“Getting out of the Rat Race”: Economic Development and Social Wellbeing in Cardwell, North Queensland

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Abstract:
How does economic development affect the lifestyle and social wellbeing of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in regional Australia? This study, based on lengthy ethnographic fieldwork, takes a particular interest in the aspirations, values and choices of the residents of a regional town and their desires for the future. The paper draws on ethnographic and statistical data to dismantle the dominant economic ideology, pervasive in Australian government policy, that economic development increases happiness and wellbeing. I make a comparative analysis of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in regional Australia to discuss the factors that impact upon their economic development and social wellbeing and to illuminate the emergent sea change amongst the non-Indigenous population that, I argue, reflects an historical legacy amongst the Indigenous population.

Introduction

Economic development, and the potential benefits that flow from a market economy, are persistently portrayed in Australian government policies as being of great benefit to the country and its people. Government policy and rhetoric is centred on a primary assumption that increased wealth, asset accumulation, and product consumption is deemed the marker of a happier society. But is it? There is now a steadily growing body of literature indicating that, despite the fact that today people are earning more money, houses are getting bigger and there are usually two cars in the garage, it has become increasingly apparent that Australians are not necessarily happier.¹ As Eckersley (1998a: 3) argues, ‘the equation of more with better is coming under critical scrutiny in the research literature, but remains largely unquestioned in mainstream public and political debate’.
In today’s climate of incessant economic growth, the emergent discourse is now challenging the commonly-held assumptions that economic growth increases happiness and wellbeing. As Eckersley (1998b: vii) points out, ‘How we answer the question of whether or not life is getting better depends crucially on how we define and measure “a better life”’. My concern is that there is too much focus on economic development in government policy and not enough focus on social wellbeing. The debate about economic development and wellbeing has the potential to immensely influence public policy-making in Australia and possibly pre-empt a policy shift away from the former in favour of the latter.

Unfortunately though, government policy has predominantly been premised upon statistical analyses alone, which, I argue, along with a number of leading scholars, only gives us part of the picture. Some economists in Australia are going beyond statistical analyses to discuss the issue of economic development and are pointing to the advantages of complementing statistics with ethnographic evidence to dismantle the dominant economic ideology that is pervasive in government and public discussion. My contention is that policy that pursues greater engagement in the mainstream economy as its only goal ignores the ethnographic and statistical evidence that demonstrates economic development and participation are not the primary aspirations of all Australians. Gregory’s (2005: 146) claim that ‘macro-economic policies directed towards faster economic growth and higher rates of employment creation matter most’ does not necessarily reflect the values, choices and aspirations of the general Australian public.

While this issue has become a feature of scholarly literature and discourse, the focus has been on either the mainstream Australian economy or the Aboriginal economy, with little to no analysis of the differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people’s economic participation. It is these issues which I take to task in this paper, using ethnographic evidence to challenge the conventional view of economic development. In doing so, I use my own ethnographic data of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in regional Australia to make a comparative analysis of the factors that impact upon their economic development and social wellbeing.

This paper investigates economic development in a regional town and its effect on the local lifestyle and social wellbeing of those living in the community. This study takes a particular interest in the aspirations, values and choices of the residents and their
desires for their future and the future of their town. Lengthy ethnographic fieldwork for the study was carried out in Cardwell, a small town on the north Queensland coast, roughly mid-way between the regional centres of Cairns and Townsville. Whilst population figures vary depending on the source, there are approximately 1200 residents in the Cardwell area, including an Aboriginal population of around 70 in Cardwell and 160 in Jumbun (ABS, 2001). I see Cardwell as reflecting the contemporary debate about economic development. As I will discuss, there is a sea change evident amongst Cardwell’s non-Indigenous population that reflects those values predominant in Australian Indigenous cultures, and more specifically amongst the Aboriginal people of Cardwell, which prioritise family and community wellbeing above economic development.

Aboriginal responses to development

The concept of economic development evokes different ideas and understandings of what constitutes development. In Australia ‘our measure of national progress is bound inseparably to the price system’ (Hamilton, 2003: 54). Like Hamilton, I argue that ‘this way of measuring national wellbeing omits two large realms: the contributions to wellbeing of family and community and the contribution of the natural environment’ (Hamilton, 2003: 54). The traditional owners of the Cardwell area, the Girramay people, have always assumed the value of family, community and country and have struggled to retain these values in the face of two centuries of disruption following white settlement.

Despite the legacy of ‘white Australia’ and ‘assimilation’ policies, the Girramay have maintained a strong connection to their land and their culture. Unlike many other Aboriginal groups in Queensland, the rainforest ecosystem in which the Girramay lived, and the lack of mineral deposits which failed to attract large scale mining to the area, were to be their saviour in allowing this group to continue, to a large degree, unhindered in their traditional social and cultural life after white settlement (Dixon, 1972: 34; Lumholtz, 1889: 113). Fortunately, ‘the rainforests of north Queensland proved to be one area where Aboriginals for a time were able to resist the encroachment of settlers into their country’ (Donovan, 2002: 85).

In recent decades, they have managed to maintain aspects of their traditional lifestyle by the grant of 250 hectares of freehold land in the 1970s within the area of their tribal
territory. Only 30km to the north-west of Cardwell lies the small Aboriginal community of Jumbun where the Girramay and Dyirbal people have successfully managed to isolate themselves, to a certain extent, from the modern market economy and have retained much of their traditional culture. Land is a critical element to Aboriginal people in retaining and maintaining their unique cultural identity, yet in the course of white settlement, they have lost vast tracts of their land. The purchase of Jumbun was fundamental to the ongoing survival of Girramay culture. Despite the severe disruptions to traditional lifestyles, the Girramay people have managed to maintain their identity through language, knowledge and kinship.

Their strong identification with their heritage is evident in their retaining language and knowledge of Dreaming stories and places. Material culture is also a clear marker of Girramay identity, and the preparation of traditional food sources and the practice of basket weaving are just two such examples. During my field research I came to understand that the people of Jumbun insulate themselves, to a degree, from the incessant push for economic development inherent in the wider Australian society. Their limited engagement with the mainstream economy is primarily through the use of the CDEP program, the sale of arts and crafts, and more recently some small-scale tourism ventures. The desire of the community is to be self-sufficient with greater ability to pursue their own social, cultural and economic interests.

So with the political push to increase economic growth and participation, the question is: do the Girramay adapt or get left behind? Do they negate their cultural traditions or transcend these superficial bounds and transform their traditional culture into something that is useful and self-sufficient in the face of the modern market economy? This is a difficult situation and a number of scholars have proposed ways out of this dilemma:

Some writers propose that traditional culture can meet the demands of current community life… Others envisage community-funded enterprise based on government transfers and modest private investment. Still others advocate migration with the assumption that the cultural adjustments involved could not be worse than the current disabling impact of violence, poor education and health in remote communities (Austin-Broos, 2005: 2).

However, I argue that advocating for the migration of Indigenous people ignores the ethnographic and statistical evidence that, given a choice, many Indigenous people choose not to migrate for economic opportunities. As Biddle and Hunter (2005: 16)
point out, ‘migration is also crucially affected by social and cultural factors, which are arguably more important than the economic factors for Indigenous Australians’.

Mobility and economic participation

Mobility is a key factor in analysing economic participation and the empirical evidence suggests willingness to migrate for economic opportunity is substantially different between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

Significantly, against standard theories of mobility transition, Indigenous populations in remote Australia are anomalous for their lack of conformity to the notion of inexorable drift to urbanization in the midst of development and modernity. While such populations are undeniably mobile, they are far less migrant. For the most part, [Indigenous] individuals born in remote communities conduct their affairs and pass through life in familiar surrounds (Taylor, 2005: 109) [emphasis added].

It has been widely acknowledged that economic opportunities are limited in remote areas, but despite this circumstance Indigenous migration is minimal. Many Indigenous people in Australia are disengaged from the labour market and one reason for their disengagement ‘is the fact that Indigenous propensity to migrate in search of such employment is low (in contrast to non-Indigenous labour)’ (Taylor, 2005: 110).

A vast proportion of Australia’s Indigenous population reside in remote or very remote regions that have little or no formal labour markets. ‘At present, there are 120,000 Indigenous people living in communities in remote regions ...that are extremely distant, both geographically and culturally, from [labour] markets’ (Altman, 2005: 123). Their severely limited access to the labour market was recognised in government policy when ‘the Whitlam Labor government promulgated a policy guideline which stated that Aboriginal people “living on settlements and missions” did not have to move from their community of residence in order to demonstrate their willingness and availability for work’ (Sanders, 2005: 203).

Following this policy shift, the CDEP scheme was established under the Fraser government and ‘there was no doubting its popularity with Aboriginal communities’ (Sanders, 2005: 205). Subsequently, the program was expanded into ‘southern, rural and urban areas’ under the Hawke government in response to ‘arguments about Aboriginal unemployment’ (Sanders, 2005: 206). It was ‘a creative response to the circumstances of communities without any form of mainstream labour market’ (Cass, 2005: 102). The CDEP scheme has provided an option and an opportunity for
Indigenous people to remain in their local community without the need to migrate for employment.

As Davis (2005: 51) has pointed out:

One concern in these debates [over culture and economic development] is the extent to which Aboriginal peoples should or could assimilate to conventional social and economic life, or at least increase their commercial opportunities and access to the labour market.

Gregory (2005: 136) has suggested that ‘the ability to integrate into mainstream employment can be influenced by policies that bear on local attitudes in remote communities towards education and integration’. I argue that this suggestion is bordering on a return to assimilation policy. Rather than focussing on how to ‘integrate’ Indigenous people into the mainstream we need to develop options that give Indigenous people a choice. Here I would see the CDEP scheme not as a fallback mechanism, but as a real and effective alternative to migration for mainstream labour market participation.

Altman’s (2001) proposal of the hybrid economy seeks to overcome the predominant tendency to frame the economy as consisting of two distinct domains, the market (or private) sector and the state (or public) sector, or to use Pearson’s (2000) term, the ‘real’ economy as opposed to the ‘gammin’ economy. Altman’s (2005: 122) hybrid economy has three sectors, the customary, market and state, rather than just the last two, more orthodox ones. Use of this framework highlights that in many contexts the dichotomy between “real” (or market) or “unreal” (or welfare) economies is an oversimplification that ignores and potentially demeans Indigenous effort in the customary (or non-market) sector.

The model of the hybrid economy reflects the actual lived experience of Aboriginal people in Jumbun, where most people are engaged in all three sectors. Many Jumbun people regularly alternate between CDEP work (the State), local seasonal work on the cane and banana plantations (the market), and customary activities such as basket weaving and traditional food preparation (the customary economy).

**Non-Indigenous people and the Cardwell ‘sea change’**

The non-Indigenous people in Cardwell, however, would in most cases need to migrate for employment opportunities unless they were willing to take up local unskilled labour positions, as the opportunities for skilled labour in the town are limited. Some of the young, non-Indigenous people, upon leaving school, migrate to
the larger centres of Townsville and Cairns to pursue higher education and employment opportunities. The statistics show a high proportion of the population of Cardwell is over the age of 30, with a fairly significant percentage (24%) over the retiring age of 65 (ABS, 2001). It is interesting to note that there is a marked drop from the number of people in the 15-19 year age group to the 20-25 year age group, which my ethnographic data attributes to school leavers migrating for university and work. The population numbers more than double in the next age group (25-29) and continue to increase in each of the higher age brackets (ABS, 2001).

This statistical phenomenon became of interest to me in understanding the dynamics of inward and outward migration. While outward migration was minimal and was mostly confined to those in the 20-25 year age group, how could inward migration to a town that provided limited economic opportunity and development options be explained? This theme became a key question in my ethnographic research. The overarching response from participants was that they had chosen Cardwell as a lifestyle choice, rather than a career choice. When I asked one of my middle-aged participants why they had moved from a major Australian city and left behind a successful career to live in Cardwell, they simply stated they were ‘getting out of the rat race’. As Altman and Taylor (1987: 2) said of Aboriginal people who had made a ‘conscious choice to live at outstations’, they had ‘embraced a materially limited lifestyle’. I would say this is also true of those who have chosen to remain in or move to Cardwell and Jumbun; they have embraced a life of limited economic opportunity, but one which is more fulfilling in terms of social wellbeing and lifestyle choice.

In a society that places so much importance on economic growth to create happiness, why in a place like Cardwell, where the population has barely registered on the growth scale compared to the rest of the east coast of Australia, and where job prospects and career opportunities are minimal, and where incomes are relatively lower compared to the larger regional centres and cities, are the residents so content and happy? Based on my fieldwork, which spanned thirteen months and three subsequent visits, I have found that the residents of Cardwell measure their social wellbeing not on their material wealth but on their lifestyle choice. They have a different value system that measures success in terms of wellbeing rather than monetary value. As Hamilton (2003: xvi) points out, ‘we need a politics that encourages people to pursue a rich life instead of a life of riches’.

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We see this philosophy being enacted in Cardwell with people who have chosen not to leave the town in pursuit of economic opportunities, and others who have migrated to Cardwell from the cities and larger towns, leaving high-powered careers, to pursue personal contentment rather than wealth. ‘In fact, there is now a large body of evidence that casts serious doubt on the dual assumptions that more economic growth improves social wellbeing and that more income improves individual wellbeing’ (Hamilton, 2003: 23). The overall wellbeing and happiness of people living in Cardwell seems to be quite high, despite the lack of economic opportunities or high incomes.

I explored this issue further by asking participants about their understanding of ‘success’ and what constitutes success. When I asked participants what it means to them to be successful, the predominant response was that success is to be ‘happy and healthy, and for their children to be happy, health and safe’. Their wellbeing and the wellbeing of their families was evidently a high priority and they repeatedly associated their idea of wellbeing with a lifestyle choice. This understanding of what it means to be successful is an example of how Cardwell residents’ prioritise lifestyle choice and wellbeing over economic opportunity.

**Conclusion**

This paper has discussed issues of economic development and participation and its effect on social wellbeing and lifestyle. I have argued that advocating for increased Indigenous mobility to reduce economic disadvantage ignores the evidence that ‘Indigenous Australians are less responsive to local economic factors than other Australians’ (Biddle and Hunter, 2005: i). Furthermore, the ‘sea change’ phenomenon emerging amongst the non-Indigenous population also indicates the need to re-evaluate policy to reflect changing values, aspirations and choices. Policy-making needs to be informed by detailed, comprehensive research, and yet there is surprisingly little research on the underlying factors influencing economic participation and mobility amongst Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

The emergence of a social awareness amongst Australian non-Indigenous people that prioritises social wellbeing and lifestyle choices above economic development can be seen to reflect a common thread that has prevailed in Aboriginal society throughout history. Much of the ethnographic literature on Aboriginal Australia points to the
predominance of prioritising family, social and cultural factors above development in the modern market economy. With the emergence of this non-Indigenous shift in priorities and perceptions,\textsuperscript{12} government policy needs to reflect and incorporate these changes in order for social policies to be effective.

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Footnotes

\textsuperscript{1} See Hamilton (2003) for a discussion of ‘growth fetishism’ in Australia. See also Eckersley (1998a: 8) who says ‘people have not become happier as their societies have become richer’.

\textsuperscript{2} See for example Finlayson (1995: 11).

\textsuperscript{3} See for example Eckersley (1998) and Hamilton (2003).

\textsuperscript{4} See for example Altman (2001, 2005) and Davis (2005).

\textsuperscript{5} Members of both groups reside in Jumbun. My field research focussed on the Girramay people, the traditional owners of the Cardwell area.

\textsuperscript{6} See Pedley (1992) for a detailed account of the material culture of the people of Jumbun.

\textsuperscript{7} The Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme allows Aboriginal people to forego their unemployment payments, which are pooled together and paid to the Community Council to fund work projects.

\textsuperscript{8} In the early days of the community, the residents began agricultural ventures, including banana farming, in pursuit of self-sufficiency. This desire for independence is still strong today, and some small-scale farming continues to be undertaken, along with other activities.

\textsuperscript{9} See for example Altman (2005) and Rowse (2002).

\textsuperscript{10} See Rowse (2002) for an eloquent discussion of Indigenous choice and development.

\textsuperscript{11} This age group refers to those participants aged 40-60.

\textsuperscript{12} Increasingly exemplified in the public domain through organizations such as The Australia Institute and its public support base, the Wellbeing Manifesto.

References


