on both sides struggle to reach a common understanding of each other's capacity, capabilities and perceptions. One resident at Ali Curung expressed it this way: 'Nothing ever changes here. We have been talking about the same things for years and it still is not happening. How do we get it to work?'

Without the end-user perspective there is little understanding of where gaps exist in the system. In the Pilbara the difficulties arising from the diverse array of agencies and their respective initiatives was compounded by the rate of change in the system, including a high turnover of staff. Actors in this rapidly changing system were unable to work with a full understanding of the system, and so were not in a position to coordinate their activities. People complained about their administrative workload, which partly resulted from a draining of staff to the mining sector, which offered better salaries and housing. There was an abundance of initiatives and ideas, few of which came from Martu people. Information about SRAs was not supplied in a form that was accessible and the best intentions of the approach were lost in communication. Accountability was focused primarily in an upward direction, shaped primarily by different government silos.

The complexity of the supply side is exacerbated by the inter-governmental dynamics operating between the Australian and state/territory governments. The relative balance of powers between the states/territory and the Australian Government is shifting as the Commonwealth increasingly intervenes, most notably in the Northern Territory. The tensions were evident in the case study at Doomadgee. As mentioned earlier, one of the researchers involved in this project was engaged by the Mount Isa ICC (Australian Government) to develop a comprehensive SRA at Doomadgee. Preceding this, the Queensland Government was already well advanced with a similar process of establishing an Indigenous Local Partnership Agreement (ILPA) at Doomadgee, which it was developing with the locally based Dulluma Government Coordination Committee. Since the Dulluma Committee was dominated by locally-based non-Aboriginal service providers, the researcher recommended a broader forum to include Doomadgee representatives from local organisations: the Combined Aboriginal Organisation (CAO). The researcher went to some lengths to integrate the two processes, but there was opposition from both the State and Australian Governments. In the end the researcher was instructed by the State Office of FaHCSIA (Commonwealth) that the SRA would only bind Australian Government programs and that it should be separate from the state's ILPA. Thus two whole of government initiatives at Doomadgee were required to operate independently, although, fortunately for the community, the comprehensive SRA did not progress to fruition.

Within government departments a supply-chain operates between a hierarchy of actors through which interactions and information progress. Some departmental officers in intermediary positions display considerable tenacity and innovation in interpreting and inventing policy, raising questions about the 'linearity' of the supply system. The interpretation of policy by the Queensland State Office of the Australian Government at Doomadgee, for example, was quite different from that made by actors at Ali Curung, where the finalised, comprehensive SRA included both the Australian and Northern Territory Governments.

An ICC Manager at Tennant Creek exhibited a considerable capacity to maintain effective relationships with government staff and community members, brokering a comprehensive SRA. But this was the exception. In the Pilbara, staff complained about the time they spent on reporting because it reduced their ability to work effectively with Martu people. Generally, staff in intermediary positions in government, especially in ICC offices, complained about their lack of autonomy, discretionary funds and freedom to negotiate the system. The recent Intervention in the Northern Territory seemed to strengthen the top-down nature of the system.

On the Ngaanyatjarra Lands the research tracked the progress of SRAs that were intended to be an outcome of a Regional Partnership Agreement (RPA). After two and a half years of operation of the RPA none of the SRAs had been brought to a successful conclusion. The research found that ICC officers had very little discretionary funding themselves and instead operated in an intergovernmental environment with multiple pre-existing programs. Because the ICC attempted to negotiate 'buy-in' from other agencies, they had to adapt proposals to the agencies' priorities. This process was slow since the ICC did not have the authority to demand a rapid turn-around. Often the ICC returned to the community after a considerable delay and presented a different proposal, or a request for the community to recast the SRA to satisfy a different funding source or policy emphasis. In keeping with the nature of public service processes the reasons for this were not entirely transparent. This was frustrating for the employees of Ngaanyatjarra Council who were left speculating about remote processes affecting the SRA, while at the same time being required to account for them to the community. ICC staff, for their part, felt exasperated by the lack of understanding shown for the constraints they faced and perceived a lack of gratitude for their efforts to at least deliver some aspects of the SRA.

In Dajarra, there was a serious issue with the high mineral content of its water supply. Analysis of the supply chain revealed a confusing division of responsibilities: Cloncurry Shire was responsible for supply, but the worst effects of water hardness were on hot water systems and other household fittings, which were the responsibility of the housing owners (Queensland Housing or Jimberella Cooperative).

In Dajarra requests for basic local government services were not extravagant when measured against the services available in small towns in other local government authority areas. Demand was expressed not only verbally, but also by where people chose to live and the living arrangements that they chose in these places; for example, people made conscious decisions to live on outstations when there were more services available in town. People in Dajarra undertake a range of house maintenance tasks themselves and when asked about improvements people sensibly favoured renovations that were beyond their means and skills. The Queensland researchers judged these demands to be reasonable and informed, which led them to focus on the supply side problems, both in terms of quality and speed. Speaking specifically about housing and infrastructure, informants in Dajarra expressed a degree of cynicism and exhaustion: service providers did not listen to their expressed needs, they listened but did not act, or promised to respond but did not keep their word. This seemed to largely be due to communication problems: service-providers being unrealistic about what demands they could meet, agreeing to unrealistic timeframes and then not following through with feedback if there were delays. Problems with communication were exacerbated by the number of suppliers involved. Again in the context of housing, there was little consistency in the supply chain, with different tradespeople arriving each time to undertake repairs to housing in Dajarra. Further research is planned in Year 2 to seek out supply-side perceptions of these same issues.

At Ali Curung the delivery of housing services was overwhelmingly supply driven, with little or no involvement from tenants in decision making. The project observed other problems with the quality of the supply arrangements, for example, during the setting up of the market garden at Ali Curung under their SRA. The funds provided by the government and other stakeholders covered some initial growing of crops, some infrastructure, training for community members to Certificate Level II in Horticulture and in-kind support for a business plan. A range of problems emerged around the 'business model', including a lack of demand for sales, limited crop sizes, limited knowledge of farm management and a problematic training system which resulted in the improper installation of

infrastructure. In his review of the first round of SRAs, Sullivan (2005b:9) sounded the warning that SRA projects could be ‘all carrot and no donkey’. Sullivan drew comparisons with business ventures that failed in the 1980s under the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs due to inadequate business planning, including alligator farms, horticultural ventures and bull-catching plants.

Again under the Ali Curung SRA, increased school attendance is an obligation of the community, as measured using a baseline indicator of school attendance before the SRA and after the SRA. A range of supply-side factors, however, affected the quality of the service provided by the school, including delays in replacing the principal, teacher absence due to ill health, a lack of relief teachers and changing levels of teacher aids working at the school. This in turn led to reduced school attendance, but the indicators in the SRA only identify demand-side obligations, which seems at odds with the principle of ‘shared responsibility’.

The power situation in Urandangi and the nearby settlement of Marmanya was one of the service priorities identified by people at Urandangi early in the project. There is no reticulated power supply at Urandangi or at Marmanya. At one stage Marmanya had a diesel-fuelled generator for the settlement; however, it failed and was taken to Mt Isa for repairs but was not returned. The Marmanya settlement was then without power until 2007, about five years. Participants were asked what they needed power for; most of the reasons given can be categorised as healthy living practices (see FaCSIA 2007) such as refrigerated storage of foods. In 2007 the ICC provided households at Marmanya with individual petrol generators as part of an SRA. Each household was then responsible for the operating costs of the generator (with some initial subsidisation by ICC). As part of the SRA, Marmanya residents were supposed to construct welded steel cages to protect and secure the generators. These generators cost between \$50 and \$140 per week to run (fuel prices at Urandangi are considerably higher than in Mt Isa) and households could only afford to use the generators for short periods of time. The generators were not suited to the appliances that people wished to operate and there were also undiagnosed problems in the existing electrical wiring of the houses. Marmanya residents continued to use firewood as an energy source for cooking, heating bath water and for heating. By June 2007 the ICC was considering replacing each household’s petrol generator with more powerful diesel generators.

The SRA at Warnan involved the building of a new community store and refurbishing the existing store as a youth centre.⁶ The original store is too small and does not meet hygiene standards.⁷ Ultimately, the major funding agency – Indigenous Business Australia (IBA) – was unable to provide the necessary infrastructure loan, and attempts to find alternative sources of funding were unsuccessful. The progress of the SRA has taken many twists and turns, but it reached a crisis point in 2007 when IBA refused the application for a loan to cover approximately half of the establishment costs. This put in jeopardy other applications being made to Lotterywest and the Goldfields-Esperance Area Consultative Committee (GEACC) for the remaining costs. With the benefit of hindsight, key community decision-makers realised that IBA was probably not the best choice as the central source of funding, since it was in the process of establishing itself as a commercially oriented promoter of Aboriginal private enterprise, and the Wanarn store is a cooperative whose primary purpose is social rather than economic. IBA staff suggested to community workers at Wanarn that they approach one of its subsidiaries, Outback Stores. Following a meeting at Wanarn, a representative from Outback Stores agreed that its business model was not suited to the Wanarn case. This labyrinthine and as yet unresolved funding tale about a much needed community store is indicative of problems of supply, not demand. Community and ICC staff were unable to patch together the necessary funding or to broker government input.

The above examples do not indicate a problem with demand, or problematic articulations between demand and supply, but rather a problem in the quality of supply in terms of technical and economic

⁶ The SRA was signed at the same time as the RPA in August 2005 with the partners: OIPC, DOHA, IBA, Office of Aboriginal Economic Development West Australian Government (OAED), Lotterywest and the Shire of Ngaanyatjaraku.

⁷ The Wanarn settlement has grown since its founding in the early ‘80s from about 20–30 people to about 150 (Brooks & Kral 2007:27). This figure does not include the staff of the aged care centre, clinic, school, Community and Ngaanyatjarra councils. The aged care centre attracts many visitors. The population can swell to over 700 people when there is a funeral.

feasibility. A basic tenet of demand and supply in economic systems is that the quality of the service affects its demand. Thus problems in the supply of education services result in reduced attendance. When a business venture proves successful in achieving its intended outcomes (and given the lack of successful enterprises in Aboriginal affairs, it does not matter overly how this success is measured) it is perceived as legitimate by its clients, and people are more inclined to become involved. Participation is related to successful outcomes and demand can be stimulated. When a business venture fails, or looks likely to do so, people are obviously less inclined to get involved. Thus demand can be stifled. It is necessary to reiterate these obvious statements when reflecting on the system that administers Aboriginal affairs. In an economic market a supplier cannot survive in the absence of an effective demand for their commodity or service. This does not necessarily correlate with the system that regulates Aboriginal affairs.

3.2 Demand as supply

People in Ali Curung experience the delivery of services not only through their demand for the service as consumers, but also through their participation in the supply of the service, largely through their employment with CDEP. In 2007 CDEP workers and their support systems were clearly central to all the services delivered locally, including Centrelink payments, the postal service, community store, school, night patrol, safe houses, aged care and respite services, the clinic, sports and recreation services, the internet café, market garden, Council municipal services, art centre, bakery and office administration. CDEP workers were actively engaged in the delivery of almost all of the local services in Ali Curung. The community's understanding of services was, therefore, as much related to their employment, as it was to their local use as consumers.

It is not possible to dissociate service delivery from employment opportunities because providing employment is such an important part of improving Aboriginal welfare. It is possible for the supply of a service to a settlement to have two benefits: the benefit gained from consuming the service on the one hand, and the employment and profit gained if the service is provided by locals, on the other. There are issues associated with this point concerning the training and employment of an unskilled workforce. It is possible that local employment and training to deliver services may increase the cost of the service, lower its quality and result in slower supply. After the initial extra costs, poor quality and delays, if they happen, local suppliers may prove over time that they are more reliable and more effective than outsiders.

Myuma at Camooweal is a commercially-based enterprise that is engaged in a range of service delivery functions that it is not funded to do. Myuma has organised banking and financial information presentations for its workers with follow-up personal assistance on matters such as overdue tax returns, re-payment schemes for creditors using pay deductions and hire purchase. Myuma has also used local elders to provide cultural instruction to its workers about butchering and hearth cooking techniques for kangaroos, emus and goannas with the appropriate rituals, and instruction about how to identify discarded flakes from stone tool manufacturing for cultural heritage records. It provides a private room to each of its employees, which is often the first fully private space they have ever lived in and that they can personalise. The organisation provides assistance to resolve its workers' legal problems, such as unpaid fines, outstanding court warrants, difficulties related to conforming with probation requirements and lack of awareness of legal rights. Furthermore, it provides its workers with health checks for blood pressure, diabetes, hearing, STDs and scabies, drug screening, as well as some drug rehabilitation counselling and assistance.

Tjuwanpa Outstation Resource Agency in central Australia also provides a range of services that are not funded by the government, including a postal service, access to telephones, internet, transportation, financial management, assistance with white goods purchases and help with brokering contact with banks, government agencies, public housing organisations, schools and the criminal justice system. Indigenous Community Housing Organisations in the Mount Isa region delivered a range of services for which they were not funded, largely because they were the only Aboriginal organisation operating in the non-Aboriginal settlements in the region (Severns & Retchford 1998, Spiller Gibbins Swan Pty

Ltd 1998). Yet these services were not recognised as being ‘legitimate’ by government and many of these organisations had their funding withdrawn or curtailed due to their lack of performance measured against housing related outputs.

An associated project of the DKCRC (CP1, Livelihoods inLand™) is researching how people provide a service to government and society when they manage the flow of natural and cultural services; examples are environmental management (such as caring for country) and Aboriginal tourism. Similarly, elders in the Doomadgee Justice Group provide a service to the broader society when they adjudicate in sentencing hearings. In these and other cases, Aboriginal groups also provide services.

The findings of this research demonstrate that demand is partly driven by the capacity to supply services. Demand and supply of services are thus not dichotomised; rather, they are inescapably intertwined in a dialectic relationship. The utility of the terms demand and supply is therefore primarily directional.

3.3 Multiple interfaces

Problems are not limited to the supply side. Multiple examples exist of problems on the demand side. This project initially conceptualised a demand-supply interface, with an autonomous Aboriginal consumer or end user and a ubiquitous non-Aboriginal service provider. The study has subsequently revealed a much higher level of complexity in the supply chain, and also in the demand chain. End users often express their demands indirectly through ‘third-party’ intermediaries: relations, community leaders and trusted outsiders (see section below on ‘primacy of relationships’). These people then effectively represent the demands to service providers. There is no clear end or starting point to the complex chain of demand and supply. Boundaries are not at all clear in this context, which makes the notion of a *single interface* misleading. The dynamics at play are better conceptualised as multidirectional interactions across multiple interfaces, akin to the notion of ‘political pluralism’ as understood in political science.

In their approach to service delivery on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands, external agencies were preoccupied with the notion of the regional ‘interface’, largely comprised of regional organisations based in Alice Springs, approximately 500 kilometres to the north. In reality, the service delivery mechanism on the APY Lands is a considerably more sophisticated system of interaction within and between regional and local governance structures. Separate incorporated community councils in the larger settlements, along with homelands across the Lands, interact with multiple regional service providers and regional Anangu elected representative forums. Therefore Anangu leaders often have multiple roles in representation, governance and service delivery at the same time.

In the Pilbara service providers struggle with the lack of any clear interface or boundaries. Staff working for government, non-government organisations and BHP Billiton Iron Ore express a willingness to work with Martu people, but they are confused about how to engage with Martu. At the regional level there was some recognition of Western Desert Land Aboriginal Corporation (WDLAC) existing as a regional representative organisation, but there was little recognition of this at the local level (which raises questions about how a ‘whole of government’ could ever meet with ‘whole of Martu’). Generally, Martu representation in organisations appears to be minimal and not clearly defined. Service providers find themselves dealing with non-Aboriginal employees of Aboriginal organisations, but are uncertain about the level of authority these employees have. Service providers recognise that building relationships with Martu people requires time, but there is no funding or recognition from within the system to allow them to spend the time necessary. In particular the time used to report and collect statistical data for quantitative indicators precludes the establishment of relationships that might lead to more qualitative measures, which could provide a greater understanding of how Martu realities match with projects and programs. This is exacerbated by general staff shortages and associated workplace pressures related to mining operations.

Also in the Pilbara, the researcher observed that government service providers have a vague idea of the Martu community, but have little understanding of where the boundaries of that community lie in terms of individuals, families and other divisions of the broader Martu population dispersed across the Western Desert. In reality the Martu population is, if anything, characterised by its fluidity. Boundaries that are commonly understood by Martu people are not clearly understood by service providers on the supply side. Martu boundaries are unlikely to coincide neatly with the fixed geographical boundaries and centres that service providers use to deliver services. In a geographic sense, Martu people ‘belong’ to a number of different geographies of households, as well as settlements, across the Western Desert.

Successive rounds of the *Housing and infrastructure in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities survey* (ABS 2000, ABS 2007) have recorded problems with access to services on outstations and remote settlements, especially health, education and essential services. So, in addition to maintaining kinship and social relationships, a significant driver of mobility is to access services, especially between outstations and larger settlements (Taylor 2002:9, Memmott et al. 2006:93–108). This results in service catchments around regional centres with ‘service populations’ as opposed to the ‘resident population’. Most movements are short term; people are reluctant to spend extended periods away from their homes and family for training, schooling and health care. In the Georgina River area mobility is a key factor in the interplay between demand and supply of services.

Mobility is not only related to problems accessing services; it can sometimes result in the over-use of services. Residents at Ali Curung are able to purchase food on a form of credit known as ‘book-up’, and mobility gives them access to a larger number of creditors. People mostly shop at the community store and bakery for groceries and other essential items, but they also travel to Wycliffe Well Roadhouse, Wauchope Roadhouse, Murray Downs Station Shop and Kurrundi Station Shop. Travel to these other stores is related more to maximising additional ‘book-up’ than to obtaining a wider variety of goods or produce. A regional network of ‘book-up’ is an effective adaptive strategy used for dealing with income and food shortages, but as a result, many families carry a debt for general food items which is much higher than their weekly income.

The current study does not involve detailed ethnographic research, but there is a wealth of anthropological literature that describes social interactions within the Aboriginal domain, including the acquisition and exchange of resources. Peterson (1993) argues that ‘demand sharing’ underlies social interactions in traditional Aboriginal societies. As expanded by Martin (1995:9), when asserting a demand:

... an individual is asserting their personal right (as a son, an aunt, a clansman and so forth) to a response from others, but is also acknowledging, and thus through their actions substantiating, their relationship with the other person ... goods are thus ‘decommodified’, that is, incorporated into the Indigenous domain in which their values were not determined primarily as commodities within the market system, but in their capacity to sustain and inform social relations.

This ethnographic evidence therefore cautions against conceptualising Aboriginal people as undifferentiated individualised consumers of services. While Aboriginal people do act as consumers of material goods, access to and consumption of services occurs in a considerably more complex social and political environment than predicated by the market economy.

On the APY Lands there are complex interconnections between and within organisations and committees in the Anangu body politic. This reflects both the strength of ‘bonding’ and ‘bridging’ social capital in Aboriginal society. The permeability of boundaries is prone towards a form of ‘closure’, where power is concentrated in small family or kin ‘elites’. Governance on the Lands is consistent with Smith’s (2005:16) depiction of different forms of power, authority and decision making dispersed across gender, age and political lines, where individuals and groups negotiate ‘complex sets of overlapping rights, interests and alliances’. Therefore, the question of ‘who speaks for Anangu’ at the point of service interface is a complex issue, and the expectation or pursuit of a homogenous single view from Anangu could be viewed as naïve. Aboriginal groups, communities and

regions have competing voices, interests and often highly charged disputes about power: who holds it and for what purpose. The PY Ku initiative's focal point for integrating services became the regional interface, when the actual point of integration between service provider and consumers is the shop fronts of the rural transaction centres at the local level. Issues of consultation, negotiation and consent building became abstracted from practice and then highly politicized as service providers sought to work almost exclusively at the 'regional interface'.

Instead of the notion of a single *interface* between suppliers and consumers, the notion of *governance* better encapsulates the array of actors and activities that occur over a broad range of institutional positions and scales. Hyden, Court and Mease (2004:16) usefully define governance as the 'formation and stewardship of the formal and informal rules that regulate the public realm, the arena in which the state as well as economic and societal actors interact to make decisions'. In the local context of remote Aboriginal settlements, governance includes managerial, administrative and operational processes that deal with outside agencies and interests. Governance is an omnibus concept that encompasses diverse scales, interactions, relationships, processes, structures and traditions that determine how power operates, how decisions are made and how beneficiaries participate. As noted by Healey et al. (2002:14), studies of governance 'reveal a complex picture of change and continuity, operating at different scales and different speeds', involving the 'continuous search for ways of reconciling inherently contradictory forces'.

Recent anthropological writing on intercultural dynamics (Hinkson & Smith 2005) also help to illuminate the interactions between service providers and end users. In her review of the literature, Holcombe (2004:2) concludes that 'delineating culturally distinct structures is no longer relevant'. She describes a shared hybridised 'third space' as opposed to an interface between separately conceived domains (Holcombe 2005:222, 226). Consumers and service providers are not isolated, rather they are intertwined in a complex and dialectic relationship with the wider society, where the complex transactions of service delivery and consumption are conducted. The tension between the demand and supply of services in practice leads to mixed interpretations and complex transactions. On the demand-side, consumers have different perspectives of the meaning of 'services' and the multiplicity of uses to which services can be put. On the supply-side, service providers struggle to reconcile a multiplicity of competing claims and entitlements.

There is a literature of supply-chain models, including more sophisticated models which integrate supply chain and network analyses (Lazzarini et al. 2001). Other research identifies seven values that occur along the supply chain: trust, satisfaction, power, dependence, commitment, relationship-specific investment and personal relationships (Batt 2003). There are considerable opportunities for this project to contribute to the greater theoretical analysis occurring in the 'science of desert living' project.

In the Georgina River area the interplay between demand and supply of services is inherently dynamic. The communities there have experienced changes in the quality of their services, they have experienced different service response times and they have experienced changes to specific services. The interfaces that have formed along the supply chain are essentially transient, occurring in a broader sociopolitical field. In contrast, government and other service providers are preoccupied with finding a single 'interface', sensibly seeking to save time and effort by talking to the 'right people'. But in reality there are multiple interfaces operating at multiple levels and places.

External perceptions of a *single interface* do not always tend towards higher scales. In Doomadgee, the researcher was instructed to negotiate the SRA directly with households and to bypass all local organisations; the local shire council and other local organisations were not to be placed in a position that could block the SRA or have any power over Australian Government programs. Thus liberal notions of consumer choice and citizen freedom can have powerful effects: depoliticising governance and reducing Aboriginal affairs to an undifferentiated mass of households and individuals.

There is, therefore, a need for a clearer understanding of, and articulation between, the multiple interfaces of Aboriginal affairs. Ideally, effective processes should operate internally in the different interfaces of governance, as was observed between local and regional organisations on the Ngaanyatjarra Lands (see below). In this instance, government dealt predominantly with a regional interface of Ngaanyatjarra Council, in the knowledge that they had effective processes in place to disseminate information and to respond to feedback from local levels. When governance systems are weak or in the process of forming, the artificial promotion of a single interface by governments can have a powerful depoliticising affect, which ultimately gives rise to politics as decisions are disputed by other points in the system. Sanders (2002) argues that in such dispersed governance situations, multiple inputs and consultation at multiple points of the system are preferable.

4. Conditions leading to successful practice (research question 2)

What conditions permit successful practice to develop between consumers and service-providers?

4.1 The primacy of relationships

All of the case studies strongly reveal that relationships between people on the demand and on the supply side of the system are primary to the effectiveness of service delivery. While these frequently involve relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, ethnicity was not a primary consideration; some service-providers were Aboriginal, and some residents of remote settlements were non-Aboriginal. At Tjuwanpa Outstation Resource Agency, regardless of the formal measures that were in place for representation and governance, the day-to-day reality is that demand is expressed through the relationships that people have with local non-Aboriginal staff on the ground, who respond when someone rings up or walks into the office. On the APY Lands, reciprocity, good relationships, trust, tenacity and respect were evident within both the Anangu and government public service domains as they struggled to keep the PY Ku program afloat.

The research in the Pilbara highlights the importance of building relationships that will allow Martu representations of their own world to emerge. Marcia Langton (1993:33) argues that Aboriginal identities are a 'field of inter-subjectivity in that they are remade over and over again in a process of dialogue, of imagination, of representation and interpretation'. She outlines three broad categories of cultural and textual construction:

- Aboriginal person interacting with other Aboriginal people in situations that are within Aboriginal culture but not completely closed off from some western influence
- stereotypes, icons and myths of Aboriginal people that are imagined representations constructed by non-Aboriginal people who have never been in contact with Aboriginal people
- actual dialogue between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, for example in supermarket checkouts, that test their models of each other.

Langton's categories are formalised to some degree in Newman through BHP Billiton's cross-cultural awareness training with traditional owners. Service providers interviewed in the course of the research indicate the need and their support for cultural awareness at all levels of the institutions that meet with Martu people. The training will ideally open up spaces between non-Martu and Martu individuals and allow for further dialogue and the ongoing process of reshaping perceptions of relational identities. Face-to-face dialogue allows for the development of the types of relationships that enable fluid understandings of identity, rather than relationships based primarily upon stereotypes and fixed perceptions.

A primary conclusion coming from the Pilbara case study is that there is a need for dialogue and deliberation that allows Martu people to experiment with different institutional configurations.

Currently there is no institutional support for such experimentation because of the many bureaucratic and administrative demands faced by institutional actors.

In the absence of the market economy that exists in mainstream society, government services and resources are far more significant to the residents of Aboriginal settlements than to other Australians. The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (HRSCATSIA 2004:161) acknowledges that Aboriginal ‘people’s ability to participate effectively in the economy is strongly related to access to services and an understanding of such services’.

The Martu people in the Pilbara have little understanding of the external institutional world and so place demands on outsiders to help them navigate the system, especially through the labyrinth of government departments, some of which have no local physical interface and rely upon phone contact via a maze of voice recorded prompts. This assistance is often provided by non-Aboriginal people in non-government organisations and also to some extent by individuals within government. The relationships formed with these people are important bridges that facilitate the functioning of the system. This informal role is not recognised or widely valued by the supply side. It tends to occur as a result of personal commitments made by these actors to work longer hours. The bridging of these gaps relies entirely upon the integrity of the relationship between these committed individuals and Martu people. The actions of such people in filling the gaps in the system go largely unnoticed.

Almost all senior positions in local organisations in remote settlements across all of the research sites are held by outsiders. Moran (2007) collectively called these people *trusted outsiders*. In addition, some departmental officers visit with sufficient frequency to fulfil a similar role: what Lipsky (1980) describes as the ‘street-level bureaucrats’. People also rely on staff in non-government organisations when they visit regional centres such as Newman, Alice Springs and Tennant Creek. These staff are mostly of non-Aboriginal descent, although some are of Aboriginal descent but originally come from elsewhere. In some cases they have lived in the remote settlement for many years, but have some ongoing social distance from the local community. Their effective operation is contingent on a high degree of local familiarity and trust, and they display considerable scope in their dealings with different actors in the system. Their fundamental role in facilitating the service delivery system is poorly understood or acknowledged.

The ebb and flow of the PY Ku initiative largely followed the involvement of certain key non-Aboriginal individuals. The initiative almost collapsed when the non-Aboriginal manager and his partner left PY Media, reportedly due to work overload and exhaustion. The organisation struggled to survive in the aftermath, and probably would have collapsed without the intervention of another representative regional body (APY Services), although this again largely came down to the efforts of a key non-Aboriginal individual to maintain support for both the PY Ku initiative and PY Media. For the government lead agency (Department of Health and Ageing), the APY Services officer was a central driver of the program from its inception and was very active from the sidelines ‘rescuing’ PY Media. Throughout 2007 APY Services unsuccessfully advertised for a new manager for PY Media. In an unusual display of commitment to the program, the government coordinator left her senior government position in Canberra to take up the position with PY Media in early 2008.

Similarly, although it largely preceded the study period, it was clear that the then ICC manager at Tennant Creek was the driver behind the completion of the comprehensive SRA at Ali Curung. The work involved was formidable, especially the ‘signing up’ of a large number of Northern Territory and Australian government departments. Judging by her standing in the community, the ICC manager clearly spent considerable time discussing the agreement at a local level. This was also evident from the records of council meetings and public meetings. She was more informing than consulting or negotiating and people in Ali Curung continue to be unclear about the details and their commitments under the SRA, but they have clearly established a relationship with the ICC manager and hold her in respect. When she departed in 2007 other important drivers emerged at the local level: the SRA Project Manager, the CEO and the Arts Coordinator.

The success of two programs at Ali Curung (discussed in further detail below) is tied to the development of productive working relationships between key Aboriginal residents and non-Aboriginal stakeholders. Both of the projects have relative longevity and local specificity. The school principal was committed to the development of a bicultural curriculum and the indigenisation of school staff (not only teacher aids, but also qualified teachers) for the Alekarenge Language Program. The working dynamic that developed between the principal and the Aboriginal staff was pivotal to the success of that program. Similarly, strong relationships formed between Ali Curung leaders and two field officers from the Northern Territory Government who were involved with the Justice Program over a six-year period.

On the Ngaanyatjarra Lands the researcher observed the mutual reliance between the Yarnangu Chairperson and the Community Development Advisors (CDAs).⁸ As in Tjuwanpa, the CDAs are the first people the Yarnangu express their demands to, which can be quite stressful at times. CDAs rely on community chairs to use their authority to back them up when they are resisting unreasonable demands or when they are put in threatening situations. They are funded through the regional Ngaanyatjarra Council, but are directly employed by each settlement. If the relationship between the chair and the CDA breaks down, the CDA could be dismissed. The Ngaanyatjarra Council relies heavily on CDAs to supervise CDEP project officers and coordinate the other Ngaanyatjarra services, implementing the terms of the Council's service contracts with FaHCSIA and DEWR. However, their important roles within the community and the support provided by community chairs give CDAs considerable independence from other employees of Ngaanyatjarra Council and limit the Council's ability to enforce compliance with the procedures that government agencies require.

Government agencies frequently dismiss community managers as 'gatekeepers'. The Operational Commander of the Intervention taskforce, Major General David Chalmers, recently described them as 'madmen, missionaries and mercenaries' (Weekend Australian, 8 October 2007). The research found that they were a fundamental part of a dysfunctional system. Given the quantity of administration to be processed, an accepted part of their role is to limit what is coming in from outside. In the words of one Yarnangu leader on the Ngaanyatjarra Lands: 'we employ you to help us sort through all of this whitefella bull****'. Community managers have demands placed on them by their Aboriginal employers to perform a mediating role, to vet the quantity of administration and visitors, to channel the complexity and therefore to 'keep the gate.' Their actions are a practical response to the volume and nature of the administration that has to be processed, as much as driven by their motives, personality or political ambitions.

Formal structural elements can be instituted to improve the accountability of community managers, including formal policies, separation of powers, delegations and registers of pecuniary interests. These structural solutions, however, will not overcome the gap in capacity, nor resolve the fundamentally ambiguous and interstitial nature of their role. It is not uncommon for community managers to work 70 hours a week for a salary of \$60 000 per annum. They generally say a period of one to two years is required before they achieve the necessary trust and local knowledge to be proficient. If they leave, who can take on the intense requirements of their roles?

The functioning of the system is predicated on other outsider roles as well. At Ali Curung people indicated that the bus service would not work if it was operated privately by someone from the community because they would be unable to refuse family members. In this instance people actively prefer an outsider to fulfil the role of bus driver.

On the demand side, the counterparts to trusted outsiders are community leaders or 'trusted insiders'. It is important to consider the capacities to broker services in both directions. Community leaders themselves are often placed in difficult positions when the community 'shoots the messenger'. When Ali Curung leaders offer their interpretations of recent policy changes they often receive the brunt of

⁸ Despite the title, in practice these positions are similar to the CEOs or community managers typical of many remote Aboriginal settlements in Australia, although the regional and local configurations of relationships are unique to Ngaanyatjarra Lands.

their constituents' anger, confusion and concern. Aboriginal leaders are often seen as endorsing government policy through their employment or position in the community. The dialogue that ensues does help to shape people's understandings of changes, but at a personal cost to leaders.

As must be expected, there is a high turnover of non-Aboriginal staff. In Newman for example, the community coordinator at Parnpajinya changed three times in one year. Similarly, community leaders tend to rotate through different positions, with little continuity between terms. This turnover introduces a major vulnerability in terms of sustainability. In the words of Owen Stanley, the economist on the research team: 'we need to move from "can do" people to a "can do" system.'

4.2 Public participation in governance

While representation in local organisations allows end users to express demands, it does not mean that people have relinquished their right to speak on certain topics themselves. In Dajarra, householders expressed their frustration about failures to advertise meetings with enough advance notice for them to attend. They also object to service providers limiting their visits to local offices and other centralised community places (e.g. store, pub); they call for service providers to 'get around more' and to visit households to hear people's real demands in more informal settings. As discussed above, this suggests that there is no one *single* interface; community and other local-level organisations are more correctly *funnel points* for interactions and decision making for service delivery. In the terminology of network analysis, they are *nodes* in the system.

Again in search of the illusive interface, agencies from the Queensland Government were preoccupied with the formal structure of the Doomadgee Shire Council. In Doomadgee, however, it was necessary to adopt a whole-of-governance perspective. Doomadgee Shire Council has consistently struggled over the last ten years to retain a critical mass of staff and capabilities, and is widely held by external stakeholders to be one of the most inept councils in Queensland. Beyond Council, however, there is a large number of functional organisations that have developed organically in Doomadgee, including the CDEP committee, Justice Group, Men's Group, Women's Group, Aboriginal Health Organisation and the Parents and Citizens Committee. Not all of these are incorporated or operate from a building shopfront. This dispersed governance arrangement, which is both factional and gendered, represents a local adaptation to a complex operating environment⁹; thus the local capacity of the shire council is just one small part of the combined capacity of these different organisations. In the course of discussions about a comprehensive SRA at Doomadgee, the research team advocated a whole-of-governance perspective, which led to the practical suggestion of a combined Aboriginal organisation with representatives from each of these organisations at Doomadgee.

Since Aboriginal settlements are not homogenous communities, different types of decisions are of interest to different local groups. For the dispersed governance arrangements at Doomadgee, form followed function; that is, the level of participation and self-organisation adapts to suit the function of a decision-making forum. Different functions require different structures and processes. Different decisions have different relevance to different people and require different processes and timeframes. Multiple governing structures divided by function are an effective means to broaden participation in governance. People are free to choose among different organisations in keeping with the perceived relevance of their functions to that individual. Thus women concerned about violence and alcohol and humbug came to dominate the justice group, young men with a history or interest in pastoralism came to dominate the CDEP committee and mothers with school-age children came to dominate the Parents and Citizens Committee. This phenomena has also been observed in a similar sized remote settlement on Cape York (Moran 2006:404).

At Ali Curung, in addition to the Council, residents of Ali Curung also formally participate in decision making through three other local committees: Mirnirri Store Committee, Sports and Recreation Committee and Arplwe Arts and Cultural Committee. The Arplwe Art and Cultural Committee was

⁹ Arguably, the failings of council and the attention it receives from service providers has provided the institutional space required for this configuration of local organisations to develop.

set up recently in the Ali Curung SRA process. Following a workshop it was agreed that the Art Centre should represent all the different language groups at Ali Curung. Members were nominated in a subsequent meeting. There was no voting and the nominated candidates were not disputed. This may appear to be a non-democratic process but the residents of Ali Curung are extremely supportive of the chosen committee. Potential candidates were a topic of informal discussion throughout the community in the week leading up to the meeting. The outcome indicated the functioning of an informal decision-making process across the community.

The study found other examples of decision-making processes that completely lacked any formal structure. Under the Ali Curung SRA a bus was provided to transport community members on a user-pays basis using funding from the Tennant Creek ICC. The bus was initially to be managed by Council with the intention of establishing a local business. Within weeks of the bus arriving in the settlement, Council staff worked out the management and rules of the service. There was little consultation with the community or with the elected Council. In September 2007, the Council offered the bus for the football grand final in Tennant Creek at the return ticket cost of \$55 for adults and \$35 for children. People were required to pay cash on the Thursday before the event, but no tickets were purchased and the trip was cancelled. Residents then independently arranged for three buses to take them through a business called Centre Bush Bus, at a higher cost of \$45 for a one-way ticket. Their preference largely came down to the method of payment: Centre Bush Bus offers Centrepay deductions.¹⁰ The week after the grand final ICC and Council staff removed the bus and stored it at the ICC yard at Tennant Creek. The bus was not to return to the settlement until suitable management arrangements had been resolved. In the subsequent weeks little attempt was made by ICC and Council staff to explain the circumstances of the removal to settlement residents, or to help facilitate the development of management arrangements. Service providers failed to recognise the interest and capacity evident in the local decision making that took place in the process of organising alternative transport to the grand final. Settlement residents resorted to a private provider when they realised that they were bound by the terms set by the ICC and Council staff and that they had little power to influence the process.

Two past programs are widely held to be successful by Ali Curung community elders: the Alekarenge Language Program and the Justice Program. Both programs achieved high levels of engagement because they worked with people on locally identified issues. The way that services are delivered affects people's perception of the service. In both programs there was an alignment between the process followed and culturally based decision making. Both relied heavily on local knowledge and experience. Similarly, in the Pilbara two organisations were felt to have successfully engaged Martu in their activities. Matu Milli is an artist cooperative for the Western Desert, and Kanyirninpa Jukurrpa undertakes a range of activities, including a history and archive project, micro-enterprises (including cultural awareness training) and a communications unit. Both models report regularly to Martu informally and also formally through WDLAC meetings, and Martu people are employed in both programs. Both have a strong cultural basis and aim to strengthen culture and connection to country.

The study found evidence of an existing capacity for governance, although sometimes this was operating informally. The key issue again was the mismatch between this local capacity and the quantity of administration of an external origin. The study found an apparent link between the level of engagement and the extent that an initiative is perceived locally to have local or cultural specificity. The dilemma is how to manage the types of administration that do not meet this criterion. The SRA in Ali Curung was unable to attract the same level of engagement as the language and justice programs. The nature of public consultation was largely limited to informing people what had been decided elsewhere, partly in representative forums like the Council, but also in the corridors of government departments. Much of the consultation for the SRA had a 'what do you want' approach, which had little meaning for potential participants. There was only one local Aboriginal representative on the SRA steering committee. Thus it is possible to articulate a fundamental question here: to what extent was the lack of engagement in the development of the SRA due to a lack of process, and to what

¹⁰ Centrepay is a free direct bill-paying service offered to customers receiving payments from Centrelink.

extent was the lack of engagement due to the nature of the administrative functions of the SRA, most of those functions being more related to the business of Aboriginal affairs than the local context?

4.3 Government 'coordination'

The project found little evidence to suggest that 'whole of government' arrangements are working. This has been observed by others (Smith 2007) and critically noted by Fitzgerald (2001:52) in the course of the Cape York Justice Study:

Overall, the policy of coordination between agencies and program flexibility has not yet produced a significant change in approach by the various departments and agencies which are involved in overlapping activities on Cape York. Hierarchical structures and strict processes narrowly confine the authority of the public officials directly involved, each of whom is required to give effect to his or her agency's policies and practices, including policies and practices relating to service delivery. Government officials directly involved in the communities have little discretion to make decisions or take action according to local needs. Any 'flexibility' is largely controlled by senior officials, who are seldom well informed of those needs. Coordination is largely a euphemism for committees.

The Ngaanyatjarra Regional Partnership Agreement (RPA) attempted to bring together multiple partners, timelines and objectives under one comprehensive framework of mutual obligation. There was a marked mismatch between the proposed evaluation framework and its actual implementation. From an early stage in the process it proved difficult to engage all the Australian Government departments, which effectively undermined the whole-of-government approach of the RPA. According to a consultant engaged by DKCRC prior to the CP5 research, a major Australian Government department refused from the outset to develop a regionally flexible approach in accordance with the agreement. The RPA did not deliver the proposed structural reform or a more streamlined government decision-making system. The research found that it is generally acknowledged that the RPA has not reduced the quantity of 'red tape'; indeed the RPA may have increased the administrative burden on all parties, particularly Ngaanyatjarra Council. There are, nonetheless, some benefits that can be attributed to the SRA. Two subsidiary SRAs have delivered benefits, though these programs were in operation before the RPA. The RPA also led to an increase in funding from the Australian Government to Council by gaining security of Municipal Service (MUNS) funding until mid-2008. Funding for the Land Unit of the Council was a windfall benefit from the RPA. The establishment of the Community Planning Unit increased staff on the ground, though their efforts were largely wasted on unsuccessful SRA planning. The opportunity for Ngaanyatjarra Council to produce a strategic investment plan and restructure for more robust governance was not taken up, but this was no fault of the government parties. The question is not whether gains occurred, but whether the process was more effective than the previous practice of funding allocation by departmental portfolios.

Funding for the PY Ku program on the APY Lands was announced in mid-2004, with PY Media auspicing the project. PY Media's involvement stemmed from the roll-out of broadband across the APY Lands and the strategic intention to relocate their existing internet and video-conference facilities into the rural transaction centres once they were operational. A complex implementation arrangement ensued in an already complex regional institutional environment (see Figure 4 below). The grafting of this complex program onto a small but significant regional Anangu organisation created such a burden of bureaucracy and increased administration that it rendered the organisation at risk. PY Media was on the brink of collapse in 2007, but it has recovered with the assistance of another regional organisation, APY Services.

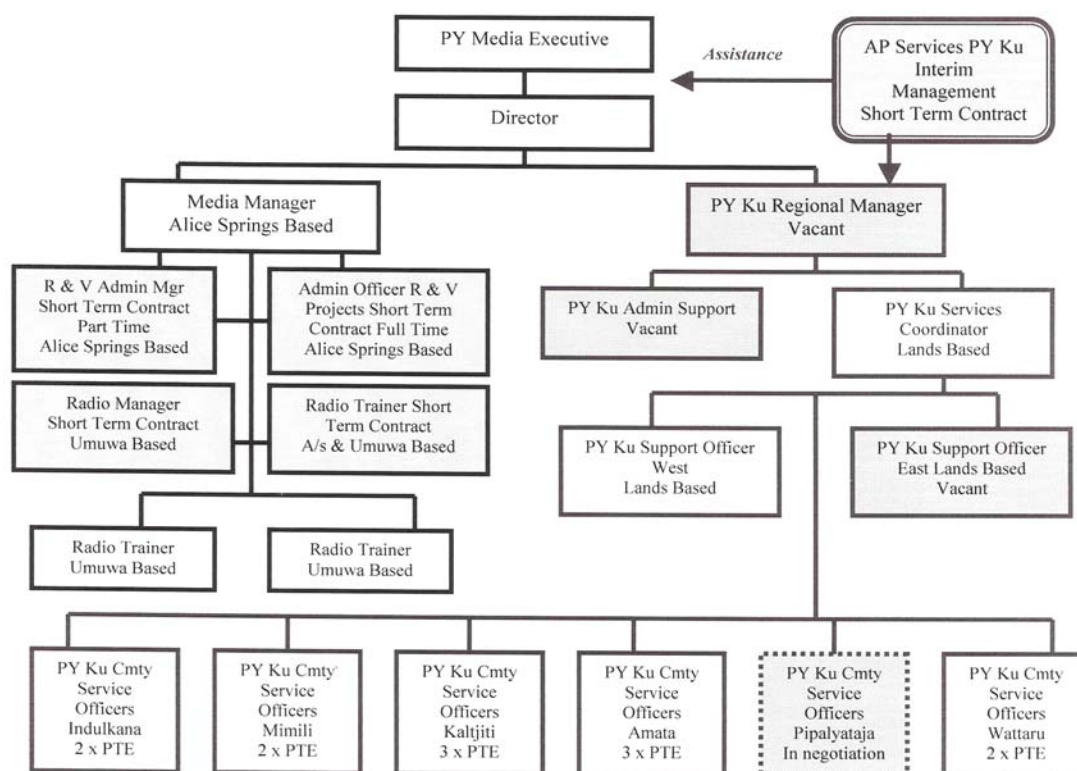


Figure 4: Organisational structure and personnel status of PY Media

Once the PY Ku centres become operational their one-stop access points for services have considerable potential to improve service delivery. There is an existing demand for the program, and given that the alternative is driving considerable distances to deal with multiple agencies, their operation is likely to stimulate further demand. As one Anangu person commented:

All I want is the same thing I wanted when this was first raised in that meeting in 2003 – to be able to pay for my license here instead of having to go Alice, to use a local bank, to sort out some basic things like that and even use the internet now and then. It ain't rocket science is it? How hard can it be?

Yet after more than three years of implementation, the delivery of the program is still bogged down with governance problems at the regional level. Whatever coordination has occurred at a regional level has not translated vertically to the local level, and local leaders are generally unaware of the project's progress and issues. As early as 2002 the South Australian Coroner (Chivell 2002) identified problems with the governance arrangements in the APY Lands. As a result, efforts by government to better coordinate itself ran the risk of limiting needed on-the-ground action. Through 2004 and 2005 considerable changes occurred in the political and policy environment in South Australia, leaving interdepartmental arrangements and staffing in a constant state of flux. The COAG whole of government focus of the PY Ku program appears to have only exacerbated the difficulty in implementing it. The end result of a strong emphasis on coordinating governance arrangements has been significant delays and implementation problems.

The problem with whole-of-government programs is that the forums that emerge generally lack authority to operate horizontally across different vertical jurisdictions. Consistent with a recommendation by the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO 2007:22), a single lead agency is needed with the authority to oversee implementation. The ANAO report describes the difficulties caused by the upwards accountability of each agency and the unwillingness of agencies to devolve across departmental boundaries.

Whole-of-government arrangements seek to overcome an inescapable reality of complex organisations: the sheer size of Aboriginal affairs requires an inevitable amount of compartmentalisation and specialisation. Given the volume of service delivery occurring in Aboriginal affairs, it is often necessary to accept departmental specialisation and the inevitable compartmentalisation, duplication and competition that ensues. Inescapably, the most efficient mode of operation is to work within a single silo. It is still necessary for coordination to occur between departments, but it is unrealistic to seek to unite them. Whole-of-government management can, in some cases, effectively increase complexity by bringing more agencies to the table than would otherwise normally be required, certainly at any one point in time. In normal practice, interactions with a range of service providers can be sequenced and coordination orchestrated only to the extent necessary. The complexity of government can be managed incrementally in this manner.

It is interesting to compare the two COAG trials on the APY Lands. Parallel to the PY Ku initiative included in this study, the Mai Wiru initiative introduced a healthy food strategy across the Lands. In this case the initiative was implemented by Nganampa Health. A fundamental difference between the two initiatives is that the rural transaction centres proposed by PY Ku require a shopfront for services from multiple service providers; a whole- of-government approach was natural for it. When juxtaposed with the number of Anangu organisations that operate at the regional level, PY Ku was an ambitious project. Mai Wiru, in comparison, was implemented with input from a smaller number of agencies, involved on an as-needed basis. PY Ku also involved the building of new facilities, the use of new technologies and the training and employment of new staff. That task was, therefore, considerably more complex.

Another interesting characteristic of the Mai Wiru initiative was its focus on a range of processes at a local level. Coordination of government services tended to occur in a ‘bottom up’ direction. Instead of exhausting the project’s resources coordinating with government at the whole-of-government regional interface, effort was directed toward consulting effectively over a large geographic area with many political factions. Similarly, in a review of two programs in Ali Curung, bottom-up coordination was identified as the key success factor. The Alekarenge Language Program was coordinated locally by the school principal and the (predominantly Aboriginal) staff of the school at the time. The community manager and the Council performed this role for the Law and Justice Program. Coordination involves not only external government agencies and service providers working with the community, but also the distribution of information at the community level. In this respect the coordinators act as nodes in a complex system.

In keeping with this model the locally based government business managers (GBMs) being employed by the Northern Territory under the Intervention have potential. A locally based manager may have more room to manoeuvre across these information silos and could prove effective in coordinating government services around focal issues. To be effective as nodes they will also need to maintain effective networks in the community, including effective working relationships with leaders and the community manager. It is unfortunate that GBMs were quick to reduce the scope of their coordinating role to Australian Government programs by abdicating any responsibility for state/territory government programs and those delivered by private enterprise and NGOs.

4.4 Stability and SRAs

This study was conducted during a period of extraordinary change in Aboriginal affairs, most notably as a result of the current Intervention in the Northern Territory, the changes to CDEP and local government reform. Beyond the merits of these respective reforms, the research team was particularly interested in what was being swept away in the process. Past waves of policy reform show that discrediting the past is a necessary part of the new and the international experience of emergency responses is that much is bypassed or displaced in the urgency to attend to the ‘crisis’. The current reforms are a threat to local organisations, community leaders and trusted outsiders and the local knowledge, trust and goodwill that they have formed.

Researchers were in the field in the first months of the Intervention. They were constantly asked to explain the changes underway, but they struggled to understand them themselves. The researchers observed government officers in the field failing to explain workplace changes in ways that people could understand. They used acronyms and assigned different meanings to everyday words; they did not use plain English. Little attempt was made to produce graphical information sheets in plain English, or to stay the night, or to set up a stall outside the community store to talk to people one on one.

In the first months of the Intervention even the most experienced and well-intentioned departmental officers were struggling with the realities of ‘policy-on-the-run’, with information changing daily, implementation siloed to different departments and a general centralisation of authority in higher levels of government. The result was that there was no overall or stable picture of how the waves of reforms were unfolding. The number of visitors arriving from government increased considerably, as did the quantity of administration to be processed. Each group made their own demands and expected that staff would be available to them, often with little advance notice and certainly with no regard for the staff’s ability to take on the additional workload. And the local organisations that might have performed an intermediate role were, in the face of criticism or funding cuts, of diminished capacity or of no mind to help.

When SRAs were first introduced in 2004, this mechanistic framework was met by widespread cynicism from government officers and Aboriginal leaders alike. Yet the study discovered that ICC officers and local leaders are usefully adapting the framework, a finding confirmed by a national survey by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner (ATSISJC 2007). SRAs are still being developed in 2008, four years after their inception, which is an unusual period of stability for a policy platform. At its most basic, an SRA can effectively ‘formalise the informal’ by documenting what the community is already doing with what the government was already going to do. In Ali Curung, the ICC office and local community developed an elaborate and comprehensive SRA over a two-year period from 2005 to its signing in mid-2007. The process evolved through numerous meetings and discussions, building on the good faith of key drivers of the process. Through sheer effort and a scatter-gun approach to consultation, many stakeholders have signed on to the agreement and funding has been forthcoming. Yet in the course of the study, few people in the community were aware of the commitments under the agreement, which were largely made on their behalf by the Council and Council employees. Despite these shortcomings, positive activity is nonetheless occurring: funds are flowing, buildings and infrastructure are being built, relationships are forming and thus the ‘business’ of Aboriginal affairs has found a way to adapt to the framework.

A key factor leading to the success of the language and the justice programs in Ali Curung was their longevity and the relative stability of personnel at a local level. Both projects had lifespans of more than three years. The longer the period that government is prepared to commit to a program, the more likelihood there is of achieving some measure of the desired outcome.

One pervasive affect of the constant process of policy reform is the struggle Aboriginal leaders have to keep up with the necessary knowledge and to make relationships with new staff. Local leaders are less concerned about the relative merits of government policy, but are frustrated with seemingly endless rounds of policy changes seeking to make improvements. For them, there is a need for more stability. Information flows and stability of working relationships in the governance system positively correlate with local leaders’ ability to understand, engage with and influence the system. While beyond the scope of the data collected to date, it seems likely that this would also apply to service providers.

5. Functional rationalisation by scale (research question 3)

At what scale of governance should different service delivery functions be assigned in order to optimise both demand- and supply-based criteria?

As previously stated, this project is still very much a work in progress. The main focus for the first year of activity was research questions 1 and 2. The discussion below about research questions 3, 4 and 5 is more conceptual, less evidence-based and written in order to establish a framework for the remaining years of the project. Research questions 3 and 4 have been reworded to reflect the conceptual directions being taken by the research:

3. In terms of the properties of the service delivery system (including subsidiarity, accountability and connectivity), what mechanisms would improve adaptation of the system to local practice?

4. What are the service type and delivery style priorities of consumers and what is their capacity to participate and willingness to contribute to services?

5.1 Dividing functions by scale

A constant feature of the governance of Aboriginal affairs is the reshuffling and fragmentation of functions to different levels of the system, with little analysis about which functions operate most effectively at which level, and with little input from Aboriginal people attempting to work with the system. As governments successively retreat from or advance onto the field, they decentralise and re-centralise powers to different agencies operating at different levels in the system. While rescaling is generally driven by a consideration of efficiencies (i.e. costs per unit of output), this needs to be balanced by a consideration of effectiveness (i.e. impact of service function on intended consumers against intended outcomes). It is possible to have highly efficient services that fail to meet consumer demand or their intended outcomes (Cornell & Kalt 2003:11).

The principle of *subsidiarity* holds that government should undertake only those initiatives that exceed the capacity of individuals or private groups acting independently. It is often stated as the principle of decision making as close to the level of the individual citizen as is appropriate for the circumstances (Sullivan 2006:25). In its application by the European Union (EU), subsidiarity pursues two opposing aims: the EU assumes power when an area cannot be dealt with by member states acting on their own, but the authority of member states is upheld in areas that they can manage most effectively themselves. The principle has a simplicity and conceptual allure, but as Porter and Craig (2000) note: ‘while there are basic rules of thumb about what kinds of questions need to be asked to decide the levels at which functions should be assigned, subsidiarity is a notoriously slippery subject.’

A rationalisation of functions by scale has the potential to reduce the complexity and the quantity of administration to be processed, leading to a better match between devolved functions and local capacity. When leaders are not overwhelmed by their administrative workload, their ability to engage with and then to influence the system should increase. If the quantity of administration handled by local organisations is overwhelming, then, sensibly, regional organisations and even government departments should assume responsibility for more. This is particularly the case for desert settlements, where the cost of service delivery is extremely high due to remoteness and the harsh environment.

Functions should rest regionally whenever economies of scale cannot be achieved locally, and where effectiveness can still be ensured. In their paper on service delivery to the small and dispersed Aboriginal settlements of the Northern Territory, Westbury and Sanders (2000:27) argue that Aboriginal local government authorities ‘simply do not have the capacity to undertake a wide range of functions’, and should instead be ‘complemented by, and linked into, larger specific-purpose regional service agencies (not merely replaced)’ (ibid, 27). However, these local-regional judgements are highly dependent on the spatial scales involved, since some large discrete Aboriginal settlements in northern Australia, especially those in Queensland, have similar populations to entire regions in

central Australia and have been shown to successfully support a wide range of governance functions. Therefore, in the process of local government reform in the Barkly, the division of functions between the new Shire and local organisations has had to vary on a settlement-by-settlement basis.

Rescaling is a highly politicised process; it is described in the literature as the tension between localism and regionalism (Martin 1997, Holcombe 2004, Sanders & Holcombe 2007). The consolidation of functions into intermediate organisations (regional Aboriginal organisations, NGOs and private companies) has signalled a reduction in resources for outlying local Aboriginal organisations. Thus rescaling to one level of the system occurs at the expense of others, which predictably gives rise to considerable local-regional politics. In the politically charged climate of Aboriginal affairs, rescaling can at times seem no more rational than regional organisations grabbing as much as they can, and the local organisations defending as much as they can hold on to. This ‘ad hoc’ is consistent with the international experience of decentralisation in developing countries:

Many efforts are stymied early on by poor definition and linking of the responsibilities of decentralised authorities, inadequate thought about the functions and powers to be devolved and the levels of institutions appropriate to take up decentralised responsibilities: in other words, sloppy thinking about what is best done by local communities, what should be a regional responsibility or should remain national. (Porter & Craig 2000:4)

A local and regional governance model has been in place for many years on the Ngaanyatjarra Lands. It is widely held to be successful. There are multiple interfaces at play. The Ngaanyatjarra Council effectively acts as the interface for most Australian Government services (and a high proportion of Western Australian Government services), but they rely heavily on local community councils for actual implementation of service delivery. Since the 2004 regionalisation of CDEP and the Municipal Services (MUNS) program, the twelve local community councils’ levels of direct involvement with government have reduced significantly. Formerly, grants were provided directly to each community council by the Australian Government, largely through ATSIC. The community councils now tend to see dealings with government for funding and services as the job of Ngaanyatjarra Council. Community councils take a very pragmatic view of service delivery. They do not want to refer to official guidelines, procedures, protocols and other administrative requirements when struggling to meet pressing demands; they prefer to deal with immediately observed community needs.

It is interesting to observe on the Ngaanyatjarra Lands how the concept of ‘council’ in community parlance is multivalent, having developed over thirty years. All community chairs and many other community members are aware of their long relationship to Council and feel that they are members of Council, expressed by their attendance at the monthly meetings which are always held on the Lands. They nevertheless also see Council as something remote from themselves, with its own purposes and projects and responsibility for government services. Thus ‘council in town’ (Alice Springs) is in the term used to express disagreement about the way that Council operates. There is no corresponding ‘council on the Lands’ term to counterbalance ‘council in town’, because Ngaanyatjarra Council workers with a strong presence on the Lands are locally considered to be community workers. In historical terms Council was part of everyone’s existence; in day-to-day terms it is always seen as remote. Senior Council staff members are aware of this tension and its potential to increase as Council becomes more tightly controlled by government contracts.

Consistent with the literature on localism and regionalism, there is a tension at play in the complex dynamics between the local councils and the regional Ngaanyatjarra Council. Council employees express frustration at being caught between the requirements of government programs and the less rigorous understanding of the need for compliance at the community level. Community staff express frustration about feeling distant from decision making, seeing regional needs prioritised over local needs and having less direct involvement with the source of their funding. Despite these tensions there is a measure of political stability that has developed between community councils and the Ngaanyatjarra Council over the past thirty years.

The local-regional political tensions associated with rescaling are clearly evident in the local government reforms that are occurring across all of the research sites, but most noticeably in the Northern Territory and Queensland. In Dajarra this reform was at first seen positively, because it would have led to a departure from Cloncurry Shire, with whom people were widely dissatisfied. But in the end the boundaries of Cloncurry Shire were not changed due to widespread opposition and public demonstration across Queensland. In Ali Curung the initial response was alarm due to the threat of loss of power and resources, but largely through the intensive efforts of Northern Territory Government officers based in Tennant Creek, it seems that progress has been made. In both instances the process was highly politicised.

International experience demonstrates that problems can be minimised when rescaling occurs at both local and intermediate levels simultaneously, and when structures of representation and accountability to the local level are in place (Manor 1999:80–82). The difficulty is that there is not a clean slate in Australia to decentralise both local and intermediate levels to simultaneously; the institutional landscape is occupied by competing interests that have much to lose and gain. Local organisations are generally the losers because, after more than a decade of decentralisation to the local level, the rescaling that comes with regionalism effectively leads to centralisation at a higher level in the governance system, benefiting intermediate level organisations.

For some functions, some Aboriginal people seek full powers though locally controlled organisations or informal institutions, with the requisite devolution of authority and resources. Services with a social or cultural dimension – such as art centres, language maintenance programs and justice centres – were clearly deemed to need to be under local community control. This was evident in the case of the language and justice programs at Ali Curung and the Matu Milli and Kanyirninpa Jukurrpa programs in the Pilbara.

People had little interest in decision making about other functions and just want reliable access. For essential services (e.g. water, waste, roads) at Dajarra and Urandangi, people did not automatically indicate a preference for shifting more control to local organisations. In fact, some participants questioned the capacity of their existing local organisations to take on the role performed by service providers. They expressed the core issue as needing demands met and a good quality of service provided. This also extended to some municipal and commercial services. In the Marmanya SRA the ICC gave people the responsibility to supply their own power against their wishes; most Australians enjoy reticulated power supplies. In Ali Curung people choose to use a private bus company over the solution provided by ICC and Council staff, because the private company offered a payment option which better served their needs. They were also satisfied about the operation of the local bakery by a non-Aboriginal family who have lived in the settlement since its establishment, despite the fact that they do not have land tenure or pay formalised rental profits to land owners. This suggests that the desired level of participation varies according to the function of the different services. In other words, different categories of consumer responses could potentially be assigned to different service delivery functions.

A participatory analysis is likely to reveal that some functions should never have been devolved to the local level and would be better undertaken by regional organisations or within a government's 'mainstream' operations rather than by a specific Aboriginal Affairs portfolio. It is also likely to reveal that some functions have never been properly devolved to afford genuine discretionary powers to local people. It should be possible to rationalise the functions of a governance system 'horizontally' against different administrative levels, and against the aspirations and capacity of end users at these same levels. The results may suggest the need for a redistribution of service functions across different levels of the system. It was this rationale that lead to the original wording of research question 3.

After reaching this point in the analysis the study team encountered a range of conceptual dilemmas. Between the extremes of essential services (e.g. electricity supply) and what might be construed as 'cultural services' (e.g. a language program) is a complex gradient of relative demand. After Arnstein (1969:217), a simple five-point scale of public participation in service delivery could be applied: (1)

informing, (2) consultation, (3) partnership, (4) delegated power, and (5) citizen control. Through an intensive participatory process it would be possible to determine people's preferred levels of participation in the multitude of service-delivery functions at play. Since people's aspirations may not equate in sum with the local capacity to organise, a parallel assessment would also be required in terms of institutional and individual capacity. There would be economy-of-scale issues to be addressed to satisfy external stakeholder requirements, and external perceptions of rights, standards and equity would have to be addressed as well. It becomes apparent that the size of this task would be enormous and highly context specific.

The processes involved with rescaling are intensely political because of the resources that are inevitably placed on 'the table'. The study observed a general reluctance to relinquish control of those services already delivered locally, and criticism of externally provided services tended towards the hypercritical. This suggests that the division of functions between different levels in the system is highly politicised and in a constant state of flux between different political equilibriums. The study team have reached a general consensus that the division of functions by scale is a highly politicised activity which cannot be easily rationalised by scale. The Ngaanyatjarra study did suggest that certain political equilibriums could potentially be found between localism and regionalism by adopting a regional service delivery model. Drawing on international development practice, the research team decided to consider the workings of accountability across the service system.

5.2 Accountability mapping

As regionalism, decentralisation, privatisation and re-centralisation intrude upon remote desert settlements in Australia, it is fundamental to understand who is accountable for what in order to understand the workings of the system. Accountability has been defined by Mulgan (2002:3) as a 'relationship in which one party, the holder of accountability, has the right to seek information about, to investigate and to scrutinise the actions of another party, the giver of accountability'. Accountability thus implies both a measure of answerability (providing a clear account for actions undertaken) and enforceability (punishments or sanctions for shortfalls in performance). In practice it is a discourse about the conduct of performance and the standards used to assess performance (Newell & Bellour 2002:2). It is mediated by social processes that define authority and legitimacy, that create the social roles of legitimate bearer of power and passive citizen in whose name power is exercised. These processes are not hegemonic and can be contested. In what has been termed the 'accountability drama' by Goetz and Jenkins (2001:5), accountability is effectively a 'morality play of principals and agents, objects and subjects, dramatised by role reversals in the exercises of that power and authority' (Ebrahim & Weisband 2007:6). Many actors play multiple roles both within and across domains; for example, Aboriginal leaders may be the bearers of power within the community but are accountable to the bureaucracy as well. This description in the literature seems to fit the interactions observed in the course of the study.

Accountability in a governance system has been described conceptually as a complex network or web (Mulgan 2002:3, Sampford et al. 2005). It can be mapped on vertical and horizontal axes, which helps to illuminate where accountability can be strengthened and governance improved (Porter & Rohdewohld 2006, Veron et al. 2006, Ribot et al. 2006). Vertical accountability runs both 'upward' and 'downward'. *Downward accountability* involves holding those in power accountable for their performance and decisions. It is demanded of the state by non-state actors, citizens and the organisations representing them, as a basic citizen right. If citizens are to exercise any control, a clear understanding of the lines of accountability is needed. The electoral process is one accountability mechanism. However, the length of the electoral cycle and the numerical minority status of Aboriginal people mean that other, 'shorter' paths to demand accountability from public servants are critical (World Bank 2003:6, 49).

The study team observed people shortcutting the system to reach people of power and influence, or jumping horizontally between different silos to seek a better deal. For example, at Ali Curung people expressed frustration about dealing with service providers in Tennant Creek when the 'real' decision

makers were apparently in Darwin. This was evident at the official opening of the SRA in Ali Curung in 2007 when a senior minister with the Northern Territory Government was freely approached and openly responded to many community members and local staff.

Upward accountability describes the more managerial aspects of fiscal, administrative and legal responsibility, reflected among other things in the reporting requirements that government agencies, NGOs, private firms and other companies impose on their staff and others accountable to them. The managerial component of new public management emphasises upward accountability, adding considerably to the administrative burden of people in settlements. It is this sort of accountability that most clearly represents the ‘accountability drama’ on a daily basis: agents are accountable to ‘superiors’ while having others accountable to them, and the ‘buck can stop’ at any point in the system, depending on the degree of autonomy enjoyed.

Horizontal accountability operates at each level in the system and represents the checks and balances that exist across the system, if they exist at all. It can take a political form (e.g. effective opposition and inter-departmental competition) or a managerial form (e.g. ombudsmen and whole-of-government committees) or be expressed normatively and communicated through personal relationships. At the settlement level horizontal accountability is represented in the relationship between local councillors elected by the community and administrators appointed by local government agencies. Horizontal accountability also operates inter-governmentally between equal levels of the Australian Government and state/territory governments (e.g. between an ICC manager and a regional manager of a state government department), and between state/territory governments and local governments (e.g. between a school principal and a council manager).

When this framework is applied to each of the research sites there is a clear dominance of upward accountability, dominated by the silos of government departments, but including a range of NGOs and private enterprise providers. The system is seriously imbalanced by a lack of downward accountability. Aboriginal people generally lack an understanding of the different accountabilities of different levels of government. This limits their ability to exercise accountability mechanisms. There is evidence of horizontal accountability operating, more often at smaller scales and within the more informal and social realm.

Downward accountability is in a considerable state of decline in the current governance systems in Aboriginal affairs, largely due to policy changes at both state and federal levels, including the abolition of ATSIC and more recently, the top-down emergency Intervention occurring in the Northern Territory. People are generally confused about who, if anyone, is representing their views to government (Moran et al. 2007). The current governance system in Aboriginal Australia is open to the charge of being accountable to no one, other than individual centralised departments intent on moving money in their own budgetary timeframes, but without independent evaluation mechanisms to measure the effectiveness of their programs. Aboriginal leaders’ abilities to influence or even engage with the system are seriously inhibited by the absence of effective accountability.

The research team initially considered how to comprehensively map all accountabilities operating in the service system by function and scale using elaborate flow charts. Like the proposed ‘functional rationalisation of scale’ this would have consumed a considerable proportion of the research efforts. Accountability arrangements were expected to vary at an individual level and in accordance with the different arrangements in place for different services; they would be likely to be very specific to a particular context and point in time. More usefully, it would be possible to map the accountability relationships of key players in the system to see whether they foster or impede effective service delivery. The research team considers that the best way to do this would be through a table or matrix rather than a flow chart, which can easily become over-complicated. A proposed method and example is given in Appendix 1.

5.3 Complex adaptive systems

This section draws on the thinking of a number of members of the research team, but is not yet based on evidence from the case studies completed to date. It is a proposed subject of future research, largely an investigation of the public sector processes operating on the supply side.

The ways in which the agents in a complex system connect and relate to one another is critical to the resilience of the system. It is through connectivity that patterns are formed and feedback mechanisms develop. The degree of connectivity between agents in the system can be understood in two different ways. It can mean the degree of power that one agent has over another's behaviour, which can be called *accountability*. The second meaning is the number of different agents with which a given agent interacts, also known as *dimensionality* (Rhodes 2002:14). Complex adaptive systems are multi-dimensional, so in order for agents to understand, learn and adapt to the system a degree of connectivity is required between its different dimensions. *Connectivity* can thus be understood in the sense of the totality of connections in the governance system; *accountability* is an element linked specifically to power relationships.

Information flow in governance systems is a critical part of connectivity. Local leaders and 'trusted outsiders' need good information flows in order to understand and develop strategic responses. This has been recognised by a national research project on Aboriginal community governance (Hunt & Smith 2007:14), which has identified 'networked governance' – the sharing of resources and information – as a central principle. Interpersonal relationships are fundamental to Aboriginal participation in governance. These relationships are primarily between Aboriginal leaders and trusted outsiders and can only be built with respect and trust over time (Moran 2007).

Perceptions of the external institutional domain illustrate the current lack of information flowing to local people. Although this domain is many-layered, an in-depth study at Engawala in central Australia (Moran et al. 2007) found that local leaders view it as a relatively singular entity, namely 'the government'. They have little awareness of the many different levels and channels operating, of who provides what services and of recent and current policy changes. This is not indicative of a lack of interest, since people express their vulnerability almost entirely in terms of the withdrawal of government-backed funding and services. Rather, the problem lies in the lack of connectivity with people and information from outside their community.

Connectivity between individuals and groups can be expressed by the diversity, density, intensity and quality of interactions between human agents. It is not a constant or uniform set of relationships, but varies over time. Connectivity may be formal or informal, designed or undesigned, implicit – with tacit connections – or explicit (Mittleton-Kelly 2003:5–6). Connectivity can be greatest in small locales, such as discrete Aboriginal settlements. At Dajarra, the researchers found that the smaller the size of the forum and the greater the informality, the more effective was the communication. Drawing on his ethnography on Mornington Island (with a population of about 700 people at the time), Paul Memmott (1979:476) notes: 'it is probable that each individual will encounter most members of the community every few days'. McAllister et al. also note that the remoteness of arid social systems means that social networks are highly clustered. Everybody knows everybody and hence is observed, with both good and bad implications (McAllister et al. 2008).

This 'horizontal' connectivity exists at all levels of the governance system. This is especially the case in regional centres such as Tennant Creek and Alice Springs, where Aboriginal affairs forms a considerable proportion of the local economy. Divisions between personal and administrative relationships are blurred, since many people who interact socially have work responsibilities in different vertical channels of the governance system. Although one government officer in Tennant Creek commented, 'you can't go far without bumping into someone you know', there were a number of instances where government officials working on the same SRA program were unaware of what was going on in other departments, to the extent that they did not know that crucial people had left. It is not guaranteed that crucial information will be exchanged about particular programs. Nonetheless, by comparison vertical connectivity between different levels is much weaker, largely because of distance, the relative infrequency of interpersonal interactions and the hierarchical power relationships

operating in different levels of the system. Vertical connectivity tends to be dominated by the hierarchical power relationships described in the following section on accountability.

Connectivity itself does not necessarily lead to good governance practice, and there is a limit to what is optimal: networks can become 'too tight', leading to parochialism, an intolerance of diversity and conservatism toward outside ideas. Complexity theory points to the negative effects of too much connectivity: it leads to a high level of interdependence. If the system is excessively interdependent, change or improvement in one entity may lead to a worsening of conditions in others. It is the *quality* of relationships and information exchange, taking into account language and literacy skills, which is critical to connectivity, not the sheer *quantity*.

To this end, some members of the research team began to view the service system through the lens of complex adaptive system (CAS) theory. Complex adaptive systems are composed of a large number of active elements whose rich pattern of interactions produce emergent properties that are not easy to predict by analysing separate parts of the system. They display multiple interactions and non-linear dynamics. Typically they involve nested sub-systems, each undergoing adaptive changes at different temporal and spatial scales (Stafford Smith et al. 2003:27, 44). Holland views complex adaptive systems as 'systems composed of interacting agents described in terms of rules'. These agents 'adapt by changing their rules as experience accumulates' (Holland 1995:10). Complex adaptive systems 'exhibit coherence under change, via conditional action and anticipation, and they do so without central direction' (ibid, 38–39).

There is no general CAS theory yet to provide a coherent explanation of processes shared by all CAS systems, nor agreement on how it can be applied to social systems (Mitleton-Kelly 2003:2). In a review of the literature, Ostrom (1999:521) identified four basic properties: non-linearity, flows, diversity and emergence. Of particular interest here is *emergence*, because it is tied to self-organisation and the creation of new order, which can have considerable impact on governance systems. In complex systems it is the actions of individual agents and the immense variety of those actions that constantly create emergent macro patterns or structures (Mitleton-Kelly 2003:6). Small changes in the initial conditions of the system can have significant effects after they have passed through the emergence–feedback loop a few times. The emphasis is on the interacting whole and the non-reduction of those properties to individual parts.

As end users of the system, local actors, through their inputs, should drive the feedback loops necessary for the functioning of the service system and should play a role in emergence within the system. It would thus be possible to frame the above parameters in terms of ways to improve the responsiveness of the governance system to local knowledge and practice. *Subsidiarity* seeks a better match of governance functions with local capacity; *connectivity* seeks improved information flows and relationships as the basis of informed decision making; and *accountability* seeks clearer definition of power relationships, including entry points for Aboriginal leaders to use accountability relationships.

The study is focused on the local interface of practice, but it is likely that similar issues are arising within the hierarchies and public services processes internal to government. Departmental staff in regional centres express repeated frustration that their memos and messages travelling up through the hierarchy are not acted on. This was especially a feature of the government seeking to maintain tight control over the implementation of policy throughout 2007, a year of major reforms including the intervention in the Northern Territory. In an ideal world, local staff feed information into regional offices that then feed this information to Canberra where it is processed into general understandings, improved with high level expertise and this then produces rational evidence-based policy. This does not appear to be happening in the new mainstreamed environment. More importantly, this model of policy is unworkable unless the Commonwealth is prepared to relinquish a good deal of its control over the detail. Local conditions, histories, capabilities, circumstances and cultures are so diverse in Aboriginal Australia that management from a distance inevitably produces difficulties when macro

policy arrives at the level where local service deliverers operate. Further research is required to better understand the working of these public service processes.¹¹

Seen through the lens of CAS theory, if governance systems have irrational distributions of functions across different levels, poor connectivity and excessive and imbalanced accountability requirements, then adaptation and self-organisation will be stifled. Feedback mechanisms cannot operate effectively so there is little opportunity for learning or emergence to occur. The support needed will also be greater because those involved will have their self-organising ability curtailed and they will become dependent on others to provide a new framework to facilitate and support new relationships and connectivities. The logic of complexity suggests that individual and group learning is a prerequisite for adaptation and the conditions for learning and sharing knowledge need to be provided (Mitleton-Kelly 2003:21).

After presenting this emerging analysis the steering group endorsed the expansion of research question 3 to adopt a more systems-based approach. The proposed rewording of research question 3 follows:

In terms of the system properties of the service delivery system (including subsidiarity, accountability and connectivity), what mechanisms would improve adaptation of the system to local practice?

6. Informed demand (research question 4)

What are the service type and delivery style priorities of consumers within a specified budget framework, and what is their capacity to participate and willingness to contribute to those services?

The project defined *informed demand* as ‘an informed expression of need for a particular service in a context of limited resources, in consideration of the tradeoffs that consumers are prepared to make to receive the service, and where opportunity costs are weighed against benefits’ (Moran 2008). Initially, researchers set out to explore the possibility of using complex participatory methods such as contingent valuation analysis (CVA) and discrete choice conjoint analysis (DCCA) (Whittington 1998, Jan et al. 2000). What is interesting about these methodologies is that they not only facilitate ‘needs’ of the population, but also measure the trade-offs or sacrifices that consumers are prepared to make to achieve them, in terms of the loss of alternative services. They require consideration of prevailing resource constraints: where an individual identifies a need, they are also required to choose where resources are to be taken from to meet that need. In this respect these methodologies require respondents to make the same types of rationing choices that are typically faced by consumers in a market economy, or that service providers make at higher levels of government in allocating budgets.

After close examination of both methods, researchers expressed their discomfort with working with hypothetical budget scenarios which would unrealistically raise expectations. Both methods also require the use of intensive participatory processes, meaning considerable inputs of time and expertise which were unlikely to have outcomes beyond the project frame. The research team did not seriously explore these methods because of these concerns about ethics and uptake.

At a household level across all the research sites there was very little awareness of organisational budgets or generally about the flow of finances in and out of the settlement (a.k.a. the ‘money story’), so it should come as no surprise that demand was not fully ‘informed’. Participatory processes that facilitate an informed expression of demand against a fixed budget may not be the best strategy when people perceive funding levels to be inadequate. The question remains: ‘who controls the budget?’ In

¹¹ Lipsky (1980) examined what happens at the point where policy is translated into practice in various human service bureaucracies such as schools, courts and welfare agencies. He argues that in the end policy implementation comes down to the people who actually implement it (e.g. teachers, lawyers, social workers). They are the ‘street-level bureaucrats’, and they exercise a large amount of influence over how public policy is actually carried out. Lipsky suggests that they too should be seen as part of the policy-making community. He discusses several pressures that determine the way in which street-level bureaucrats implement policies. These include the problem of limited resources, the continuous negotiation that is necessary in order to make it seem like one is meeting targets and relations with (non-voluntary) clients. Some of the patterns of practice that street-level bureaucrats adopt in order to cope with these pressures are different ways of rationing the services and ways of ‘processing’ clients in a manageable manner.

the unique political economy of remote Aboriginal settlements, an astute expression of demand might be an ‘unrealistic’ demand if it proves more successful in securing additional funding.

The study team was also concerned that the wording of the question implied that contributions were substantially in a user-pays framework using cash. Many of the contributions that people make are voluntary in nature, including attendance at meetings and the maintenance of rented houses.¹² It was decided the question could be amended accordingly:

What are the service type and delivery style priorities of consumers and what is their capacity to participate and willingness to contribute to services?

The way to explore this question further would be to secure a partnership with a government department, mining company or philanthropist for an allocation of untied block funding. The lessons from the study could then be applied to facilitate a process of ‘informed demand’. Rather than CVA or DCCA, a simple rank prioritisation process might prove more effective.

The study team were mindful that this process is essentially an attempt to artificially create the conditions of a market. Fundamentally, it would be preferable to change the economic paradigm in remote Aboriginal settlements. The international experience is that sustainable solutions arise from own-sourced income. There are examples now of remote settlements with such income, largely due to royalty payments from mining and tourism.¹³ The inclusion, for the remainder of the project, of a research site that has this kind of own-sourced income should be considered. This particularly applies to royalties or employment from mining companies. Also of interest are situations where Aboriginal groups have established successful enterprises, since profits are both discretionary and individualised. The latter situation applies to the Myuma case study at Camooweal. It is already affiliated with the project, but not yet properly as a research site.

7. Technology and governance options (research question 5)

What are the critical issues and strategies required to improve the service system, including the strengths and weaknesses of different technology and governance options?

7.1 Participatory evaluation frameworks

Much of the study has involved evaluating existing programs through interviews with actors involved in practice. The research team was struck by the disjuncture between the realities of the practice and the indicators in place to measure performance. The extent of this dysfunction is such that it is necessary to restate a fundamental principle of political science: policy needs to adapt to local practice and circumstances. If the system is to adapt, then there must be mechanisms that incorporate local learning from the realities of implementation. Whatever existing evaluation mechanisms are operating within government, the results are generally not made public and they seldom incorporate inputs from end-users or stakeholders. There is a need for more qualitative measures that incorporate the viewpoints and realities from those involved in practice.

The indicators established for the SRA at Ali Curung are not a realistic reflection of its actual practice, largely due to other confounding factors. The settlement residents and government agencies that were party to the SRA are also largely unaware of what the indicators are. In the Pilbara, little explanation is provided to Martu by agencies when policies and procedures change or when new programs and policies are introduced. When consultation processes do occur there is little feedback to people about

¹² A volunteer can be defined as a person who produces an output, not for his/her own consumption, and receives no income for it, even though such a supplier normally receives an income. Thus, people who mow their own lawns are not volunteers, but where people mow their neighbours’ lawns without compensation, they are volunteers.

¹³ In terms of unrealised potential for own-sourced income, tax incentives could be used in ways that promote enterprises on Aboriginal land. The limited research in this area (Stanley 2002) has focused on benefits to community organisations, but further work is required to explore community/private enterprise partnerships.

the outcomes, particularly in a format that is suitable. When evaluations are done they are based on quantitative and statistical data and seldom include the 'voice' of Martu people as end users of the services. Quantitative measures, while supposedly 'objective', can be unreliable in so far as they can be built on unreliable or incommensurable data and may omit important qualities that are not subject to numerical measurement. It is proposed that this project will explore a better way to undertake evaluations in the Pilbara through the development of an appropriate participatory evaluation method. This would be in addition to, rather than a substitute for, quantitative measures.

The research could lead to a limited number of indicators operating within a qualitative process framework. In order to maximise uptake, this research should be incorporated into the 2009 *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Report* which now has considerable currency in government.

7.2 Block funding

Block or pooled funding (a.k.a. social funds in international development) could substantially alleviate the quantity of administrative work compared with the multi-departmental and multifarious reporting requirements that characterise the current administrative environment. The notion of block funding has been raised by a string of government enquiries from the early 1990s, beginning with the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCADIC 1991:v4:cl.27.3). Block funding is a major disruption of the territoriality of government departments, but its opportunities are real and it should continue to be lauded. To the extent that governments deem necessary, block funding could be accompanied by a suite of 'upward' bureaucratic accountability requirements. The net effect, however, can only be less than the current system of partitioning accountability across a multitude of different service providers.

Block funding has the potential to change the system in ways that would be demand responsive, so long as it is accompanied with sufficient support and facilitation. The experience of Aboriginal groups with substantial royalty money (e.g. Gagadju, Groote Eylandt and Warlpiri groups) suggests that people quickly adapt to their circumstances and adopt a long-term investment horizon. Potentially, settlements could purchase a range of services, whose successful operation would be dependent upon the providers meeting community demands. Communities could directly make trade-offs, such as that between a housing program that provided a number of houses quickly (using outside contractors) and a slower program that provided training and employment for local building workers, as well as houses. Block funding would this way not only increase the 'economic efficiency' of service delivery, as measured by an economist, but would increase empowerment.

There is potential to explore block funding for outstation-related developments in partnership with the Northern Territory Government. The Myuma case study also presents an interesting example of service provision through own-sourced income.

7.3 The seven effective practices of desert services

This project could transform its major findings into a set of principles or practices for broader use. Further work is required to define them. The number of principles is an arbitrary assignment at this stage, but to maximise uptake the total number should not exceed ten.

At the face-to-face meeting in March, researchers had an initial brainstorming session. Some of their ideas are based on evidence, and others are, at this stage, hypotheses for further testing. They will be refined during the remainder of the project:

- 1) quality and adequacy of supply
- 2) supply of service is adaptable to local conditions affecting demand
- 3) clear decision points
- 4) involvement of trusted outsiders and insiders
- 5) quality of interpersonal relationships across a service network
- 6) the form of public engagement between service providers and users is determined by function

- 7) stability in the policy environment
- 8) service match to local needs and capacity

7.4 Informing ongoing policy reform

The project is well placed to provide advice to governments about ongoing policy development, especially local government reforms in the Barkly Shire of the Northern Territory. Development of the method ‘accountability mapping’ is likely to have considerable potential for uptake.

The apology motion presented to the Australian Parliament by the Prime Minister reaffirmed the Government’s commitment to mutual obligation: ‘a future based on mutual respect, mutual resolve and mutual responsibility.’ It remains to be seen whether the preferred policy platform will be an improved version of SRAs or something quite different. The research completed to date could usefully be applied to the development of this new framework.

7.5 Community-based researchers

The project is developing considerable expertise in the employment and on-the-job training of community-based researchers, as are several other core projects. This expertise could be used to develop a training package and create employment pathways for broader implementation.

7.6 Technical options

The project team has not yet identified any technologies that could be used to improve the system, although there is interest in developing more appropriate housing design in Urandangi to help an owner-builder already living there. The project could state some general principle which could be used when choosing a technology. For example, in relation to housing it could be argued that it will continue to be difficult to get good tradespeople to work in settlements into the indefinite future. This means houses need to be robust, require little maintenance, use few electrical devices and be able to be maintained and repaired by people with few skills (householders). Alternatively, in places where mobility is high, houses should be built that are able to be adapted to larger or smaller levels of occupancy, using, for example, verandas and sleep-outs.

8. Summary and conclusions

The administration of Aboriginal affairs is exceedingly complex. The residents of remote desert settlements face this complexity with limited literacy and administrative capacity. Until the aspects of this system that limit Aboriginal development are properly understood, the addition of programs that ultimately increase the complexity of the system are likely to be of limited success and may even exacerbate the problem.

Individual actors display a considerable capacity to negotiate the complexity of Aboriginal affairs. This study has examined their actions in order to better understand Aboriginal affairs workings as a complex system. The actors involved in the study display considerable flexibility, tenacity and innovation in working the system, and the progress of initiatives can largely be traced to their efforts. Their practice has illuminated much about the fundamental mismatch between demand and supply of services in Aboriginal affairs.

From the local perspective of end users of services, the system is overwhelmingly supply driven. People have little control over the generation of policy solutions, whether in the form of SRAs, CDEP or local governance. Under normal market conditions a supplier cannot survive in the absence of effective demand for their commodity or service, but this is not necessarily the case in Aboriginal affairs. Seen through an economic lens it should therefore come as no surprise that failure is rife in Aboriginal affairs. When an initiative proves successful in achieving its intended outcomes, it gains legitimacy in the perceptions of its clients and more people are inclined to get involved. Thus demand can be stimulated. When an initiative fails, or looks likely to do so, people are less inclined to get involved. Thus demand can be stifled. The designers of policy solutions would do well to apply these basics principles of the market to their work.

There are limitations, however, to applying an economic model to the service delivery system. All of the study sites indicate a bewildering complexity of actors, agencies and activities. The interactions at play are characterised by their superficiality, resulting in complacency from both the demand and supply actors. Multiple service delivery agencies struggle to interact with multiple representative forums, resulting in a labyrinth of connections and agency. There is no one single or simple interface between service providers and consumers; rather, the dynamics at play are better conceptualised as multidirectional across a continuum of multiple interfaces. Supply chain models go some way to explain this dynamic, especially if extended to include the demand chain operating in Aboriginal communities. But fundamentally liberal notions of consumer choice and citizen freedom tend to seek a single interface at an individual and household level. Taken to a neoliberal ideological extreme, this approach can have a powerful depoliticising effect over governance at intermediate levels, reducing Aboriginal affairs to an undifferentiated mass of households and individuals. Notions of political pluralism and governance are necessary to fully understand the complexity of the interactions at play.

The extent of the dysfunction of the system is particularly evident in the over-reliance on trusted insiders and outsiders at the crumbling coalface of Aboriginal affairs. In particular, trusted outsiders are ignored by the system and ironically, are the focus of the much of the blame. Their predicament is, however, necessary in a system which fundamentally fails to engage with Aboriginal people as consumers of services. Trusted outsiders create a major weakness in the system because of their inevitable departure and high turnover. It is necessary to move from 'can do' people, to a 'can do' system.

Reform is a constant feature of Aboriginal affairs, as is particularly evident in the study sites in the Northern Territory. For Aboriginal people to find entry points, not only to services but also to the outside world generally, the *stability* of the conditions and relationships they find in the operating environment are just as important as the relative merits of different policy platforms. When the information and policy environment remain still for long enough, its complexity gradually reduces and actors reach some measure of familiarity with the system. Structures, relationships and understandings can develop, allowing Aboriginal leaders to adapt and engage productively. The relationships formed

with trusted outsiders who are able to help people understand the complexity of the system are essential to this productive engagement.

The study found strong evidence that the capacity for governance exists, especially informally, but the mismatch between this capacity and the formal business of governance remains. There is evidence of a link between the level of participation and the extent to which an initiative achieves local or cultural specificity. The dilemma then is how to manage the types of administration that do not have enough specificity. If the quantity and type of administration that presents locally is taken as a given function of a system that is beyond most people's influence to change, then it seems that public participation cannot be considered a necessary prerequisite for all aspects of decision making in governance. It seems that basic aspects of decentralisation are still to be resolved: who decides what, and at what level of the system?

Government has arguably been working to streamline the system for some time, largely through the coordination of whole-of-government initiatives. The study found that these initiatives have a poor success record, which is supported by government's own internal critique. The study has instead found there is scope for improved, bottom-up coordination, where initiatives and agencies become the focal nodes of the system. Because both the demand and supply sides are so complex, there is a need for coordination of not only external agencies, but also of the different divisions operating in most 'communities'. The Government Business Model now active in the Northern Territory has some potential merit here, although they have been quick to narrow the scope of their activities to only a small part of the business of service delivery. Inescapably, there is a critical role here for local organisations too. After years of neglect under the Howard Government, the capacity of local organisations has been greatly diminished. This has had a negative effect on the functioning of the system.

Despite the complexities and ambiguities of the system, Aboriginal leaders, employees of local organisations and government workers find the means to interpret policy frameworks to create a shared productive practice. The longevity of a program or policy platform is critical to this adaptation. The outcomes that emerge are not always those intended by the designers of the program, but they are nonetheless real and often positive. The engine room of Aboriginal affairs is driven by this local practice, not by the actions of well-meaning people in capital cities where policy is formed. In essence, the fostering of more 'bottom-up' approaches to service delivery must be a consistent theme of policy development.

The overwhelming experience of local decision makers across the research sites is that it is difficult to fit within nationally devised criteria. The obvious conclusion is that policy should set broad parameters that allow greater flexibility at the local level to suit local circumstances. This is consistent with the findings of the ANAO report (2007) which points out that there is a conflict between over-stringent upward accountability and the need to develop flexible policies that are sensitive to local needs. This requires more delegation of responsibility, without necessarily relaxing the obligation to report against overall national goals. Politicians need to accept less central control without abdicating their responsibility for Aboriginal policy. This requires appropriate resources and monitoring systems to be in place and officials at regional and local levels that have appropriate delegations to make the final decisions.

It is important to stress that this report represents the findings of research that is still work-in-progress. The main focus for the first year of activity was on research questions 1 and 2. This exploratory research has provided a better understanding of the issues and established a more robust framework from which to approach the remaining research questions (3, 4 and 5) over the remainder of the project.

Towards the end of the first year of the project, the research team reached an agreement that it would be useful to view the service delivery system through the lens of 'complex adaptive system' (CAS) theory. As users of the system, nodal actors through their inputs should drive the feedback loops

necessary for the functioning of the service system, and this should play a role in emergence within the system. Moving forward with the research, three parameters are proposed as ways to improve the responsiveness of the governance system to local knowledge and practice: *Subsidiarity* seeks a better match of governance functions with local capacity; *connectivity* seeks improved information flows and relationships as the basis of informed decision making; and *accountability* seeks clearer definitions of power relationships, including Aboriginal leaders' entry points to accountability relationships. This led to a rewording of research question 3 for later research: *In terms of the system properties of the service delivery system (including subsidiarity, accountability and connectivity), what mechanisms would improve adaptation of the system to local practice?*

The research team also set out to explore the notion of 'informed demand' in the absence of the normal workings of the market, but the initial methods proposed proved to be impractical. Thus research question 4 was reworded: *What are the service type and delivery style priorities of consumers and what is their capacity to participate and willingness to contribute to services?* Consideration should be had for the inclusion, for the remainder of the project, of a research site that has its own-sourced income (such as through mining or tourism).

Research question 5 seeks pragmatic solutions for use by governments and end-users. At this stage of the project three such solutions have emerged for exploration:

- participatory evaluation frameworks that better capture the realities of implementation
- block funding as a means to alleviate the quantity of administration
- a set of principles to guide the effective practice of desert service provision.

Each should be developed over the remainder of the Project.

The search for a theoretical framework will continue. The study began by applying demand/supply concepts from economic theory to a non-market welfare situation in an attempt to emphasise the importance of consumer inputs. This model was then broadened, first to include liberal political science concepts of citizen rights and responsibilities, then to incorporate community development and anthropological concepts of cultural change and modernity, then to the policy practice nexus of governance, and finally to feedback and adaptation in a complex system.

The realities of the interactions occurring between the residents of remote settlements and the service system seem to have one thing in common: they are characteristic of a dialectic between Aboriginal settlements and wider society. Demand is partly driven by a capacity to supply and visa versa. This dialectic relationship can be expressed in terms of rights/responsibilities, tradition/modernity, feedback/adaptation or policy/practice. The utility of these concepts are primarily directional, since in reality demand and supply are inseparably intertwined in an indeterminate relationship.

Due to the number of people involved in the research team and the number of informants involved in the study, the project has captured a broad cross-section of the circumstances of actors involved in Aboriginal affairs. For the most part, people are polarised in their positions along a demand/supply axis, or a tradition/modernity axis, a rights/responsibility axis, a welfare/economic development axis or a policy/practice axis. At different points of any discussion or analysis, proponents can be observed to move between these positions, and one position will ultimately give sway. If there is one single lesson to arise from the project to date it is this: neither end of this axis can be right or wrong, they simply reflect different ends of an indeterminate tension that drives Aboriginal affairs in practice. The nature of the problems is such that neither group on either end of these axes can find solutions on their own. To move into a productive and enabling space it is necessary for practitioners to suspend ideology, academic discipline and positivist solutions long enough for new forms of knowledge and innovation to develop.

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Appendix 1: Accountability Mapping

1. ‘Accountability’ can be understood as the obligation to answer to someone (or some organisation) for the performance of duties.

2. Being accountable involves a number processes, especially:

- informing/reporting (giving an account)
- rectification (accepting redirection, sanctions or remedies)
- [though rectification is not essential – ombudsmen and media can report but not rectify].

3. Accountability can be analysed in terms of the following questions:

- *who* is accountable?
- *to whom* are they accountable?
- *for what* are they accountable?
- *how* are they are accountable?

4. Accountability is sometimes distinguished in terms of directions, depending on the power of those to whom one is accountable:

- *upwards* accountability – to a superior (e.g. worker to boss)
- *horizontal* accountability – to an equal (e.g. state government to federal government)
- *downward* accountability – to an ‘inferior’ (e.g. government to citizen).

5. Multiple avenues of accountability have the virtue of increasing scrutiny and information but can lead to buck-passing and inefficiency. Conversely, single lines of accountability have the virtue of identifying someone who can be held responsible, but they more readily foster secrecy and lack of scrutiny.

6. Mapping all the accountability relationships in a government system is too complex a task. More usefully, we can analyse the accountability relationships of any one player or agency in the system to see whether they foster or impede effective service delivery. The best way to do this is probably through a table or matrix rather than a flow-chart, which can easily become over-complicated.

An example of a completed accountability table is given below. Note that the table headings should apply to all cases. The table text content is a hypothesised example and would be derived from interviewing the person(s) concerned. More rows could be added if relevant. An overall (qualitative) assessment could then be made about whether the accountability structure for the actor is excessive, contradictory, impeding accountability to community, etc. This could then feed into an overall analysis of the governance structure.

Who accountable: a local government service officer

To whom accountable	For what accountable	How accountable	Comment
Immediate superiors and council	Overall performance	Employer/employee relationship Regular reporting and direction through administrative hierarchy	Upwards The main avenue of bureaucratic accountability
Intergovernmental organisations (e.g. ICC)	Specified performance	Indirectly via superiors reporting to the organisation	Upwards/horizontal May involve conflicting requirements from different levels of government
Colleagues in other agencies	Sharing information Collaborating on outputs	Inter-agency coordinating meetings Informal contacts	Horizontal Based on professional trust
Contracted providers	Providing resources	Meetings and other contacts as per contract	Horizontal This accountability primarily the other way (contractor to government) but involves reciprocal responsibility to provide payment and other assistance as requested
Local community	Demand-responsive service	Consultation Professional experience	'Downwards' Based on communication and professional experience anticipating demand
Media	Information	Preparing releases Answering questions	May be constrained and exercised indirectly through agency
Courts	Compliance with law	Via compliance agencies e.g. audit, police	Upwards

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