A Development Approach to Remote Services in Australia

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NINTI ONE

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List of shortened forms

Agreement, the   National Partnership Agreement on Remote Service Delivery

AIATSIS   Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies

CSIRO   Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation

DKCRC   Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre

MASAF   Malawi Social Action Fund

NGO   non-government organisation

PBI   public benevolent institution

RPA   Regional Partnership Agreement

SLGDFP   Sirajganj Local Governance development Fund Project

ZAMSIF   Zambia Social Investment Fund

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide a perspective on remote services, a perspective that draws on international practice in the field of development combined with insights from research on service delivery in remote Australia. The paper argues that there commonly exists a lack of consistency between strategic goals in service design and the realities of operational service delivery. Better outcomes from services could be achieved by an approach that orientates them towards human development objectives, leading to longer-term and sustainable results.

Recent research in Australia cited in this paper comes from the work of the Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre (DKCRC) – particularly the project 'Desert Services that Work: demand-responsive approaches to desert settlements'. This project involved seven partner organisations: the Centre for Appropriate Technology (the lead agency); the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS); the University of Queensland; the University of South Australia; Murdoch University (to September 2008): CSIRO: James Cook University (to August 2009); and Charles Darwin University (from August 2009).

Services in remote Australia

Services are critical to economic development in remote settlements. Businesses and residents rely on them. Services cover every aspect of life: housing, water, phones, power, roads, rubbish, health, education and most of the necessities of modern living. In remote settlements these services come from governments, Aboriginal organisations and private companies, but the wide range of different services and providers often means that getting the best from them is difficult and can be complex.

The paper has three sections. The first provides an introduction to development approaches to infrastructure and services, providing definitions and reviewing international experiences of the design and implementation of projects and programs. The second section draws out the key features of development approaches to services internationally and compares them with common features of services in remote Australia. Finally, in the third section, ideas are developed for strengthening the development focus of remote services in this country.

Types of remote services

The DKCRC, through its research on service models, recently described a typology of remote services, summarised as follows.

National private sector providers

Applying to services that are most efficiently delivered through national networks, telephone and broadband are the most obvious examples of national private sector providers. The service model that applies in this case is one of centrally defined, funded and managed services to national standards determined through legislation. In the case of telephones, provision is defined by the Universal Service Obligation that requires access to a telephone in population centres of a certain size, regardless of remoteness. Staff are town-based and travel to remote settlements to conduct maintenance, repairs and other technical work.

Resource centres

Resource centres are Aboriginal-governed organisations with the status of incorporated associations or wholly owned private companies. They maintain a technical competence and capacity across a range of essential services that are provided to defined clusters of communities; this is most often outstation groups but may also include larger communities of over 500 people. These services include maintenance for housing, bores, electricity supply (diesel generator, wind or solar), fencing, firebreaks, airstrips, access and internal roads, and community facilities such as bough shelters and so on. New capital works are generally subcontracted to private contracting companies. Funding arrangements vary across a mix of states and territories and user-pays models.

Transaction centres

Transaction centres enable access to services through the use of broadband internet and a suitable building that houses equipment, technical support and customer service. This model is more common in tropical Queensland and the Kimberley region of Western Australia (WA) than desert regions, with Ringer Soak in WA and several Cape York communities offering good examples. More recently the pilot PYKu program in South Australia developed a remote desert service for the population of six major communities in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands. Funding of transaction centres combines state and federal support with fees charged on a per-use basis.

Local private contractors

Private contractors contribute to remote service delivery as a result of a specialist technical need. Examples are contractors in building and construction, electricity and water supply, and satellite installation and maintenance for communication services. Much like any arrangement with a contractor, the scope of works defines the activities undertaken. Contractors and their staff are almost always town-based and travel from there to provide maintenance services to smaller communities. Exceptions include locally based private contractors, which range from small family enterprises in plumbing and electrical work to larger private entities that may be Aboriginal-owned, such as Myuma Pty Ltd in western Queensland. Contracts are generally let through state, territory and federal government tender processes.

Programs specific to Aboriginal people

For services that are specifically aimed towards Aboriginal people, government programs are sometimes defined in a way that includes consultation and governance arrangements specifically designed to meet the needs of Aboriginal service users. Examples include Bushlight (energy services

for small communities), Fixing Houses for Better Health, the Strategic Aboriginal Housing Investment Program, and a myriad of culture-related, law and justice, natural resource management, small enterprise and housing-related programs. Again, depending on the specific program, funding is derived from state, territory or federal departments.

Specialist Aboriginal corporations

Although similar to Aboriginal-specific programs in their focus on meeting the needs of Aboriginal people, specialist Aboriginal corporations are distinguished by being independent and incorporated under state or territory legislation and not restricted to a fixed timeframe or budget determined by government. They often have a geographic or thematic specialism and expertise to match. Examples are the land councils and the Institute for Aboriginal Development. Sources of funding of the work of Aboriginal corporations varies across the types of services they provide, often with core services supported by single funding agreements from federal, state or territory government and additional work contracted for specific purposes through the same or different departments.

Local government agencies and community councils

As a level of local government, community councils are a means of providing access to services that is governed and managed in the community. These services may include a range of minor works, repairs and maintenance to housing and infrastructure, youth and childcare services, natural resource management, and other services for which local skills are available. Funds come from a combination of state and territory government sources, managed through the relevant departments of local and regional government and payments by services users, depending on the kind of service.

Non-government and public benevolent institutions (NGOs and PBIs)

Organisations established to provide particular services nationally or internationally sometimes find a niche role in desert Australia as part of their broader remit. These often include health and caring services such as those provided by Mission Australia, the Salvation Army or the Fred Hollows Foundation. They may be emergency services specific to remote Australia, such as the Royal Flying Doctor Service. In many cases, NGOs and PBIs subcontract services in the way as private contractors. This takes place for aged care facilities, for example, or particular mental health services. Funding arrangements for NGOs and PBIs vary. Most generate income from their own fundraising work from corporate and individual sources. Many also work effectively as contractors for federal government services or receive Commonwealth grants to support their work.

Federal government agencies

Most federal government services are regulatory services accessed through telephone or contact in person, internet or through remote transaction centres of the kind described earlier. These are standardised and nationally determined, the most common being benefits provided by Centrelink.

State and territory government agencies and statutory authorities

Through their own agencies, state and territory governments provide a high proportion of local services in desert Australia. Access to services takes place through government staff working in health and education (for example, at schools, hospitals and clinics), sport and recreation, housing, energy, water and a range of other services. The Power and Water Corporation and the Aboriginal Lands Protection Authority are examples in the Northern Territory, but there exist a multitude of services grouped within the relevant government department across all states.

In considering the above typology of remote services, it is apparent that some types of services and some modes of delivery lend themselves more readily to development strategies than others. For

example, housing, justice and employment programs are more versatile than regulatory services for motor vehicle licensing. In the next section of the paper, I will frame concepts of development as they relate to services and then review relevant case studies from international practice in this field.

Development defined

The concept of development is too often ill defined and unclear. There is no standard definition of development on which practitioners and agencies agree. As AusAID has commented, development has an 'elusive "everything and nothing" nature' (Gibson 2009, p. 2). This presents a barrier to achieving a stronger development focus within services.

Development is a process by which skills, knowledge and resources are brought together by governments, communities and the private and non-government sectors with the purpose of promoting human development. As such, development is an inter-disciplinary field that encompasses health, education, human rights, poverty reduction, the environment and related issues. A recent expression of international development objectives was the statement of the UN Millennium Development Goals.

The notion of human development incorporates all aspects of individuals' wellbeing, from their health status to their economic and political freedom. Within this broad definition, different people take different perspectives or prefer certain emphases. According to the World Bank, 'human development is the end – economic growth a means' (World Bank 2002). According to Youthink of the World Bank, development means 'Reaching an acceptable standard of living for all people by improving economic and social conditions' (Iqbal 2009). Meanwhile, the United Nations Development Program says, 'the purpose of development is to enlarge people's choices. In principle, these choices can be infinite and can change over time ...The objective of development is to create an enabling environment for people to enjoy long, healthy and creative lives' (ul Haq 2009).

For many grassroots and community-orientated organisations 'development is empowerment: it is about local people taking control of their own lives, expressing their own demands and finding their own solutions to their problems' (Comhlámh 2009). The Euopean Union focuses its programs on poverty: 'The main objective of the European Community's development policy is to eradicate poverty. This policy is implemented not only through bilateral and regional agreements but also through specific programmes in certain sectors such as health and education' (European Union 2010).

In conclusion, the connection between services and development is that services provide one means of promoting development. In background research for its investment strategy in rural development, AusAID (Gibson 2009, p. 3) takes a systems approach in pointing out that there are:

> *... many potential routes through which poverty reduction in rural areas can be pursued. This includes 'economic' sectors such as agriculture, physical infrastructure (electricity, transport etc), factors markets (land, finance, labour), 'social' sectors such as health and education and other mixed spheres of development such as community development. In each case, the development task is concerned not simply with the delivery of material inputs but with the development of effective and sustainable systems.*

A development approach is therefore one which places human development goals at its centre, usually concentrating on addressing key issues of global concern such as poverty and human rights. But development approaches are also about process. In practice, this means processes of participation, empowerment and ownership of development by those who stand to benefit from it. In services, the use of development approaches imply that the purpose of access to an essential service such as energy is not just about being able to switch on an electric light or power a tool but is a means for an individual or a household to achieve improved health, wellbeing, education, security or other higher-level human development objectives.

International development experience in services

Internationally, development approaches are more commonly found in infrastructure programs than in services, but similar principles apply. Case studies from Asia and Africa provide insights relevant to remote Australia.

One such example comes from social investment funds in Zambia, later replicated in Malawi and in both countries extended to second and third terms, the most recent of which are known as ZAMSIF (Zambia Social Investment Fund) in Zambia and MASAF (Malawi Social Action Fund) in Malawi. The aims of these funds include broad development goals but the focus of investment is in specific infrastructure construction projects selected in discussion with local communities and including roads, bridges and latrines. Some funds are also used for social infrastructure, such as schools and health facilities.

According to Alberts et al. (2006) the strategies followed by these funds have been efficient in targeting infrastructure that will carry the greatest impact for the community involved. For example, construction of a single bridge in Malawi allowed children to access schools throughout the monsoon period, sick people to access health services, and also boosted trade. Achievements in capacity building are also noted: 'The funds are both developing the beneficiaries' skills and increasing their ability to work together and organise themselves' (Alberts et al. 2006, p. 331). A key mechanism developed by ZAMSIF is the capacity-building ladder, which aims to improve the capabilities of local governments by gradually allocating power and resources as various performance benchmarks are reached (Alberts et al. 2006; Binswanger & Aiyar 2003; Davis 2004). Sound monitoring and evaluation processes are part of the approach.

Davis (2004) cites a number of 'operational barriers' to successful capacity building, including disorganised district governments, lack of control over local tax revenues, multiple project committees with unclear institutional frameworks, limited community participation, and inefficient use of resources. Subsequent work by Alberts et al. (2006) reports that the latest phases of MASAF and ZAMSIF are more focused than ever on efforts to 'empower local government capacities and help establish institutional frameworks that promote local development and accountability' (2006, p. 333).

Turning to India, a program to reinvigorate agricultural lands through the reclamation of sodic soils in Uttar Pradesh learned from early projects that rural road provision is essential to improve income development for farmers reclaiming the land. This project, which aims for the broader goals of agricultural development and improving farmers' income, now includes funds for road construction to help serve this purpose (Binswanger & Aiyar 2003). Similarly, the work of several NGOs in the field of rural transport in Sri Lanka, Peru and countries in Africa has pointed to the value of local transport infrastructure rather than major trunk roads as a means of supporting local economic development (Phiri 2006).

Access to safe water was the subject of considerable attention in international development from the 1990s and became a focus for the most progressive work on development approaches to services (Black 1998). One of the most experienced NGOs in Sri Lanka is Sarvodaya Shramadana and it has been a major provider of water and sanitation programs in the country (Ariyaratne & Jayaweera 1994). Sarvodaya operates a five-stage community development system:

1. Psychological infrastructure building, when a community begins discussing their needs.
2. 'Social infrastructure building', when they form community groups such as mothers, youth, elders, and other socially cohesive categories.
3. Organising, when the community must expedite projects to meet their needs, including water and sanitation projects.
4. Sustainability, where the community becomes self-financing.
5. Assisting, when the community plays a mentoring role for other communities newly embarking on the program.

These five stages are assisted by a full-time worker from Sarvodaya, who facilitates contact between the community clusters that form between new and experienced participant communities. Sarvodaya also provides technical support and financial assistance to villages, particularly helping with development of water, sanitation, energy and transport. According to Ariyaratne and Jayaweera, 'Sarvodaya has successfully demonstrated that water and sanitation needs could be satisfied through an integrated community development approach which recognises amongst others, the spiritual values cherished by the people' (1994, p. 33).

Water and sanitation programs in Lesotho, Ghana, and South Africa provide further knowledge on development approaches to services. According to Lane (2006), new concepts in the design of water and sanitation programs have taken root in these three countries, including community management, human development, human rights, and empowerment. These concepts frame small-scale water and sanitation projects as one small part of a broader development agenda that addresses the needs of vulnerable and marginalised groups, including women, Aboriginal peoples, and the extremely poor. Increased community participation and improved accountability of utility providers is also implied.

As a result of the adoption of broader goals, organisations such as the Community Water and Sanitation Agency in Ghana have shifted their approach from *implementing* water supply systems to *facilitating* them, in order to encourage community ownership of the projects. This includes the formation of gender-balanced committees and requirement that the communities themselves must pay for water operations and maintenance. According to Lane, as of the year 2000 at least '90 percent of water and sanitation committees had received training, opened bank accounts, and held regular meetings. Women played active and influential roles on these committees' (2006, p. 275).

In Lesotho, a government-initiated water and sanitation program directed a large share of its resources into training sanitation professionals and promoting the use of sanitation facilities. According to Lane 'While sanitation programs typically begin with a strong technical bias … the Lesotho program was always more concerned with broader social issues such as community participation, health and hygiene promotion, and finance' (2006, p. 265). Gender empowerment was an important part of this program as well, and one-quarter of all latrine builders trained in the program are women.

Lane (2006, p. 269) mentions that Uganda's water and sanitation program has also recently been reformed to fit in with its broader poverty eradication agenda. He points to a number of lessons, including that:

- top-level political commitment is essential to success
- clear legislation is necessary
- devolution of authority improves accountability
- local governments need professional support
- a number of institutional entities – including social, economic, and media elements – empower communities and give rise to development.

Empowerment is also a central part of the Sirajganj Local Governance development Fund Project (SLGDFP). The project is a government initiative with the aim of reducing poverty by bolstering local governance initiatives in one of Bangladesh's largest and poorest regions. With a literacy rate of only 27%, local councils were largely ineffective, suffering from problems with community accountability, transparency, limited authority, excessive bureaucracy, and poor financial resources. The project focused heavily on encouraging participation and representation of women and the poor. The success of the SLGDFP pilot project has led to a plan to replicate the program in five more districts.

One key element of SLGDFP is that it disburses funding directly to local councils on an annual block grant basis. Local councils are then responsible for planning and allocation of funding for sustainable development initiatives. Performance-based grants determine continuation of funding to councils, based on a scorecard system. This scorecard, intended to improve public accountability, includes

criteria such as the involvement of women in council activities, control of tax collection, community participation and budget transparency.

One element that really stands out from this example is the flexibility with which monitoring staff implemented the scorecard, evident in the following (Sirker & Cosic 2007, p. 28):

> *Initially, the scorecard was developed by the project team based on the roles and functions of local councils. However, over time, the stakeholders changed most of the issues the project team addressed, including the method of project implementation. The participatory performance assessments were undertaken at public meetings attended by 80 to 120 people, facilitated by the local council coordinator. The scorecards were hung on a board and attendees were asked to assess the effectiveness of the local council.*

This indicates that the grants allocation system included reflective processes that allowed the community to influence the very criteria on which council performance was evaluated. Sirker and Cosic also provide evidence that 'revenue mobilisation and collection efficiency have increased as community members have a better understanding of how the money is used' (2007, p. 29). Notice boards and complaint books were also used for council to communicate project information to community and allow for community feedback.

In addition, practice within the Sirajganj model made use of techniques of social mobilisation and inclusion:

- Active measures were taken to engage the community in public meetings.
- Meetings were held in the beginning and end of health, agriculture, and education projects to ensure quality and community ownership.
- Citizens were urged to participate in project committees, were selected by fellow citizens at open meetings, and were given appropriate training to fill their roles.
- Interest and support from the community was generated through an information campaign conducted by local councils using various media, such as drum beating, leaflets, invitation letters, microphone announcements, and personal contacts.
- Arrangements were made to reflect participation by women, such as the use of coloured cards to show women's needs, special planning groups for women, and screening to ensure that women's interests were met during final selection.

Sirker and Cosic claim the following outcomes of SLDGFP:

- Greater responsibility for local governments – including financing of infrastructure and service delivery by locally elected councils (rather than unelected officials at subdistrict level, who had disbursed funds previously), and planning/budgeting for sustainable development programs.
- Accountability and monitoring – developed innovative ways of improving information flows and making councilors accountable to their communities.
- Gained the trust of local communities.
- Improved service delivery, especially in the area of construction and rehabilitation of community assets such as roads, paths, culverts, and tube wells.
- Increased community access to decision-making processes.
- Optimal use of funding – projects were of a better quality and increasingly met budget targets
- Mobilisation of local resources through the willingness of people to contribute financially, the provision of additional free labour and access to land.

Few case studies from other parts of the world are directly replicable to remote Australia. The way the economy functions, social considerations and the cultural context are all markedly different in remote Australia compared to countries or Africa, Asia or Latin America. However, through these selected examples a pattern of characteristics emerges that provide pointers for remote service policy and practice in remote Australia.

Observations relevant to remote services in Australia

In considering concepts of development and then having reviewed international experiences, three key insights are gained that are relevant to remote services in Australia:

- Well-defined **development goals** form a basis for the planning of effective programs. These often emphasise positive social and economic change, such as poverty reduction.
- **Empowerment** of communities involved in and affected by infrastructure and services is fundamental to achieving these goals, with the **participation** of individuals, families and communities as both a means and an end of development approaches.
- Routine service delivery, with its central need for technical and professional competencies, can be orientated towards development objectives provided that **enabling conditions** are established for this transition to occur. These conditions include multi-disciplinary teams, use of suitable planning tools and processes and the commitment of key players, especially the service provider and the community.

What follows is a discussion of each of these aspects of development approaches to services as a means of describing their relevance and potential application to the remote context in Australia.

Development goals and the strategy ceiling in services

The design and development of services in desert Australia is usually conceived to meet policy objectives. Policy headlines provide the impetus for a budget allocation to a set of projects and programs designed to deliver, for example, economic and social change. The current leading edge in policy for remote services is the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Service Delivery signed by the Council of Australian Governments at the end of 2008. This policy is the basis for programs designed to improve the access of Aboriginal people to services, raise service standards, improve governance and leadership within communities, improve coordination of services and increase economic and social participation (COAG 2009). Examples of initiatives within the Agreement are improved methods for monitoring services and building local capacity to contribute to planning and evaluation of the results of services.

An earlier wave of reform to services has shown patchy results. Shared Responsibility Agreements and Regional Partnership Agreements (RPAs) were designed to achieve that which is implied by their titles: closer collaboration between government and communities to achieve a set of shared strategic goals. Through research conducted by AIATSIS as part of the DKCRC (Sullivan 2010), we have observed the implementation and results of the agreements on the Ngaanyatjarra lands (Sullivan, 2010, p. 11):

> *The Outcomes and Priorities in Part Four of the RPA committed the parties to four projects. None of them were achieved with any significant measure of success. Project One required all parties to investigate their current capacity to meet the terms of the RPA and make structural changes as necessary. Project Two concerned the establishment of the RPA's management and implementation arrangements. Project Three aimed for the reduction of 'red tape'. Project Four required the development of a Strategic Investment Plan with a twenty to thirty-year vision. Capacity analysis was superficial and no major structural changes eventuated. The management and implementation arrangements proved frustrating to all parties. Indeed, they were widely perceived to have produced more 'red tape', undermining Project Three. The Strategic Investment Plan, though begun by a consultant with some preliminary gathering of data, was not followed through.*

Sullivan goes on to observe that 'these projects, which should have been the central focus of the efforts of all parties, became peripheral and largely disregarded as the original intentions of the RPA faded over its three-year lifespan.' (2010, p. 11). Similarly, 12 Ngaanyatjarra SRAs were developed

but only three were signed by the parties, two of which were for work already underway through other means (Sullivan 2010).

A flaw in the process of implementing agreements of this kind is that, after the initial high point of announcing and launching the policies themselves, it seems that the only place to go is down. Turnover of staff in key government positions, discontinuity in community members' interest in and understanding of the process, and a general drift of attention towards other business has the effect of diluting the importance of longer-term goals. In bureaucracies, there are few points scored for seeing through a program to a clear end point at its conclusion. New ideas are more highly prized, as if the culture of innovation espoused by management advisers has devalued the plain and simple delivery of results. At the same time, the implementation of programs of remote services is a complex matter, especially faced with the geographical challenges of remote Australia and the demands of working effectively across cultures. It is therefore not surprising that the business of remote services is frequently confined to the realm of management alone, with the original strategic goals diminishing in importance over time.

But it is also the case that services are often defined solely by their budgets and the ability of providers to meet internal delivery targets within a particular time period. The supply of a service falls more within the bounds of management control than the messy and chaotic business of engagement with service users to achieve strategic goals. A fixation on the supply of services hampers their improvement by preventing their location within longer-term planning for communities and regions. Therefore services are implicitly considered a means of preventing or fixing a problem rather than a contribution to longer-term development goals in, for example, health, education or employment. The diagram below illustrates the way in which program activity tends to fall beneath a strategy ceiling so that the original long-term goals become removed from day-to-day operational concerns.
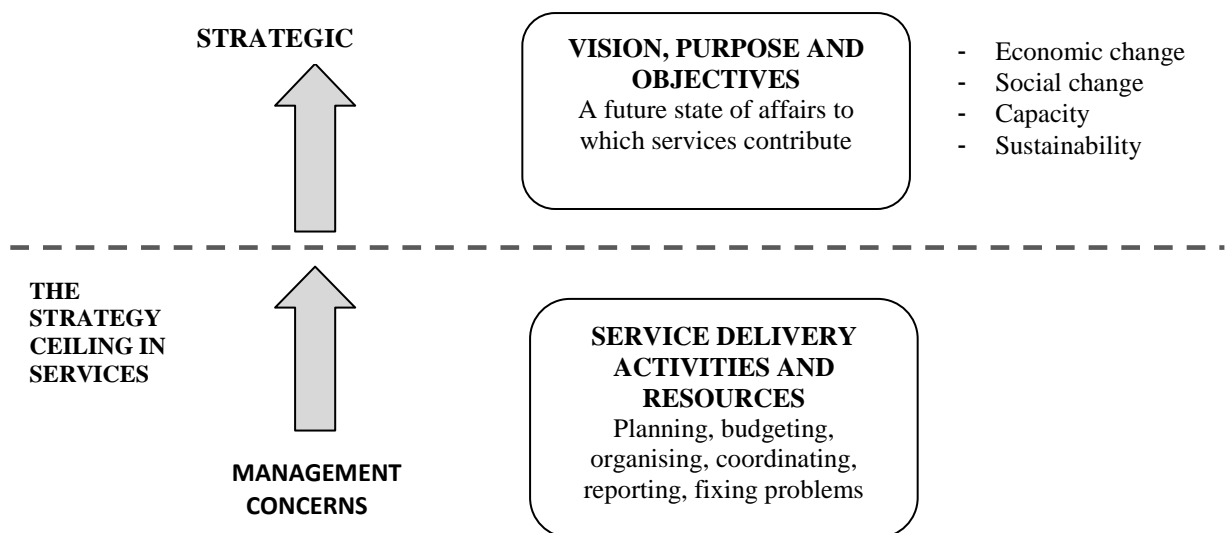
Figure 1: The strategy ceiling in services

The strategy ceiling is the most important barrier to the prospects of achieving development approaches to remote services in Australia. Development approaches require human development goals to be integrated and central to the pursuit of program objectives. A successful shift of concentration towards development objectives can only take place if strategic matters are given proper emphasis in remote service planning, design and delivery. This requires conceptual and practical

connections to be made between the services themselves and the longer-term human development aims of a community, a cluster of communities or a region. It means breaking through the strategy ceiling in services so that higher-level goals can be properly addressed and therefore measured in the monitoring and evaluation of service outcomes.

Most importantly, development approaches help identify the critical combinations of services and skills required to stand the best chance of achieving higher-level strategic objectives. This is what the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Service Delivery seeks to achieve, but it will require adherence to these objectives throughout the life of the Agreement. In this regard, the nature of reporting that government agencies require on services is critical. If they concentrate exclusively on management measurements of service delivery – such as expenditure, numbers of staff employed, numbers of service visits and so on – then the message to both service providers and service users will be that strategic objectives have diminished in importance.

This is where consideration of the practice of some funding agencies in international development is useful. In requiring implementing agencies, often NGOs or consulting companies, to use strategic planning tools and then insisting that reporting takes place against strategic objectives and outcomes, funders seek to maintain focus on development goals throughout the period of the program. There are many examples that illustrate this approach. The author's recent experience of managing programs funded by the Department for International Development in Laos, the Big Lottery Fund in Sri Lanka and also the Northern Rock Foundation and the One Foundation are cases in point (Fisher 2010). This is a subject to which this paper returns.

Empowerment and participation

Empowerment is a contested concept in development, with practitioners and commentators differing on the extent to which empowerment implies a self-generated and increased ability to make choices as opposed to that conferred and controlled by someone else through a relationship in which people are passive.

According to the World Bank, empowerment is one of four ways in which people participate in projects and programs that affect their lives, the other three being information sharing, consultation and collaboration (World Bank 2002, p. 551). However, information sharing and consultation do not imply the assertive involvement of people in services that development approaches require. Collaboration has only limited relevance for services that require specialist knowledge since local people are often not in a position to deliver their own services. Therefore empowerment, despite its conceptual shortcomings, is most relevant to development approaches to remote services. In the context of remote Australia empowerment is achieved in two ways: through service providers creating the necessary space and process; and by Aboriginal people responding to the opportunity to express their needs and preferences.

When this happens the results can be startling. The best examples come from small and dynamic outstation groups such as the Chuulangun Aboriginal Corporation close to Coen on Cape York (www.kaanjungaachi.com.au/ChuulangunAboriginalCorporation), which has taken a number of steps to coordinate services to the community. The Myuma Group – comprised of three inter-linked Aboriginal corporations centred on the upper Georgina River in far western Queensland –were established by the local traditional owners, the Indjalandji-Dhidhanu people, is another example of local people developing their own means to improve and sustain a range of services. The Myuma Group is the subject of a case study developed through the DKCRC (Memmott 2010).

When applied to remote services, notions of empowerment are useful as a way of describing a transition from service delivery that is entirely supply-driven to one in which users of services are active in planning, defining and choosing services. This represents an important repositioning of the service user in a way that is increasingly common not only in international development practice but

also in industrialised countries. A common example of this is the health service reforms in the UK since 1997 (Milburn 2009; Chapman 2004).

Enabling conditions

In any setting where services are the subject of frustration and discontent on the part of service users and providers, a common lament is that there is not enough capacity. This usually refers to the number of people available and the skills they have. While capacity is critical, considering services in terms of enabling conditions is more useful because it encourages us to think about the service system as a whole and the components and factors that make it work well or otherwise. A development approach to remote services determines the conditions that maximise positive results for all those with a stake in their success. Research conducted by DKCRC on desert services (Moran et al. 2009) has pointed to three conditions that support effective services: the quality of interactions between service providers and service users; service match to local needs; and capacity and the service setting.

Quality of interactions between service providers and service users

In earlier research for the DKCRC on services, Porter (2009) adapted Taylor's (2008) use of Mantziaris and Martin's 'recognition space' to illustrate how engagement in this space could create a hybrid housing model for Northern Territory remote Aboriginal communities. In this example the 'recognition space' can be viewed as representing the area where there is constant mediation between customary practices, active involvement in elements of mainstream society and economy, and the expectations of the state.

Aboriginal values
Kinship systems
reciprocity
social identities
relation to country

Recognition Space
Discussion and negotiation of
agreed procedures and rules

Mainstream values
Transparency
Consistence
Minimum Standards
Reciprocal obligation
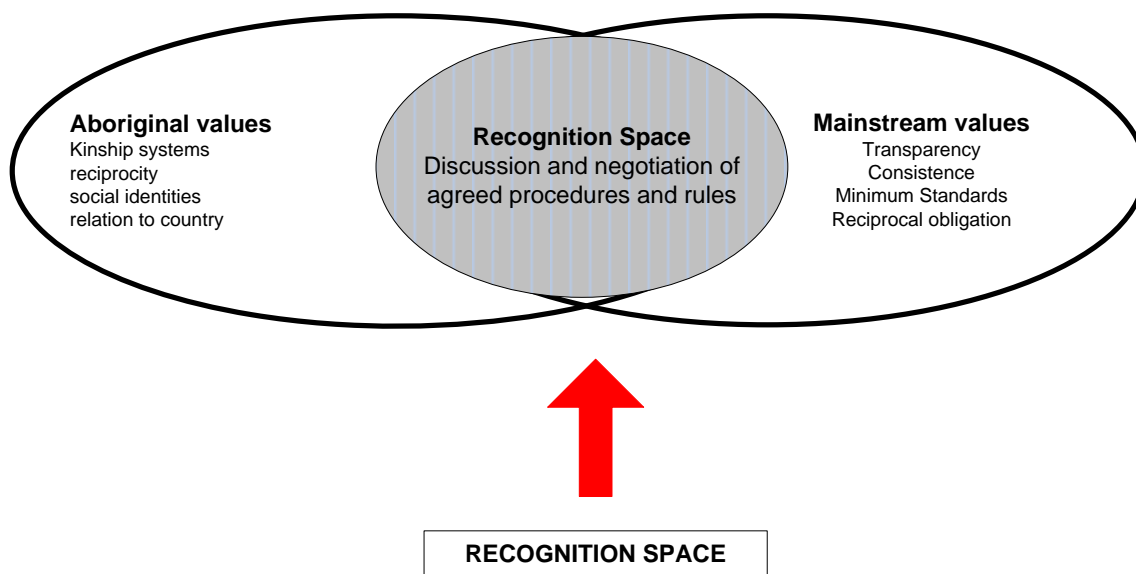
RECOGNITION SPACE

Figure 2: The 'recognition space' for demand responsiveness in housing (from Porter 2009b)

The values of consistent level of service, minimum standards, transparency in decision making on the government side and reciprocal obligation on the demand side of the service equation is captured in one circle. In the other are the values of Aboriginal culture that include, for example, social identities, kinship systems, high levels of reciprocal obligation and a holistic understanding of the relationship between land and people. Research conducted by DKCRC on housing in Lajamanu and Ali Curung in the Northern Territory defined the area of intersect as the 'recognition space' that 'represents the extent to which Territory Housing and Aboriginal communities are able to discuss, negotiate and agree on rules and procedures; that is, the extent to which they are able and willing to recognise the

existence and validity of each other's priorities and find solutions that give housing services meaning for both partners' (Elvin et al. 2010, p. 52).

Service match to local needs and capacity

The concept of 'demand-responsive' services arose from the experience of improved strategies around access to water during the 1990s (Black 1998). Demand-responsive services ensure that the capacity of a remote community to use a service for their particular needs is central to planning and investment.

Research by DKCRC on the Ngaanyatjarra lands (Sullivan 2010) has shown how a long-term vision for a settlement and the region within which it is located enables the supply chain of services to be better designed and orientated to goals to which residents themselves make a commitment. In this context, a key principle is that service development and implementation views both sides of the supply–demand equation and avoids the pitfall of focusing only on better *delivery* of services as opposed to improved *access* to services for locally determined objectives, an issue described earlier as contributing to the strategy ceiling in services.

Service setting

Research by DKCRC in western Queensland has pointed to the importance of the location and physical environment in which interactions between service providers and local service users takes place (O'Rourke 2011, p. 33):

> *At the Jimberella Hall and offices, service interactions occur in a setting that is owned and controlled by the Aboriginal people of Dajarra. This well-designed office building attached to the Jimberella Hall is a focal point for agencies, contractors and consultants seeking to make contact with Dajarra people. The Dajarra case study suggests that an appropriate setting, controlled by the consumer, encourages successful service interactions. Physical settings can be designed to accommodate culturally specific behaviours, but often ownership, personalisation and patterns of use determine the success of a place for interactions with outsiders.*

Also in western Queensland, a case study developed by DKCRC of Myuma Pty Ltd shows how the company brings together government and private sector service agencies in a way that meets the expectations of Aboriginal people for how the interaction should take place, its timing and location. This leads to concept of the 'Aboriginal service setting' which, according to Memmott (2010, p. 41), can be defined as:

> *… controlled by Aboriginal people and is designed to be comfortable for Aboriginal consumers. This can be achieved through a combination of behavioural patterns and environmental and artefactual features. The environmental features are fixed, semi-fixed or loose fixtures being a combination of manufactured objects and structures (architecture, artefacts) and natural elements (landscaping). The combination of features and behavioural patterns, including setting controls, are designed to be relatively comfortable, predictable, secure and conducive for Aboriginal people to use. There is also a sense of identity with and even ownership of such a setting by Aboriginal people when the service is being delivered in an effective way.*

Development approaches in practice

As Mikkelsen has described, despite trends and changes in the field of international development, it 'continues to be interpreted as a planning cycle, departing from project identification and following an objectives-orientated logical framework approach' (2005, p. 28). This approach starts with a goal, purpose and outputs for services, supporting them by a range of service activities that align closely to those goals and are designed with longer-term outcomes. The goal and vision remains paramount, with activities monitored and evaluated against their contribution to the objectives. The diagram below shows a sample planning framework in the context of remote services to a single community.

	Statement	Indicators	Implications for service planning
GOAL	Economic development for the people of Community A	Change in number and diversity of economic activities in the community	Services planned and prioritised according to their contribution to the goal
PURPOSE	To enable the people of Community A to access services that support employment and enterprise	Level of participation of residents in economic activity related to or supported by services	The development purpose of services is expressed through a single strategic statement
OUTPUTS	People of Community A can gain access to affordable services of a high standard and reliability Local jobseekers can find and sustain employment in service delivery Enterprises can access services they require to support and conduct their business	Level of use of services by residents Level of use of services by enterprises Reliability of services Degree to which services met recognised standards Number of jobs in which local people are employed Satisfaction in services expressed by users	Baseline survey against indicators required so that change can be measured Data to be collected that enables performance against outputs to be measured
INPUTS	Resources such as people, buildings equipment, vehicles, fuel, etc.		

Figure 3: A simple logical framework for a service orientated towards economic development

Logical framework analysis is used by some organisations and programs but has not become a consistent feature of services in remote Australia. When applied in a rigorous way, logical planning approaches are effective in working, with multi-disciplinary teams, to address competing priorities and engage communities in project development. A suitable starting point for applying development approaches to services in remote Australia is to consider what goals are defined for programs and then design programs so that the connection is made between the two as a direct cause–effect relationship.

As described earlier, the challenging part of this process is sustaining the link between the operations of the service agency and the strategic goals over the term during which the services are operated. There are three key factors in establishing and maintaining that connection over time:

1. **Monitoring and evaluating programs against their intended goal, purpose and outputs**. This means that reporting by program staff requires them to assess progress against both strategic and operational measures. They are therefore asked to concentrate on the demand and needs side of the service equation, not just the delivery. And they are required to report on the results of the services as a contribution to longer-term aims. This calls for particular skills and knowledge that may need to be developed through training and supervision of key staff over time.
2. **Active funding agencies that provide relevant and pointed feedback** on all reports, requiring explanations for shortfalls against targets and insisting that service providers take corrective action where shortcomings are apparent. In this sense, reports on services become a tool for keeping strategic priorities in sight and are not simply an administrative exercise for checking that

expenditure has been acquitted. This work requires specialist knowledge, preferably by individuals with backgrounds in particular service sectors and who are therefore able to talk to service providers in a way that both acknowledges the challenges of remote service delivery and also provides advice and support.

3. **Expectations expressed by users of services** and their active interest in progress, standards and outcomes. Many service providers have developed ways to engage with local people to encourage them to provide feedback and become more directly involved. Remote education is a field in which individual schools have made progress in this area through creative and inclusion approaches to working with families. For example, the draft Indigenous Education Action Plan, 2010–2014 (MCEECDYA 2009) makes a stronger commitment in this area. But ultimately users of services have to feel that they have the right to express a view and are adequately informed to do so.

In short, all parties need to be focused on the strategic goals of services. They have to be committed to processes and procedures that reduce the chances of strategic drift or dilution over time. Two-way lines of communication need to be established in place of what Sullivan has called 'the reduction of accountability to simple counting' (2009, p. 66).

One way to consider how a more sophisticated set of relationships of accountability and collaboration might operate between key actors in services is illustrated below.
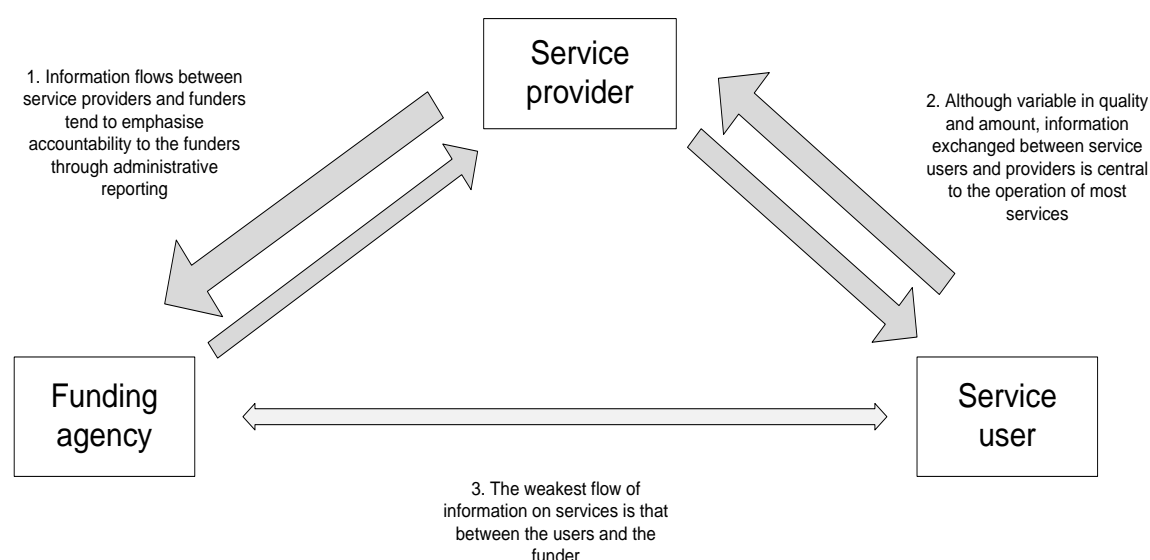

Figure 4: Information flows between key actors in remote services

The principal flow of information on the progress of the program against its plans will always be that from the provider (or implementer) to the funder, achieved through formal reporting requirements. In Australia this usually means a government agency. This is the principal relationship of accountability for the performance of the service. However, the funder should also require evidence that active communication and collaboration is being achieved between the provider and the users of the services. In other words, that the quality of interaction is sufficient to achieve services that are responsive to the needs of and demand from users. The funder should check this aspect in person through evaluations of the program, a practice that rarely applies in services in remote Australia and therefore hampers proper learning as well as constraining opportunities to apply positive experiences in a new program. This subject is addressed by a separate DKCRC publication on the replication of good examples of remote services (Fisher & Rola-Rubzen 2009).

It is no surprise that the observations made in this paper about planning, communication and monitoring of services return to the question of capacity. To use development approaches calls for increased capability of those involved in services to bring new techniques to their work. In some places and certain organisations this is happening already. A range of tools need to be used that support the integration of development goals into services, empowerment and participation of service users in the process and build the enabling conditions required for services to be effective. Logical framework analysis is described earlier in this paper. It is one of a series of tools and techniques that could be more widely deployed in remote Australia, including 'problem tree' analysis, systems methods, stakeholder mapping, social animation, the sustainable livelihoods framework and adaptive approaches to problem solving. These tools were recently described in a workshop conducted by Desert Knowledge Australia at the Aligning Indigenous Land Management with Economic Development Conference (Huigen & Fisher 2010).

Conclusion

This paper has argued that there often exists a lack of coherence between strategic goals in service design and the realities of operational service delivery in remote Australia. Better outcomes from services could be achieved by taking an approach that orientates services towards human development objectives.

In practice, a development approach to services integrates well-defined development goals, empowerment of community members to participate in service design and planning, as well as establishing enabling conditions such as improved service settings and planning tools. The paper has described the strategy ceiling and ways to break through it, as well as approaches to strengthening the responsiveness of services to needs and demand locally. A systematic approach to monitoring and evaluation in which funding agencies are playing an active and leading role is fundamental to learning from and achieving improvements to services.

For as long as remote settlements have existed in desert Australia, so has discussion and debate on the most effective ways for people to gain access to services. It is certainly not new for commentators to suggest that the service system itself in remote Australia presents opportunities for change and this paper makes the same point. But the entry point for those changes is the most critical choice that people involved in the day-to-day business of service design and delivery should consider. Returning to the typology of services and the funding arrangements for each, we can begin to see which offer the greatest potential for development approaches. Where funding and reporting on services takes place to government agencies, there is scope for a more sophisticated approach to monitoring and evaluation against higher-level and longer-term goals. This would require those charged with resourcing services to also measure their performance against strategic goals rather than just compliance with contractual requirements and to drive a change in emphasis in that direction. Similarly, where local people have a close interest in how services are delivered and represent a reliable source of advice on the subject, then there are ways in which they could and should be more directly involved. Maintenance of housing and infrastructure are examples that have featured in the research of DKCRC in the field of desert services.

Ultimately, service providers, the users of services and those who develop policy and provide funds for service delivery need to ensure that they are focused on the strategic goals of services. This includes putting in place those processes and procedures that reduce the chances of strategic drift away from development objectives.

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