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SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS IN THE ANMATJERE REGION: EMPLOYMENT, UNCERTAINTY, AND INSTITUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Local government in the Anmatjere (Ti Tree) region, 200km north of Alice Springs, identified high Aboriginal unemployment as a core issue for sustainable regional development. Unemployment (as conventionally defined) is high despite the availability of seasonal labour jobs in an expanding horticulture industry in the region. This research used the sustainable livelihoods framework (SLF) as a tool to help understand the complex and related factors that affect local people's access to employment and livelihood activities. We interviewed more than seventy people in the Anmatjere region. The demographic profile of the interviewees parallels that of the Anmatjere region where there is a predominantly Aboriginal population.

We discuss four key factors affecting employment in the region: the availability of suitable job vacancies; the capacity of workers for different jobs and the capacity for employers and employees to adapt to differences in cultural norms; motivation to work in paid employment and to employ Aboriginal people; and the accessibility of jobs to different people. We discuss the ways that the cultural norms of different groups affect these four factors.

There is high uncertainty in the availability and security of employment for Aboriginal people in the region. High socio-ecological uncertainty is typical of desert environments and people living there have often developed institutions (rules, norms and strategies) that mitigate this uncertainty. However, employment-related institutions operating in the Anmatjere region seem to add to rather than mitigate uncertainty. This research will improve understanding of the factors influencing livelihoods and employment in remote Australia.

Key words: *sustainable, livelihoods, employment, uncertainty, institutions, Aboriginal*

INTRODUCTION

Our research on *Outback Livelihoods in Anmatjere region* is focused on local issues important for the sustainability and development of the region. Local government in the Anmatjere (Ti Tree) region, 200km north of Alice Springs identified high Aboriginal unemployment as a core issue for sustainable regional development. Unemployment (as conventionally defined) is high, even though there are a considerable number of seasonal labour jobs available. There is a significant horticultural industry in the region, as well as a service industry comprising a local council, school, clinic, aged care centre, and several pastoral stations and various small tourism and art ventures. Aboriginal people comprise more than 80% of the regional population. The Aboriginal settlements in the region have much lower labour force participation rates and lower fulltime employment rates, than the other settlements (ABS 2006). This study investigated local people's livelihood activities and aspirations, and the factors that affect these, using the sustainable livelihoods framework as a conceptual tool. This paper focuses on issues around Aboriginal employment within the region's industries including the public sector.

Overall this project aims to:

- 1 understand the relationships between the livelihoods of people in the region and opportunities for economic development
- 2 understand the pathways and barriers between people and jobs in remote areas
- 3 understand lessons about economic development and sustainability for other outback regions that have some similar characteristics.

METHODS

This research focused on understanding people's experiences of and aspirations for livelihoods (the capabilities, assets and activities required for a means of living) which may or may not encompass paid employment. The sustainable livelihoods framework (SLF) was used as a conceptual tool. The SLF is widely used internationally and this project contributed to testing its value in the Australian context (Davies et al. 2008). The SLF recognises that people use income and other diverse assets as well as multiple strategies to provide for their needs. It also recognises that health, social relations and the natural and physical environments affect people's quality of life. We used the SLF in the analysis of multiple factors and their linkages that impact on people in securing employment opportunities.

In interviews and focus group discussions we asked questions about various aspects of livelihoods. These included discussing interviewee's past, present and future livelihood activities, interviewee's perceptions of the strength of different types of assets in the region, the rules or institutions that affect their lives, and their aspirations for future livelihoods.

We interviewed 72 people in the Anmatjere region, and held two focus group discussions. The demographic profile of the interviewees (see Table 1 below) largely paralleled that of the region.

Table 1: Number of interviewees by age by Aboriginal status

	15-24 years	25-34 years	35-44 years	45-54 years	55-64 years	65 years and over	Total
Aboriginal women	5	8	4	2	3	0	22
Non-Aboriginal women	0	0	0	3	2	0	5
Aboriginal men	10	9	3	3	1	1	27
Non-Aboriginal men	0	1	5	3	8	1	18
Total	15	18	12	11	14	2	72

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Non-Aboriginal interviewees were almost fully employed or running their own business. Around half saw the region as home and planned to stay there in the long-term. In comparison, almost all Aboriginal interviewees called the region home, and four out of five planned to stay there. Aboriginal interviewees were highly mobile within the region and frequently visited local regional centres. Many Aboriginal people described participating in a wide range of livelihood activities. For example, many discussed looking after children and elderly people, hunting and collecting bush foods, and participating in ceremony, while some related long and varied work histories including a range of training courses and jobs. Just over two thirds of Aboriginal interviewees had relatively reliable sources of income (jobs and/or social security), compared to 100% of non-Aboriginal interviewees.

We discuss four key requirements for paid employment:

Job Availability and Suitability

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people viewed the availability of jobs in the region differently; non-Aboriginal people were more likely to see many jobs while Aboriginal people usually saw few jobs. Many of the paid activities in the region are seasonal or short term, entailing high uncertainty and high

entry-exit requirements. Employment that relies on government funding is vulnerable to changes in government policy. There are few avenues for sharing information about the availability of jobs. Aboriginal communities displayed dense social relations. These facilitate the reproduction and maintenance of cultural norms and rules that strengthen identity and kinship ties. However they tend to create social enclaves that limit the entry of new information.

Perceptions of job availability were also affected by the capacity of the employer and the work to accommodate or adapt to the capacities and norms of Aboriginal people and vice versa. Many important cultural norms (shared practices, relationships and values of groups) influence the availability, suitability, and appeal of jobs. For Aboriginal people these often included gender division in workplaces, kinship avoidance norms, sorry business (funereal practices), and reciprocal sharing and customary land tenure. On the employer side, cultural norms often included a belief in the value of diligence and punctuality, and a demarcation between work and cultural and social activities.

Rules and norms provide certainty in actions and engagement strategies at work, by enforcing regularised patterns of behaviour. Working under unfamiliar employers' cultural norms and work rules can be challenging and costly. It requires a different set of habits and regularised patterns of behaviour, and entails risks of breaking rules.

In some workplaces in the public sector and the pastoral industry, employers and employees had set up clear procedures and rules to work with Aboriginal cultural norms and perform the required work for the employer or funding body in an accountable way. In other workplaces, such as horticulture and tourism, it can be too costly to adapt workplace norms to Aboriginal culture.

Capacity

Capacity refers to having the skills, knowledge, aptitude, fitness and time required to perform a livelihood activity. People often need literacy, numeracy, English language and other skills to find and perform many jobs. High levels of ill-health, alcohol abuse, and overcrowding also affect capacity to participate in a range of livelihood activities. As noted above, to participate in unfamiliar work environments people need the capacity to adapt to different norms.

Motivation

People are motivated to pursue any livelihood strategy, such as paid work, art, hunting, or an employment program, in part by their assessment of the benefits (financial, social etc) and costs (physical, social, cultural etc) the strategy entails compared to the benefits and costs of other strategies. Aboriginal cultural norms such as demand-sharing and providing support to family can lead to workers suffering an excessive burden (consisting of demands from relatives, often termed 'humbag') that increases the costs of working and reduces the benefits.

Accessibility

Accessibility refers to the social and physical distance between a person and a livelihood activity. Lack of transport and poor roads exacerbate physical distances in remote areas and can make some jobs inaccessible. Social distance between job seekers and employers, largely determined by previous acquaintances and reputations, can also limit job accessibility. In some industries the reputations of unemployed local people with respect to work ethic and motivation is low, producing a large distance between jobseeker and employer. Similarly, the reputations of employers for working with Aboriginal people vary. Customary land tenure and associated aspects of customary law also affects accessibility. Aboriginal people with customary land ownership or managerial responsibilities may have authority to choose workers, and people may prefer to work on their own country, or may be precluded from working on some other country. Some people in Anmatjere had the necessary knowledge and relationships to act as brokers between employers and jobs, recommending workers to employers and telling workers about jobs. Actors that can bridge enclaves between social networks, government bodies, and potential employers can play a significant role in increasing accessibility and linking people and jobs.

CONCLUSION

The availability and security of employment for Aboriginal people in the Anmatjere region is uncertain mostly due to the periodic and short-term nature of many of the available jobs. High socio-ecological uncertainty is typical of rangelands and especially arid environments. People in desert environments develop institutions (rules, norms and strategies) that mitigate this uncertainty. However, employment-related institutions operating in the Anmatjere region have been unable to mitigate this uncertainty. Rather these institutions have added to uncertainty, for example through rapid changes to welfare rules, employment programs, and funding arrangements.

The sustainable livelihoods framework has facilitated a more comprehensive analysis of the factors affecting paid employment in the Anmatjere region by drawing attention to the factors that impact on people's livelihoods choices and opportunities, and the interplay between them.

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