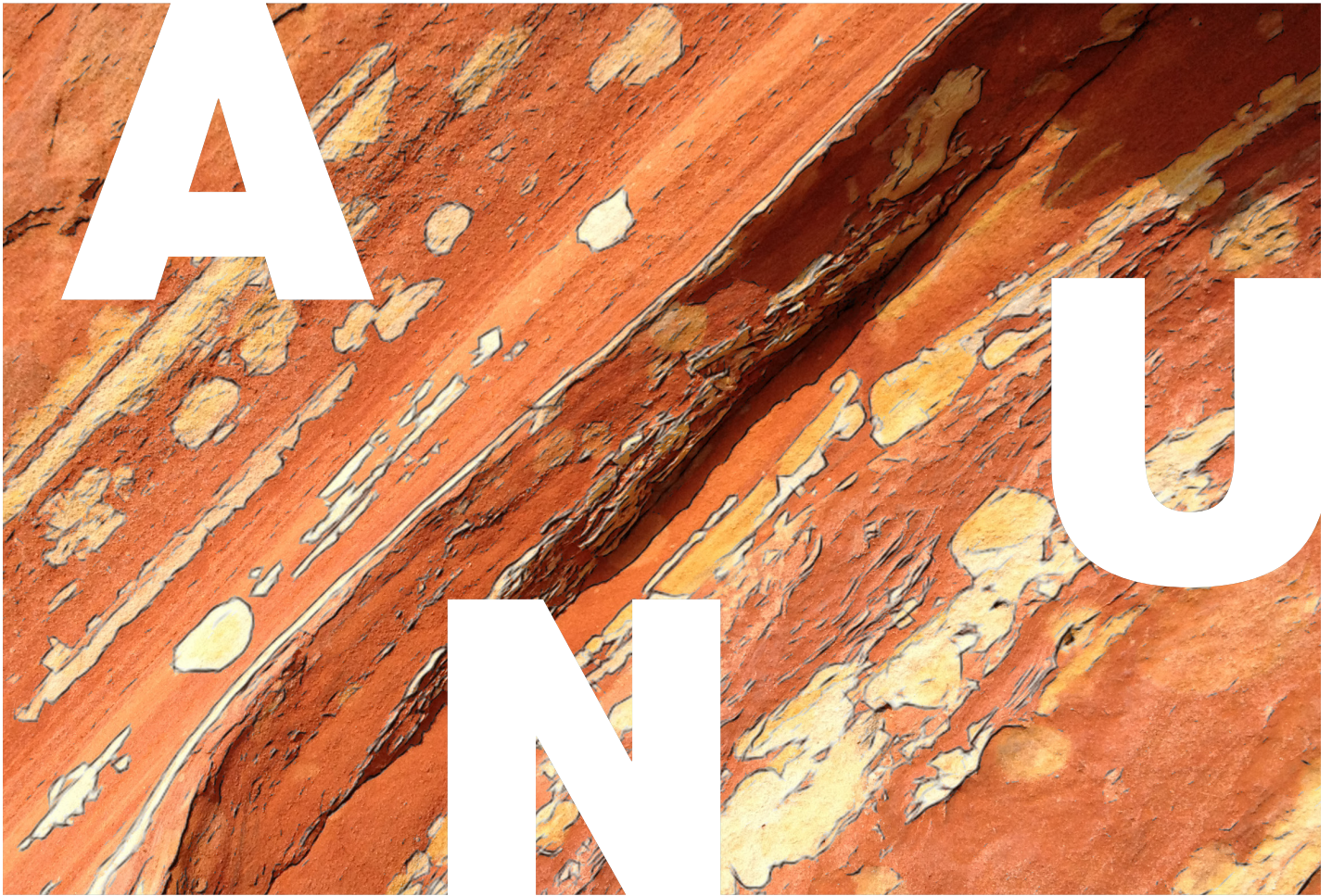




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THE POWER OF DATA IN
ABORIGINAL HANDS

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Aboriginal Economic
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The power of data in Aboriginal hands

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At the time of writing, **Peter Yu** was Chief Executive Officer, Nyamba Buru Yawuru Ltd, Broome and a member of the Australian Statistics Advisory Council of the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

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I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of country occupied by the nation's capital. I am sorry that I can't deliver my paper in person. I am very pleased, however that my Yawuru countryman Professor Mick Dodson is able to speak to this paper on my behalf and I am sure that he will warmly welcome our Indigenous brother, Mathew Snipp, from the United States who is also attending this conference.

Introduction

I have been asked to address the topic 'Indigenous perspectives on Indigenous evidence in the social sciences'; a seemingly benign and academically obscure subject. Such a perception could not be more wrong.

Sir Francis Bacon is credited with the quote 'knowledge is power'. When accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in 2001, Kofi Annan extended Bacon's dictum into something more meaningful, adding 'Information is liberation'. The truth of that statement is being played out in the Middle East and North Africa now. The combination of information about corruption and abuse of power with the technology that can disseminate that information freely, has had an explosive liberating reaction.

In this paper I want to talk about the critical role that data can play in development scenarios when Aboriginal people are in control of collecting, managing and interpreting data.

The view I have about data is a long way from the current paradigm where data is collected on Indigenous society by governments for their purposes; rather than to support the objectives that Indigenous people want to determine. I share a pervasive Indigenous aversion to the way data is collected by governments, academics or professional researchers on or about Aboriginal people. I'm sure that many of you would have heard the much quoted observation by Aboriginal people that we are the most researched people on earth. Yet despite the wealth of empirical data dished up by countless inquiries, Royal Commissions and research projects over many decades about the social and economic condition of Aboriginal society, little practical benefit seems to come from all this data.

As a member of the Australian Statistical Advisory Council, I believe that the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) should play an important role in aligning its work with Aboriginal priorities. A partnership approach should be developed on the basis that the indicators that measure Aboriginal people's wellbeing must be determined by Aboriginal people, not imposed on us by governments or agents of the dominant society.

However, one has to look only as far as the National Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) conducted by the ABS to appreciate how far this reform agenda has to travel. That ABS survey is designed to assist governments, commentators or academics who want to construct policies that shape our lives or encourage a one-sided public discourse about us and our position in the Australian nation. The survey does not provide information that Indigenous people can use to advance our position because the data is aggregated at the national or state level or within the broad ABS categories of very remote, remote, regional or urban Australia. These categories are constructed in the imagination of the Australian nation state. They are not geographic, social or cultural spaces that have relevance to Aboriginal people.

In this paper I want to share some insights about current work of Yawuru native title holders in the Broome region to show how data can support an Aboriginal development agenda.

Context

First, let me paint a contextual picture. The story of data collection about Indigenous people highlights this nation's historical relationship with First Peoples; a history of denial and subjugation. The Australian nation's foundation document of 1901 explicitly excluded Indigenous people from being counted in the national census. That provision in the constitution, combined with Section 51,

sub section 26, which empowered the Commonwealth to make special laws for 'the people of any race, other than the Aboriginal race in any State' was an unambiguous and defining statement about Australian nation building. The Founding Fathers mandated the federated governments of Australia to oversee the disappearance of Aboriginal people in Australia. We were not to be counted as we did not exist in the nation's imagination of how Australia should be developed.

I was 16 at the time of the 1971 Census when Aboriginal people were first included in the formal enumeration of Australia's population; four years after the amendments that removed the overt racist exclusion of Aboriginal people from the Constitution. There is a pervasive view—a myth I would argue—that the 1967 referendum resulted in the full inclusion of Indigenous people in Australian citizenship. The mission for the ABS in this so called 'inclusive' Australia has been to get the Indigenous count right. It is seen as a practical issue, an overwhelmingly technical challenge.

As we know the ABS has not met this challenge successfully. There is uncontested acknowledgement that the ABS undercount of Indigenous people in the census is so significant that in some regions such as the Kimberley, the official ABS data is almost meaningless. This is a very serious failing of the nation's constitutional responsibilities to all its citizens. And the consequences for Aboriginal people are often very practical and detrimental. ABS data is used as a basis of Commonwealth and State public funding distribution. The data is used by government agencies and, more increasingly, private corporations to inform investment strategies that are aimed at improving the economic and social wellbeing of Aboriginal people. The Australian government has finally recognised the problem of the Indigenous undercount in the nation's census, and allocated the ABS with additional resources to produce a more accurate demographic and socio/economic picture of Indigenous Australia.

The forthcoming national census will be the eighth in which Indigenous people will have been counted. This begs the question; why has it taken so long for governments to act on the Indigenous undercount? The answer, it would appear to me, is that the collection of evidence is part and parcel of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Closing the Gap strategy. Governments of all persuasions have determined that closing the evidentiary gap that exists between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in health and mortality, education outcomes, employment and child development and other crucial areas is to be the overriding policy objective of the Australian nation regarding its relationship with First Peoples.

Reliance on data is fundamental to this objective. The Gap has to be determined through conclusive evidence.

What is the life expectancy gap, or the education and employment gaps? We need the data to tell us. And then we need the data to measure the progress in closing this evidence-based gap. And just to show that the Australian Government is wholly committed to this mission, the Prime Minister delivers an annual report card to the Australian Parliament. The third of these reports was delivered to the nation's parliament by Prime Minister Gillard two months ago.

The Australian Government's chief advisor on this policy framework that is strung together by a series of Commonwealth and State financial National Partnership Agreements is the Productivity Commission, which releases a biennial report titled *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage*. The Productivity Commission has advised governments that the fundamental flaw in the Closing the Gap strategy is poor data; hence the recent additional funding to the ABS.

The fundamental problem with this evidence based approach is its underlying assumption. The COAG agenda is based on a consensus view that has emerged in Australia in recent years that Indigenous wellbeing is achieved through Indigenous people adopting the fundamental tenets of western society. Government policy emphasises Indigenous individual achievement in education, employment and home ownership, informed by an ideological assumption that this is what promotes social and family functioning and good physical and mental health.

The intended use of data by governments does not measure seriously the fundamental imperatives of Indigenous life. The NATSISS effort, which attempts to measure language, cultural connection and Indigenous social values, appears tokenistic compared to the overwhelming emphasis by combined Australian governments to use data to measure Indigenous absorption into mainstream Australian society. Whilst the power to collect data and report on the analysis of data collected about Indigenous people remains with government, Indigenous public policy in this country will remain dysfunctional. Government policy and practice is not aligned to the nation's recognition of Indigenous peoples' collective rights. In 2007, Australia joined the international community in recognising the self-determination rights of the world's 370,000,000, Indigenous peoples when it endorsed the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Australian governments have established a statutory framework to recognise, protect and forge agreements relating to Indigenous people's common law rights. Yet despite these fundamental points of recognition, Australian governments pursue policies that do not match Indigenous imperatives.

Yawuru Native Title Agreement—A Model for Aboriginal Development

I would like to turn now to my own community in Broome to show how the power of data in Aboriginal hands can play a strategic role in community development and reconstruction and help shape a functional relationship between Indigenous people and governments.

Yawuru native title was determined by the Federal Court in 2006 after protracted litigation. The Yawuru native title holders of the Broome region negotiated a Global Agreement with the Western Australian Government and the Shire of Broome that was finally registered in August last year. The agreement is fundamentally concerned with a comprehensive integration of economic, social, environmental and cultural factors that would allow the commercial and residential expansion in Broome, in return for lands to be transferred to Yawuru ownership and consequently to be developed at our cost and without concession by government for the benefit of Yawuru people.

The agreement provides for a significant conservation estate to be jointly managed between Yawuru and the State and for important areas of cultural significance to come under Yawuru control to ensure their protection. Approximately 80 per cent of Broome's future developable lands will also come under Yawuru control, in freehold and leasehold title, to generate income for a social dividend that will benefit Yawuru and the wider Broome community.

The Native Title Global Agreement potentially provides Yawuru people with the capacity to enjoy a life bequeathed to them by ancestral wisdom and traditions. It provides a platform for Yawuru people to be respected by the broader community and no longer feel dominated, intimidated or controlled. It provides a framework for rules and decisions to have legitimacy because the decision making process is transparent, accountable and has decent objectives. Importantly it provides a basis for Yawuru people to gain benefit from their equity in the local economy, although this is largely contingent on how much current development frameworks and financial outlays are to be mitigated.

The challenge facing Yawuru people in a dynamic social and economic environment however cannot be overestimated. A giant liquified natural gas (LNG) processing plant is proposed to be built just to the north of Yawuru country which will have a huge impact on Broome. Less than three decades ago, Yawuru people constituted the majority of the Broome population. We are now the minority and with a growing settler and Aboriginal itinerant population, our proportion in Broome's overall population is getting smaller.

To safeguard Yawuru cultural and social values, build a sustainable capital base and produce a substantial social dividend, Yawuru have developed a strategic plan that focuses on innovative social and home ownership models, employment, education and training, enterprise and cultural renaissance through language revitalisation, land and sea management and cultural tourism. Yet without sound baseline data of Yawuru and Broome Aboriginal demography we would be flying blind with our development agenda. Yawuru are about to begin the most comprehensive Aboriginal population survey ever undertaken in an urban environment in Australia. We are calling this project Knowing Our Community because we need data collected by our own community so that we can plan for our community's future. Over the next three months every Aboriginal household in Broome will be visited by local people employed to conduct a very simple questionnaire. The aim of the survey is to find out as accurately as possible how many Aboriginal people live in Broome, because at the moment nobody knows that basic information. ABS data on Broome is not helpful. Not only is there a significant undercount of the Aboriginal population, but the census does not enquire into the cultural complexity of the population. The NATSISS is no use to us at all.

The Knowing Our Community project will be seeking answers to only a few questions. Besides the total Aboriginal population in Broome, we also want to know how people choose to identify their Aboriginal cultural or language group background. We want to know how many Aboriginal people are permanent residents or transient residents of Broome. We want to know about people's housing: how many people are renting public housing, own their own houses, live in community housing, are staying with family or friends or don't have adequate housing at all. We want to know if people's houses are overcrowded and as well the hopes and ambitions people may have for their own housing, or their family's housing, in the future.

As a community we need to know these facts about our community because Broome is changing fast. Broome's population is growing at twice the national average and could grow even faster in an industrial future based on LNG development.

The Government says that a new housing estate known as Broome North will be able to cater for Broome's population growth and that one house in nine allocated for public housing will satisfy social needs. Yet the Government's planning decisions that will affect people's lives and help shape the future of Broome is not based on sound demographic information.

Later this year Yawuru will have an accurate picture of the broad Aboriginal demography of Broome. We are confident the data will be sound because we know from world

experience that the most accurate way to collect population data on Aboriginal communities is to employ people from the community to gather that information. Fourteen Aboriginal people from a wide cross section of the Broome community have been employed to collect the data. They are being assisted in collecting, managing and analysing the data by researchers from the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research at the Australian National University who Yawuru regard highly for their expertise on Indigenous demography. This data will enable Yawuru to more effectively plan and invest its limited resources particularly in housing. Importantly the data will provide a basis for an informed dialogue between Aboriginal interests, government, the Shire and industry about infrastructure and social investment in the Broome region.

Establishing an Aboriginal population baseline for Broome will also enable a deeper assessment of social and economic issues that will be pursued through sample surveys. A third dimension of Yawuru's evidence based approach will be a longitudinal study which is intended to assess social and economic changes to Yawuru society over a time span of two decades.

The power of data in Aboriginal hands has the potential to have a number of important consequences for Broome and surrounding communities.

- It will give Yawuru an informed basis for decision making.
- It will assist dialogue between different native title groups in the Broome and West Kimberley who will be affected by the Browse LNG development with the aim of building a concerted Aboriginal approach to managing the impacts of industrial development.
- It can provide a baseline to measure impacts of economic and social change on Aboriginal society.
- It can provide a basis for informed dialogue with Aboriginal interests, government and industry.
- It can provide a basis of accountability for public policy and investment for Aboriginal development in this region.

Within the evidence based approach to our development, we plan to construct a Yawuru Wellbeing index, as a basis for measuring the things that are important to Yawuru people.

This index will no doubt include people's income levels, housing and health profile but it will also include family and kinship relationships, connection to culture, the extent that people feel respected by the dominant society, and

other social and cultural matters that are important to Yawuru people.

Conclusion

Whilst the power over data collection and analysis remains in the hands of government the narrative about Indigenous people's place in the Australian nation will continue to be one of deficit, disadvantage and dysfunction. And the policy prescriptions flowing from that narrative will continue to fail Indigenous people and the nation.

Only when Indigenous people are resourced to collect and analyse data and tell a far more compelling story will we see the emergence of genuine Indigenous self-determination in Australia.