

Remote Indigenous settlements – more than tiny dots on a map

Indigenous people and their settlements are more than tiny dots littered across a vast continent. These smaller settlements are under threat of closure by top-down policies in favour of urban concentration.

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Australia has over one thousand discrete Indigenous settlements distributed over the continent and on its surrounding islands. Public debate over plans to cut government support to remote communities in Western Australia and the Northern Territory, where the majority of these settlements are located, is ongoing. These small settlements are alternatively known as communities, outstations, homelands or small towns, and both states are now headlong into a decade of reforming remote service delivery. In Western Australia, policy practice has resulted in threatened and forced closure of 150 to 200 communities. Over the border in the Northern Territory, funding has been diverted to “hub” settlements by decoupling smaller “spoke” settlements from government grants, critical for municipal services, such as road maintenance and local power generation.

Urban concentration is now being put forward as the preferred model of housing Indigenous communities, replacing the small-scale, decentralized settlements that burgeoned in previous policy eras. These new policies come with new labels referring to their upscaled size: “SuperTowns,”

“growth towns,” “core” and “non-core” communities convey a ranking in the settlement, and funding, hierarchy. While this language promotes regional urbanization, it has been equally used to disparage Indigenous settlements as welfare-dependent, hence in need of “integration,” “normalization,” “ingathering” and assimilation into the productive economy. This is a top-down approach to Indigenous citizenship that overhangs an acrimonious history of racialized policies and practices in Australia. The bleaker side of what appears to be an optimistic model has led in practice to sweeping reform, service withdrawal and small settlement closure, either by force or by attrition. This pattern fails to recognize the diverse economic and strategic benefits made possible through unlocking human and landscape resources across regions. In our view, policies need to value and integrate desert, savanna and coastal customary knowledge to support both national and Indigenous interests.

Outstations are a distinct category of small settlements established on Aboriginal lands in the brief, yet buoyant, era of self-determination of the 1970s. When mapped with vast distances between, outstations resemble dots peppered across a sea-bounded continent. Hundreds of these dots are individual communities described as “life projects,” often started by small family groups with long-term commitments to caring for, and remaining on, traditional lands. Some communities have disintegrated into troubled social localities, but in this hidden part of Indigenous Australia, there are also many quiet achievers who have initiated projects that sustain residents, invigorate remote regions and drive the economies of tomorrow, and which vitally also align with Indigenous people’s own aspirations.

Remote Indigenous Australia has severely lacked the basic services most urban dwellers assume as national standard. The Australian Bureau of Statistics has, in the past, produced a rather revealing survey reporting the level of development across 1,200 discrete Indigenous

settlements. The last edition of the Community Housing and Infrastructure Needs Survey (CHINS) was published in 2007, at the beginning of the current remote reform era. The CHINS catalogued, state by state, a telling image of systemic undersupply and under-servicing. Remote communities have been starved of consistent funding for adequate housing, public schools, affordable electricity, sewerage systems, medical facilities and safe drinking water. This itemization reveals that, historically, infrastructure has been inequitably distributed and poorly maintained and that the so-called cost overrun of servicing communities has been, in fact, a pretty cheap outlay.

Indigenous Australians in remote communities have reasserted their rights through cultural adaptations and by staying fixed in place, many on land that was previously denied them. Despite the absence of opportunities for high-return business developments, other economic opportunities exist: in protecting biodiversity, ecological management and cultural enterprises. These are often low-intensity, niche industries in Indigenous art, cultural and ecotourism, land and sea management and local-scale infrastructure projects. This type of interspersed economic participation is termed the “hybrid economy.” The hybrid economy is a distinctly Indigenous economy, combining customary, state and market-based elements. Hybrid economies are not transitions to or in between full market engagement; rather, they are rational choices and alternatives to intense market development. In these regions, mainstream economies do not exist and could not be sustained even if desired. And as it happens, supplementary local-scale subsistence actually constitutes affluence for remote Indigenous residents.

The hybrid economy of the Torres Strait’s Masig Islanders demonstrates the difference of this model. Non-commercial and commercial fisheries are guided by rules and values moderating use of sea resources and wealth accumulation and ensuring equitable distribution of both. The Yanyuwa peoples from the south-western Gulf of Carpentaria

have rangers participating in cultural tourism and Sea Country programs. They manage turtle and dugong breeding and their sea-grazing areas, undertake fee-for-service work with fisheries, remove feral cats from offshore islands and also transfer cultural knowledge to younger generations. The point of identifying these successful cases is that hybrid economic activity can make positive contributions to the whole nation's productivity, resource management and eco-security aspirations.

Another approach that steps up from the hybrid economy scale to the commercial scale involves a partnership between the Indjalandji-Dhidhanu traditional owners on the upper Georgina River and a team of architects and bio-nano materials engineers from the University of Queensland. The Spinifex Project illustrates an important lesson: that intercultural partnerships integrated with government agencies are vital to new industry developments. Spinifex is a ubiquitous perennial native grass prevalent in the arid and semiarid areas covering 70 percent of the Australian continent. Spinifex fibres and resin have potential uses in building and other technologies as either separate or composite products, such as insulation batts, water filtration devices and renewable carbon fibre precursor materials. The research, now in its tenth year, indicates that other regions in Australia may have similar opportunities for local, sustainable, contemporary industries and technological products.

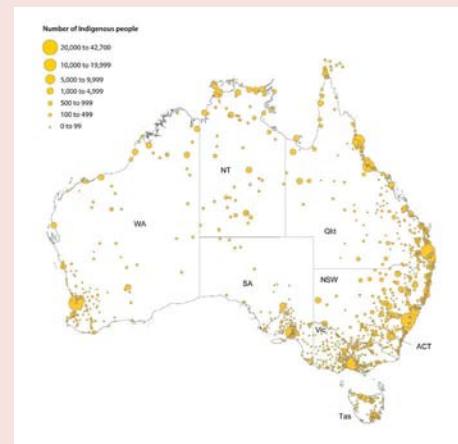
Not every Indigenous organization has the capability to leverage into high-end industries. The Indjalandji-Dhidhanu traditional owners, despite residing in a remote Indigenous town of less than 250 people, located 150 kilometres from the regional hub of Mount Isa, have established the Myuma Group of corporations, combining a range of enterprises and charitable functions, and have thus grown into an important regional player. Their partnerships and enterprises with government turn over an estimated \$15 million per annum, diversifying across road construction,



Walngal outstation in Wik Lands, south of Cape Keerweer, Western Cape York, Queensland. Photography: Rex Martin

training and inland-river management services. Adding to this mix are the possibilities offered by commercial spinifex farming to provide a new enterprise base for affiliated Indigenous settlements. Spinifex is not every region's answer, but what other latent industries could be unlocked by coupling contemporary Indigenous enterprises with new technologies?

Indigenous people and their settlements are more than tiny dots littered across a vast continent. They are indicators of family groupings in permanent communities,



Map of Indigenous settlements and population distributions across Australia, 2011, copyright Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), "The health and welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples," Cat. No. IHW 147 (Canberra: AIHW, 2015), 14.

many of which contribute to hybrid economies and aspire to move toward financial self-determination. Shifting beyond the origins of the outstation movement, several have relocated themselves away from the escalating social problems of hub townships. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' right to stay on their traditional lands is a principle recognized under twenty-three land statutes, in addition to the federal *Native Title Act 1993*. People who do so undertake the responsibilities of land custodianship, incorporating niche cultural industries and playing a vital role in environmental management. They are maintaining sustainable livelihoods beyond their local regions by building social and economic enterprises to secure a future, providing meaningful dividends for residents while enhancing Australia's national interest.

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