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## What are the enablers of economic participation in remote and very remote Australia, and how can we identify them?

<p><b>Eva McRae-Williams</b></p> <p>Batchelor Institute</p> <p>eva.mcrae-williams@batchelor.edu.au</p>	<p><b>John Guenther</b></p> <p>Flinders University</p> <p>john.guenther@flinders.edu.au</p>
<p><b>Damien Jacobsen</b></p> <p>Southern Cross University</p> <p>damien.jacobsen@scu.edu.au</p>	<p><b>Judith Lovell</b></p> <p>CRC for Remote Economic Participation &amp; Charles Darwin University</p> <p>judith.lovell@cdu.edu.au</p>

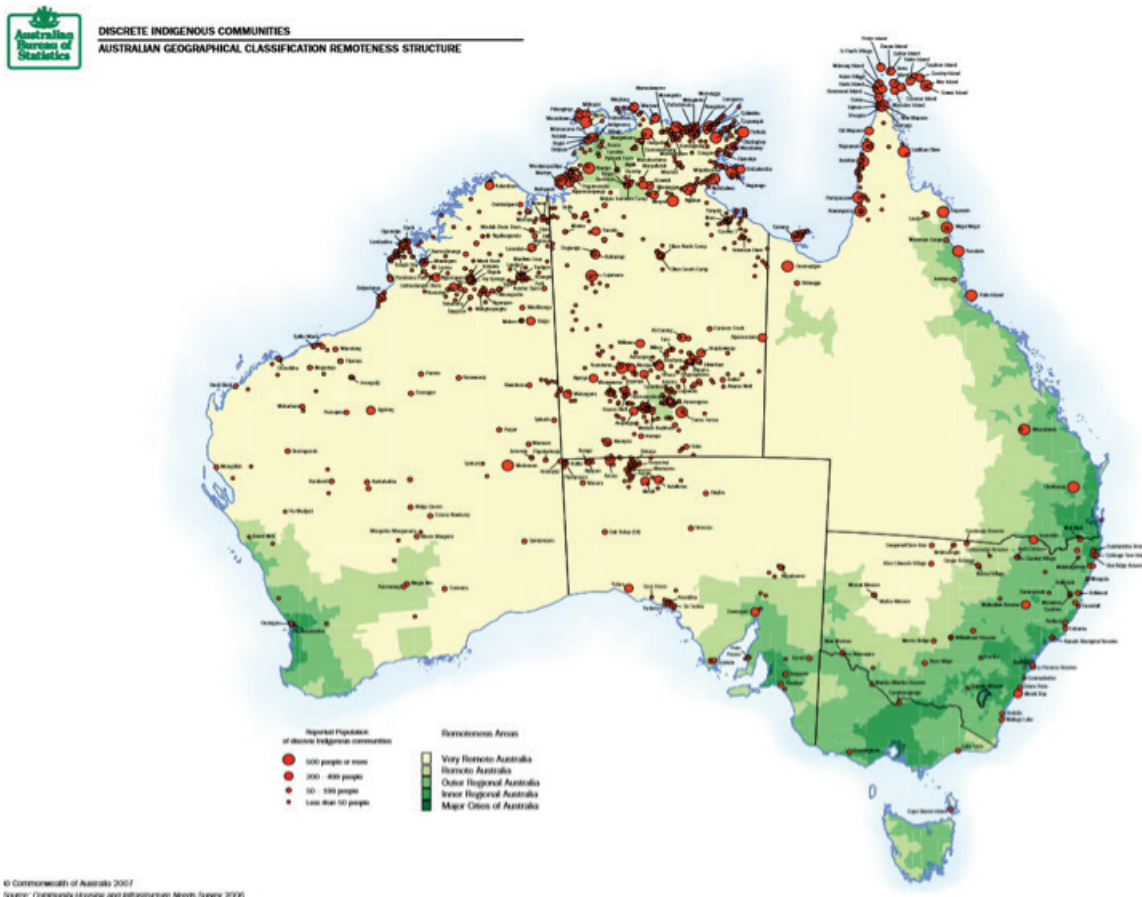
### Abstract

In this paper we discuss some of the key learnings from the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation (CRC REP), *Remote Economic Participation, Pathways to Employment and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Tourism Product* research projects. While we do not deny the importance of global markets for remote Australians, we see value in opportunity structures that move beyond the confines of traditional economic and human capital theories. It is through acknowledging and building on local residents' social, identity, cultural and natural capital strengths that, we argue, has a greater potential for supporting increased economic engagement and sustainable participation. Framing our learnings through a theoretical lens of different forms of capital we argue a shift in discourse from one of 'disadvantage' to one of remote advantage would be more supportive of education, employment and enterprise outcomes for local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander residents. While such a shift will not contribute significantly to the Gross National Product we argue that it would have important tangible and economic benefits for local people and the nation.

### Introduction

This paper points to a disjunction between dominant perspectives and associated policy, and the aspirations and capacities of Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander residents of remote and very remote settlements. While we are cognisant of the breadth and depth of theories and methods within the field of economics, we point in this paper to a dominant public and policy perspective which frames remote Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander economic engagement and participation primarily as an issue of disadvantage and deficit. Our findings from the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation (CRC-REP) (2010-2017) research suggests significant limitations with such a frame. Our concern here is not with issues of economic participation generally, but in the discrete communities of remote and very remote parts of Australia, highlighted in the two most lightly shaded areas of the map in Figure 1 on the next page.

**Figure 1:** Discrete Indigenous communities in Australia



Source: Commonwealth of Australia, 2007

In this paper learnings from the CRC-REP *Remote Economic Participation, Pathways to Employment and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Tourism Product* research projects are used to highlight a tension between lenses of 'remote disadvantage' (Australian Government, 2015a) and those of 'remote capacity and advantage' (Guenther, Bat, & Osborne, 2013; McRae-Williams, 2014). It is from this perspective that we question the effectiveness of existing 'Human Capital Theory' approaches for supporting increased economic engagement and sustainable development in remote and very remote Australia and argue for an expansion of capital theories for better outcomes.

The learnings from the research projects, *Remote Economic Participation* and *Pathways to Employment*, highlight that by privileging non-remote and non-local assumptions in economic participation and development agendas, initiatives often fail to engage with local (capital) advantages. Both projects have argued that with increased engagement with local aspirations and strengths, education and employment initiatives would be more likely to achieve their desired outcomes (Guenther, 2015; McRae-Williams, 2014). Learnings from the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Tourism Products* research project similarly point to tensions between Aboriginal business practices and non-Aboriginal standpoints. Such tensions impact on the capacity of the polity to provided effective enablers and supports for sustainable local enterprise based on Aboriginal capacity and advantage (Jacobsen & Tiyce, 2014).

This paper raises salient points regarding local aspirations, actions and agencies for engaging with meaningful livelihood agendas. In addition, the Tourism Project draws attention to the capacities and value of Aboriginal ways of doing business. The paper highlights that while there are numerous education and employment programs rolled out in remote Australia, rarely do they meaningfully engage with Aboriginal ways of doing business or provide resourcing which bolsters enterprise resilience (see also Lovell, Ryder, Williams, Ellis, Wallace, & Hayes, 2011).

This paper argues the interpretations of ‘human capital theory’ which operate and shape policy and program delivery in Australia, are based on flawed assumptions usually reflective of neoliberal positions and non-Indigenous bias (Zipin et al., 2015). By describing local assets as different forms of capital, we aim to open up space for envisioning contemporary and local economic opportunity structures. We argue policies and programs oriented to these forms of capital are more likely to increase enterprise resilience and stable economic participation. We argue that by building from a place that assumes capacity and advantage, the high costs associated with maintaining the current status quo of ‘disadvantage’ can be reduced. In agreement with previous research, we suggest the hegemony of economic value and the associated reduction of human activity to units of monetary cost or gain fails to capitalise on important local assets and agency (Levine, Chan, & Satterfield, 2015). These kinds of ‘human capital’ approaches are unlikely to make a significant contribution to increasing Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders economic engagement and participation in remote regions of Australia.

Framed by our engagement with Indigenous Standpoint Theories (Foley, 2006; Nakata, 2007) we argue a presupposition of sovereignty (Land, 2015) within such approaches is fundamental for vigorous, culturally embedded, innovative and sustainable economic possibilities and solutions. Ardill (2013) has highlighted that most Australian scholarship, particularly undertaken by non-Indigenous academics, fails to bring First Peoples’ Sovereignities to the fore, and as such persists as colonial knowledge. He has pointed out that while sovereignty is an abstraction for non-Indigenous scholars, First Peoples scholars have consistently maintained “that their sovereignties continue as embodiments of themselves, despite assertions of Crown sovereignty” (p. 318). As authors, we acknowledge Australia belonged to First Peoples before it was colonised and in the absence of a good reason for Crown sovereignty, sovereignty should continue to be assumed to reside with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Peoples (Land, 2015). In this paper we are not attempting to define sovereignty, nor do we deny historical and current processes of subjugation. What we want to express is that as authors we share a goal where “reconciliation and rights must be forged on the express presumption that First Peoples’ sovereignties – however they are self-articulated – are a fact of Australian history, and survive as surely as there are First Australians” (Ardill 2013, p. 323).

With this in common, it is still important to acknowledge we come from our own standpoints. As authors, this includes a spectrum of European, feminist, Indigenous, heritages, epistemologies and genders. It is our intention in this paper to continue a process of decolonising our thinking by focusing on the assets of very remote Australia which could be better harnessed in attempts to support ‘resilient remote communities and businesses that enrich Australia through their vigour, cultural integrity, innovativeness and sustainable use of resources’ (Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation, 2015d). We believe this requires a shared acceptance that First Nations sovereignty is both axiological and cosmological (Drahos & Frankel 2012). This positions local residents as the authorities who can enable remote economic participation and the futures of their ensuing generations—it asserts custodial heritage as the integrator of multiple forms of capital (Akeyulere, 2014; Sengupta, Vieta, & McMurtry, 2015).

Substantial ground has been made in the study of ‘indigenous entrepreneurship’ (Dana & Anderson 2007), but such advances rarely infiltrate the front line business landscape of remote Australia. An ongoing presupposition applied to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

in remote Australia is knowledge about ‘being business people’ can only be imported. People of remote Australia are not unfamiliar with such circumstances, particularly given policy and governance are typically imposed from afar from non-remote ‘centres’ and knowledge structures (Ferguson 2012). These challenges are ongoing, multi-faceted and cross all sectors of the economy and society, however the outcomes of our applied research identifies some of the re-visioning needed to facilitate the task.

### Literature Review

Local knowledges and extant systems of relationships between people, country, ancestry and resources is both ontological and advantageous (Grieves, 2009; Wallace & Lovell, 2009); yet this is avoided in the language of public policy, which uses the discernment of remoteness and Indigenous heritage as measures of disadvantage (Australian Government, 2015a). Often these systems of relationships are, whether blatantly or more subtly, constructed as key ‘barriers’ to be ‘overcome’, particularly in the employment engagement and participation policy and program environment (McRae-Williams, 2014). While we recognise Altman’s hybrid economy model (see Altman, 2010) has had a significant impact and gone some way towards creating a space for recognising the economic values of local knowledges and relationships, it continues to adhere to an assumption that Aboriginal knowledge and business knowledge are separate phenomena.

This kind of dualism, we argue, hinders initiatives aimed at economic participation and development by constraining evolution of cultural identities. Drawing from authors like Bhabha (2013), we believe culture to be fluid and hybridity possible, where practice can enable ‘culture’ to acquire new forms that simultaneously affirm old ways. This perspective is distinctly different from the assumptions informing dominant remote economic participation and development initiatives. For example, here the identity given most legitimately is that of ‘worker’ (McRae-Williams & Gerritsen, 2010), a dissociated individual, who knows and makes choices through a lens of rational self-interest (Hodgson, 2012), primarily for the purposes of wealth accumulation. Identities not obviously or firmly associated with accumulating wealth through productive citizenship, are subsequently viewed in terms of deficit, an individual’s failure to value the ‘right’ things or make the ‘right’ decisions (McRae-Williams & Guenther, 2012).

It is predominantly such a standpoint that defines the disadvantages and barriers to economic participation and growth in remote Australia and shapes policy and program implementation. From this dominant frame the value of certain assets or types of capital are emphasised at the expense of others in the quest for ‘closing the gap’ (Australian Government, 2015a; Tudge, 2014).

While there is some indication the current Australian Government is moving towards a more nuanced engagement with economic theory (Hoque & Adams, 2011), assumptions about the nature of a ‘productive citizen’ are still firmly entrenched in the non-market goals and evaluation of economic engagement and participation initiatives in remote Australia (Dockery, 2014; Haslam McKenzie, 2013). It is perhaps symptomatic of the polity governing the non-market approach to remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander settlements that the values of, and tradeoffs made, by residents are outside the scope of most indicators measured in reports, such as *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2014a), or the *Closing the Gap, Prime Minister’s Report* (Australian Government, 2015a). Levine et al. (2015) have pointed out the focus of such reports is on generating data that provide monetary valuations (however unstable), rather than understanding realistically presented and empirically defensible choice behaviour and tradeoffs. We acknowledge this, and find the tension is prevalent beyond our work and in much of the multi-disciplinary work of the CRC-REP (see Blackwell, Dockery, Blake, Vincent,

Lovell, Bubb & Raggatt, 2014; Blackwell, Mcfarlane, & Blake, 2014; Minutjukur & Osborne, 2014; Osborne, 2014) and its predecessor, the Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre (DKCRC) (McAllister, Izquierdo, Janssen, & Stafford Smith, 2009; Stafford Smith, 2010; Walker, Porter, & Stafford Smith, 2009).

### **Human capital theory**

One of the key theories holding up most current initiatives aimed at increasing the engagement and participation of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples residing in remote Australia is a certain interpretation of Human Capital Theory. This theory suggests individual investment in knowledge and skills is motivated by a reward in the form of a return on investment or economic benefit (Becker, 1993). Regardless of any other benefit that individuals or communities can derive from learning, whether at school or beyond, the driving rationale for education and training is the imperative of generating income and increasing labour market productivity (Tan, 2014), ultimately for economic growth (Keeley, 2007). The dominance of this perspective means it is not surprising to hear messages like ‘A good education can lead to a good job and financial stability for individuals and their families, as well as a better future for the community’ (Scullion, 2015).

This reading of human capital assumes a causal link between education/training and employment. The logic stemming from this is if jobs are there and training is linked to jobs, then economic participation and productivity are more likely. However, this logic has been challenged through the findings of the *Remote Economic Participation and Pathways to Employment* projects (see Guenther & McRae-Williams, 2014; Guenther & McRae-Williams, 2015)

### **Social Capital**

The concept of social capital is a response to the disassociated, under socialised view of human nature that has been touched on above. In its most simplistic or traditional sense ‘social capital’ is something essential to the nature of ‘productive citizens’ in that it is not simply the financial capital that is in people’s bank accounts nor just the human capital inside their heads that are contributors to their capacity to generate wealth and increase labour market productivity. The structure of their ‘social’ relationships is also essential (Côté, 2005; Portes, 1998). Falk and Kilpatrick (2000) assert social capital is produced and used through the interactions (networks) between people as they create and draw on knowledge resources and as they create and draw on identity resources (including trust, norms and values). They suggest the strength of a community is determined by the quality and quantity of the interactions and that ‘interactivity connects with social, civic and economic outcomes’ (p. 105).

While being poor and marginal is often associated with having little or insufficient social capital (Knack & Keefer, 1997), Woolcock (2001) argues ‘social capital’ links between disciplinary, sectorial and methodological divides and at its best:

*Recognises that exclusion from economic and political institutions is created and maintained by powerful vested interests, but that marginalised groups themselves possess unique social resources that can be used as a basis for overcoming exclusion, and as a mechanism for helping forge access to these institutions. (p.16)*

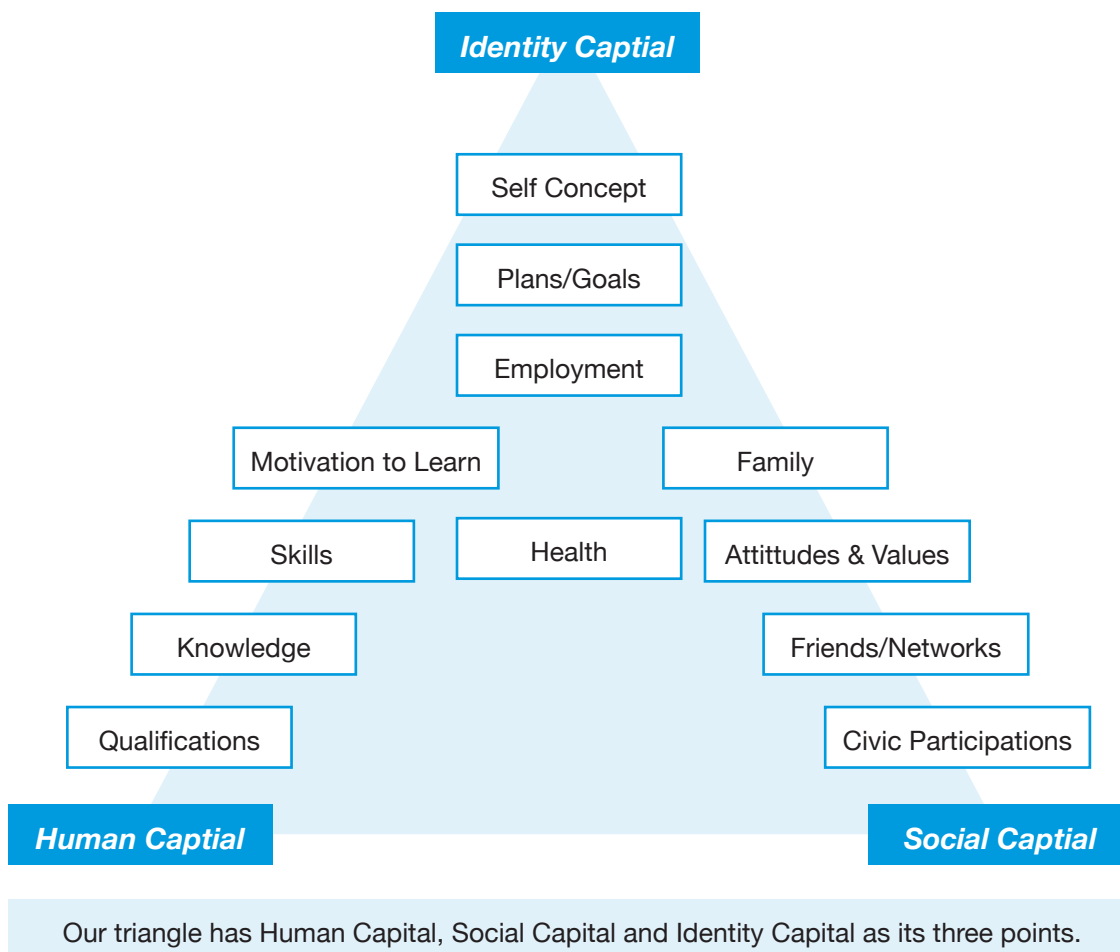
Social Capital, in terms of the purpose of this paper, accepts that social and relationship systems have existed for hundreds of generations and through these, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have managed resources, survived European colonisation, taken up

intercultural trade and participated in structured and informal economies. Social capital is important as it values local networks as assets, and allows recognition and exploration of both their costs and benefits. However, we also wish to suggest the concept of ‘social capital’ itself is inadequate as a way of explaining the enablers of economic participation in remote Australia.

### Identity Capital

In keeping with Côté (2005) we accept identity capital develops as a result of phases of human development where individuals distinguish ‘the systems of value, beliefs ... group affiliations, leisure time pursuits, as well as intellectual and aesthetic preferences’ (p. 225) with which they identify. Identity capital can be defined as ‘the intangible resource in which people ‘invest’ to become ‘who they are’ (Côté & Schwartz, 2002). Identity capital includes psychological factors such as self-confidence, self-efficacy, cognitive flexibility and complexity, self-monitoring, critical thinking and morals (Côté, 2005). While identity capital can be built and drawn on (as an asset) in a number of contexts, it is likely, in the context of education, training and economic participation, there are multidirectional causal links between other capitals. For example, education can lead to the production of identity capital but it also contributes to the kind of learning people engage in (Côté & Schwartz, 2002; Guenther, 2011). Schuller, Bynner, and Feinstein (2004) argue for the intertwined relationship using Figure 2. While this model may not present a full picture, it does explain to some extent how and why individuals make decisions that are not necessarily motivated by purely self-interest and economic gain.

**Figure 2:** Relationship between capitals



Source: Schuller et al., 2004

Importantly, successful outcomes in this model are not measured in purely financial or economic terms. They could be measured in terms of qualifications, levels of trust, engagement in democracy, as well as through psychological measures - in addition to the financial value that arises from the three capitals shown.

### **Cultural Capital**

Cultural capital can include taste and preferences essential to the agency of social and identity capital (Côté, 2005). This form of capital is described as the various forms of habits, dispositions and knowledges gained via exposure to cultural practices (Prieur & Savage, 2013). Originally 'cultural capital' was conceived by Bourdieu (1993) to explain the relationship in European societies between exposure to 'highbrow' cultural practices (music recitals, theatre and fine art) and increased social capital and privilege. It was applied as a tool for explaining how the success of children in school depended on the level of education of their parents (Prieur & Savage, 2013) and as a form of capital that poor or marginal communities lacked. However, as with social and identity capital, the notion of cultural capital can easily move to one which allows for recognition of local cultural assets and their value in terms of economic development and participation. Biddle and Swee (2012) suggest remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wellbeing includes use of first language, participation in cultural activity and access to homelands. Woodhead and Acker (2015) have detailed analysis of the value chain association of cultural production with economic, social and cultural capital. While a traditional view of cultural capital was essentially defined as a reflection of European cultural privilege, the definition changes as it re-centres on marginal communities (Yosso, 2005).

Indigenous peoples' ways of living have been constructed in policy evaluation and program design as less than ideal in terms of the 'right' way of being, knowing and valuing economic activity. This is demonstrated in the 'Closing the Gap' rhetoric (Australian Government, 2015a). Yet to suggest remote Australian Aboriginal peoples do not utilise cultural capital in business and as significant participants in the cosmopolitan and local economies, is naïve. Indeed, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have been engaging in forms of trade for a long time (see chapter 12 in Keen, 2004) and have been part of the model of European capitalist economy since the British first colonised south eastern Australia.

### **Natural Capital**

The stocks of environmental resources measured in terms of their diversity, sustainability, availability and quality are sometimes referred to as 'natural capital' (Greiner, Stanley, Austin, & NAILSMA, 2012). In any discussion about remote economic participation, the natural environment plays an important role. Albeit this discussion is often a binary conversation where on one hand the value of environment is realised through extraction – of animals, minerals or plants - and on the other hand, land and people are a living system under the sovereignty of custodians and the value is in temporal and restorative stewardship (Drahos & Frankel, 2012). In a conservation economy, economic arrangements are designed or re-designed so they restore, maintain or improve natural capital and produce environmental, social and financial value (Putnis, Josif, & Woodward, 2007). Acceptance of the value of a 'conservation economy' then has the potential to justify employment in natural resource management initiatives. Thus, 'caring for country' employment initiatives in remote parts of Australia have grown considerably over recent years (Australian Government, 2015c). Altman (2010) described the inception of a *Working on Country* program in 2007 as a way of demonstrating Australia's international obligations towards greater environmental sustainability. The White Paper on Developing Northern Australia (Australian Government, 2015b) recently reported 78 Working on Country

projects are now in place across northern Australia, justifying the conservation of ‘exceptional biodiversity and heritage value’ (p. 149). The point is at least in some ways, land does have intrinsic value, not just as a means of economic production.

### **Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation Learnings**

With the literature in mind, we now turn to three case studies based on research conducted within the CRC-REP. The scope of each project differs considerably as do the research questions they set out to answer and the methodologies employed. However, an assumption shared by all projects within the CRC-REP is the voices of the First Nations peoples who live in and belong to the land must be privileged if issues of economic participation, health and wellbeing, education, justice and culture are to be understood by policy-makers and program designers (Guenther et al., 2015). The three projects have together worked productively with several hundred local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders during the course of the research work. At the same time, those of us (as researchers) who come in from outside, need to carefully critique our assumptions. We have put considerable effort into this (Guenther, 2013; Guenther et al., 2013, 2014; Guenther & McRae-Williams, 2015; McRae-Williams, 2014; McRae-Williams & Guenther, 2012). Each project discussed below has a different scope, not only in terms of geographic reach, but also in terms of the methodology, stakeholders engaged, and budget.

More detailed information about project methodologies and outputs can be found on respective project pages of the CRC-REP website (Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c). The common theme that unites all CRC-REP projects relates to a desire to see improved economic outcomes for remote Australia, and particularly for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. While this sounds fairly straight forward, what we have discovered - and this is reflected in the literature - is that ‘economic participation’ is a contestable concept.

### **Remote Economic Participation (REP)**

The dominant discourse of education systems, both in Australia and internationally, demand education produce productive citizens capable of participating in and contributing to the economy with a certain interpretation of Human Capital Theory as the primary underpinning foundation (Banks, 2010; Keeley, 2007; Swan, 2008). Indigenous knowledge systems tend to be relegated to the margins. Consistent with the RES project’s observations of Australian education systems, Arenas et al. (2009) suggest ‘governments tend to support the inclusion of indigenous knowledge in formal schooling efforts to the degree that they remain nonthreatening to assumptions upholding the governing body itself, and to a key goal of contemporary educational reform, namely, to support late industrial capitalism’ (p. 79).

RES project findings show remote participants want education to support Aboriginal languages, maintain culture, and affirm a connection to land while supporting students’ identities embedded in the context of their communities. The way remote Aboriginal respondents see systems supporting these educational goals is through parent and community power (for a more detailed summary of RES project findings, see Guenther, 2015). They define successful education as parent and community involvement in schooling. But of course, the problem for those actors who hold power over systems, as highlighted by Arenas et al. above, is they are reluctant to cede power and control. There are good pragmatic reasons for this often related to funding arrangements. Philosophically too, if education is purposed around Human Capital Theory assumptions, the opportunities for schools to respond to alternative imperatives related to other forms of capital (social, identity, natural and cultural) become threatening.



The project findings also point to disconnects between the aims of schooling as a means for economic participation and how to achieve that. One of the reasons for this is that system actors with apparent power try hard to work with simple system responses. This is a position that assumes 'best practice' is achievable but at the same time works actively to avoid the inherent complexity of remote education. If the education system was treated as a complex system, then system actors would take into consideration as many controlling variables as possible, recognising there may be unintended consequences due to interactions not accounted for. But they generally do not. What we have found is stakeholders by and large ignore the important 'beyond school' elements of the system which include employers, training providers and other end users. Actors with apparent power in education systems also tend to prefer working with what they can control (Wilson, 2014). They can control what happens in classrooms (at least to some extent) but they cannot control what happens in communities, though sometimes they try to do this by coercive means, for example through the application of threats to welfare (Wright, Arnold, & Dandie, 2012).

With models focused on service delivery rather than ground up community engagement the involvement of employers, community leaders and even parents becomes problematic. Yet our research shows strong support for parent and community involvement in schooling. In the context of a sovereignty and capitals framework, we have learned that production of human capital is inadequate on its own to drive economic participation. We have learned social, cultural, identity, natural capital and potentially sovereignty drivers do work to align local expectations with educational engagement. We have observed this in programs that involve 'learning on country', using local languages, and which work towards cultural maintenance.

### **Pathways to Employment**

The Pathways to Employment research project has been guided by the following research questions:

- How do Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people navigate their way into meaningful livelihoods?
- What kinds of work might help to support sustainable livelihood outcomes?
- What kinds of learning could support meaningful livelihood agendas, aspirations and pathways?

Making visible assumptions that inform dominant education-employment pathway discourses was identified as essential early on in this project to ensure more marginal or alternative perspectives had space to be heard (McRae-Williams & Guenther, 2012). Through doing this, the project was able to share learnings on how mainstream assumptions about the meaning of education, its links to employment and associated purpose of life, has influenced how pathways between education and employment are engineered and implemented (McRae-Williams & Guenther 2014). Three separate qualitative case studies and one honours project were undertaken as part of this project. All drew from ethnographic and participatory action research methods and aimed to centrally position the experiences and voices of the Aboriginal peoples involved. A key learning from this project was that navigating through such engineered pathways and supports was inherently challenging for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples in remote Australia whose ways of being, knowing and valuing differed from dominant assumptions (McRae-Williams, 2014). The project has drawn attention to a common aspiration expressed by Aboriginal peoples living in remote Australia, for engaging in learning and work experiences (Parkes, 2013; Parkes et al., 2014). But more importantly, the project has argued the fundamental aspirations for belonging to family, community and country which shape these learning and work perspectives are often invisible, or seen as problematic, from a mainstream perspective.

The project has challenged the notion that simple increases in qualification levels for Aboriginal peoples will equate to improved economic participation outcomes, through pointing to the 30,000 jobs held by non-Indigenous people with no certificate qualifications in very remote Australia. While not denying the complexities of a simple transfer of employment to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples, the project has posited to some extent ‘there is no educational or skill reason why those in remote communities cannot engage more fully in the broader range of industry options available in very remote Australia’ (Guenther & McRae-Williams, 2014, p. 9-10). The project findings suggest that part of the reason for this lack of engagement, or buy-in, may well relate to ontological, epistemological and axiological mis-alignment where some pathways into economic engagement were understood as potentially fragmenting, rather than fostering, an individual’s sense of local identity and belonging. Gaining community legitimacy and family support for learning experiences and employment positions was enabled when local people’s values and strengths were recognised and spaces for building on these were facilitated. It is from these learnings that the Pathways to Employment project points to the need for a framework of advantage to shape pathway engineering and transitional supports, one that moves beyond traditional human capital models and the assumptions that support them.

The project has also included learnings that point to the potentialities of recognising and developing locally framed *entrepreneurship* (Rindova, Barry & Ketchen, 2009) and enterprise activity for supporting the extensions of local capitals for economic advantage.

### **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Tourism Product**

This research project approaches the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Tourism industry as a sector in which business ownership and entrepreneurial activity are established and at play in the context of wider market forces. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and landscape relationships are a drawcard attraction of tourism in Australia. From an economic participation point of view, this representational symbolism as Australia’s ‘Indigenous cultures’ underlies the regular citation of tourism as a key development industry for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. But there’s a ‘catch’. While Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are typically perceived as ‘masters of culture’, it is rare for the broad system (comprising the tourism industry, government, support agencies and society at large) to afford genuine regard to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as ‘masters of business’. For example, there is a body of resource-based view research on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and tourism that continually ‘concludes’ that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people lack education, understanding about tourism, resources and that cultural ways of being are counterproductive (e.g. Buultjens et al., 2010; Fuller et al., 2005; O’Rourke & Memmott, 2005; Song, 2008). Not only are these research agendas tied to deficit model thinking obsessed with disadvantage, they also uphold the seemingly incommensurable dichotomy between ‘Western’ and ‘Indigenous’ (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) knowledges. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics (e.g. Moreton-Robinson, 2004) are waging an ongoing effort to not only legitimise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges within academia, they are also redefining long-held ‘boundaries’ (purported by the ‘all-knowing’ Western gaze) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge itself.

The CRC-REP Aboriginal tourism project takes on this situation at the level it matters most: the applied contexts, which in this case are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who own and operate tourism businesses (which typically are small enterprises) in remote Australia. The contexts of distance, limited infrastructure, resources, value production chains and market access (to name but a few) in remote tourism are difficult enough for small business, but

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander business people have an added challenge to overcome - subjugation via the de-legitimisation of their knowledge, capabilities and ways of being. For example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are often treated as being in a perpetual state of start-up level business proficiency, something which the body of resource-based review of Aboriginal tourism research seems all too willing to highlight. There is presently an example which shows that for Aboriginal tourism business people (regardless of whether they are emerging or senior industry operators) they are required to accept an assignment of a business mentor in order to join a recent national Aboriginal tourism government assistance program. A recent study on such programs was unclear about whether mentors are Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, but concluded that the development and administration of the program is based on limited involvement or consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Buultjens & Gale 2013). Hence, programs like this highlight ways tourism development agencies contribute to the 'for and about' of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, but with non-Aboriginal people holding the 'keys to business knowledge' for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to learn.

The CRC-REP Aboriginal tourism project is developing a growing pool of evidence to redirect the agenda away from deficit model thinking. Small remote tourism enterprises operated by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will continually contend with challenges of remoteness, however our research also suggests operators are active agents moulding tourism systems in remote Australia. Forms of value creation, including the development of new industry value chains, are highly varied and indicative of innovative behaviour to create opportunities that improve enterprise competitiveness in what are otherwise challenging market contexts (Jacobsen & Tiyce, 2014). Many operators have business models in place that bear striking resemblance to relational practice perspectives discussed by small enterprise researchers from rural Canada (Young, 2006). According to Young (2006), relational models are born by necessity from unruly market contexts that lead small enterprises (which, by definition, have limited human, financial and other capitals) to create a level of stability across distance. Where big tourism corporations are resourced to create stable production/delivery chains (Young, 2006), our findings on industry value chain creation, enterprise cooperation, diversification and the like utilised by remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tourism operators, highlight their approach as ongoing, innovative and liberally-oriented (Jacobsen, forthcoming; Jacobsen & Tiyce, 2014). In short, our research demonstrates the ways remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tourism operators are taking up the call made in the broad tourism literature (e.g. Feser & Isserman, 2009; Schmallegger, Carson & Tremblay, 2010) that for remote tourism to forge ahead; the drive, inspiration and know-how must come from within remote Australia itself.

An additional study carried out by the CRC-REP Aboriginal tourism project also suggests that despite the challenges of distance, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tourism operators in various parts of remote Australia have established or are taking steps to self-organise into clusters (see Ffowcs-Williams 2012; Porter 2000). Impetus behind these initiatives vary, however common drives include overcoming marginalisation from regional economic development and establishing Aboriginal-centric structures for grass roots (e.g. small) operators to represent their own interests in tourism. For Porterian cluster perspectives to flourish among Aboriginal tourism sectors of remote Australia, our research set out to reconfigure Western enterprise clustering concepts within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander business knowledge. Through this work we are rethinking the development structures available to Aboriginal tourism operators in Australia, while we are also rethinking the 'boundaries of indigenous knowledge' to further explicate the notion of 'doing business Aboriginal way' and generate, at the very least, culturally appropriate business development resources. According to our research, cultural ways are not counterproductive to business, but instead hold foundations for strength and

building cluster competitiveness. We view Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges as inextricably linked to the deep past (i.e. traditional knowledges), but consolidated in the present through articulations of business and development. At the time of writing the present article, our clustering project is in progress, but we assert that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have legitimate claims to business knowledge and acknowledging this is vital for moving beyond deficit model thinking as we walk to the future.

## Discussion

It is fair to suggest that the most common way for politicians, policy makers, program developers and implementers to frame remote Aboriginal residents in Australia is through a lens of disadvantage and deficit. From such a perspective, it is what remote Aboriginal people lack that becomes the key focus and impetus for response. In terms of the 'capitals' we have discussed above, remote Aboriginal peoples are usually constructed as lacking in, or not having the 'right' forms of human, social, identity or cultural capital, and the natural capital they have is fundamentally not recognised as theirs. Yet all three CRC-REP projects point to the inherent assets and strengths of remote Aboriginal peoples and their aspirations for continuing with these as tools for being successful in meaningful livelihoods.

There is a wealth of untapped Aboriginal knowledge, expertise and insight regarding engagement with the economy whether through employment or enterprise. For example, the work of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Tourism Product project has shown the different forms of capital Aboriginal business people are sharing with each other through clustering. In a sense, the contribution of these operators should be regarded as profound because not only are they reconfiguring business practices, they are also setting out terms of business practices within contexts that are challenging/resistant/incongruous to hegemonic Western discourses of 'best practice' (Ffowcs-Williams, 2012).

In this paper we are arguing a perspective and discourse of advantage, which might use different forms of capital for example, can sit within dominant economic discourse but could also allow emphasis to be placed on local assets - social, identity and cultural (as well as natural). The research discussed includes the insight that local assets are not always a disadvantage or necessarily in opposition to capitalism or economic engagement; rather they are a strong foundation for vibrant, resilient and sustainable livelihoods. The assumption - as is evident in discourses of disadvantage and deficit - that remote Aboriginal peoples lack the 'right' forms of capital and that local ways are in opposition to economic participation and development, creates a barrier to increasing local engagement and participation in initiatives aimed at employment and/or enterprise outcomes.

We contend that working from a basis of 'who and where people are' from local systems of belief and value with their strong indicators of identity capital, facilitates stronger positions for sustainable economic engagement. It is from here that local remote people have agency to define and build on their advantages. These are formative processes where people can consider change on their own terms. Yet we do acknowledge if we envisage economic participation built on the strengths of local assets, the bonding capital ties within the community are inadequate in themselves and linking capital ties that expand local peoples' social networks and cultural connections beyond the local to the regional and cosmopolitan become important.

Similarly, as noted in the Remote Education case study, if maintaining a connection to (or sovereignty over) land is an important purpose of education, the inherent value of the natural capital of that land must be recognised. And indeed, this is exactly what is happening through the 'Working On Country' initiatives mentioned earlier in the literature review. Therefore, investment

in education, training and employment structures that meet those common purposes are likely to yield significant returns for all stakeholders through connection to country and maintaining biodiversity and natural heritage.

The problem with industries like mining and agriculture/pastoralism, which create lots of low skilled employment opportunities, is while they fit well with larger national economic agendas they do nothing to engage or build the remote local social, cultural, natural or identity capitals that are fundamentally important for residents in remote communities. This is evidenced by the fact that while mining is one of the largest private sector employers of Indigenous people, our research shows there is a relatively low up-take of jobs in these industries by local people (Guenther & McRae-Williams, 2014), but there are examples of successful Aboriginal enterprises that work in related industries, such as land management/remediation work (Haslam McKenzie, 2014). Further, a reliance on boom and bust industries like mining and to some extent pastoralism, leaves local people particularly vulnerable. The irony of the current downturn or 'bust' in the mining industry is that it will make virtually no difference to the local economies of remote communities, though of course it will make a difference to the many people who have engaged in the industry on a fly-in fly-out basis.

Both the tourism and pathways case studies point to the importance of engaging people in learning and enterprise activities in spaces where they can identify or develop a sense of 'belonging'. This alignment of social, natural and cultural capital with identity creates opportunities for ownership and participation in work that is meaningful and inherently valuable, similar to the way that creation of financial or built assets creates a sense of satisfaction and purpose relative to social, identity and cultural capital for some people. While identity may well be tied up in the social status of economic assets for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander locals, the assets that are of advantage are probably more likely to be associated with sovereign control of natural and cultural assets. This is why, as the remote education case study shows, language and culture are so important.

There are of course lessons in all of this for the Australian Government's *Developing Northern Australia* strategy (see Australian Government, 2015b). On the one hand, the strategy recognises that 'The north will only truly achieve its potential with the participation of all the people who live there, including Indigenous Australians' (p. iv). But on the other, it fails to recognise the value of land, language and culture as assets worth investing in - except where they produce direct economic benefit. The strategy argues for the importance of 'real jobs' (p. 109). It argues for 'work for the dole' 'placements in local businesses' as the solution. Yet there is no evidence in the literature we have seen that suggests these kind of assumed pathways to employment have ever worked to create so called 'real jobs'.

We do know that more than 70 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment in remote communities where English is not the first language, is clustered around four broad industry categories: 'Public Administration and Safety', 'Health Care and Social Assistance', 'Education and Training' and 'Other Services' (Guenther & McRae-Williams, 2014). We note these are not all low skill industries where apparently poorly educated remote community people should fit (McRae-Williams & Guenther, 2014). These industry groups include jobs that build on assets that are of importance to local people in communities such as ranger work, work in schools, Aboriginal arts workers, Aboriginal community researchers, health clinics, social support services and traditional healing, and local governance.

## Conclusion

The title of this paper asks a question about the ‘enablers’ of remote economic participation. This is quite a different question than the one often posed which seeks to identify barriers. The latter question assumes that something needs to be overcome, for example as expressed in the *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* report (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2014). These kinds of reports regularly reveal the problems with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, as if a certain racial profile and cultural heritage is a disadvantage that needs to be overcome. While the indicators in themselves do not lie, they fail to tell the whole story about the assets that residents in remote settlements possess because they live on their country, maintain traditional cultural practices and speak their own languages. We have presented these assets using a discourse of different forms of ‘capital’. We are not suggesting local people in remote communities - particularly those who do not speak English as their first language - should be denied access to economic opportunities that are promoted in the larger polity, such as in the *Developing The North* proposal.

Our argument however, based in part on the literature and in part on three case studies which bring together learnings from CRC-REP research projects, is the enablers of economic participation as we find them are often discounted as less than important for the livelihoods of those living in remote communities than alignments with non-remote frameworks and values. We suggest that appropriate investment and support for structures that build on these assets and the aspirations of sovereign subjects will nurture sustainable employment and entrepreneurial outcomes. But ultimately, we are not discussing ‘capitals’ defined and contained by ‘outsiders’, but rather to the creation of spaces where local capitals can be explored, questioned, challenged and built upon by locals themselves – it is these individuals, groups and communities that have the greatest stake in terms of investment.

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