

Section 1

Rethinking Regional Development and Social Infrastructure in Northern Australia

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There has never been a political or intellectual consensus about how or why to develop the north (Megarrity, 2018). Therefore, service provision, infrastructure investment and government policy has been subject to a series of fads and fashions. Megarrity (2018) suggests that these fads and fashions are underpinned by opposing fears and perceptions held by southern Australians about the large tracts of vacant and unused lands and, conversely, the belief of those in the north that underdevelopment should be righted by Commonwealth investment to increase access to basic services and a minimum standard of living.

The four chapters included in this section address these seemingly opposing views but from a pragmatic northern-held view. By this it is inferred that the authors are northerners and apply evidence to suggest a middle ground, whereby policy allows the north to prosper and develop but in accordance with the culture, needs and aspirations of those who are most affected by the outcomes of decision-making.

This section analyses the impact of the prevailing one-size-fits-all approach to policy development and implementation in Northern Australia. Each chapter examines the specific attributes that define the socioeconomic characteristics of Northern Australian residents to describe how the application of current policy affects the health and wellbeing of its these residents and makes a series of recommendations for reform.

The first two chapters describe the disjunct between land use as a planning system and as the use of the land for agriculture, and the ability of the policy system to reflect the capacity of the land to respond to and supply externally bound expectations. The following two chapters describe how the social wellbeing and health of Northern Australia residents can be enhanced by policy that responds to and applies an evidence-based approach to guide service delivery and decision-making.

Harwood and Christie-Johnston apply the analogy of the ‘have and have-nots’ to describe the impact of southern-based decisions on northern-based residents. This chapter describes how the industrialised planning and development system exacerbates Indigenous disadvantage. The authors recommend the creation of a separate Indigenous planning system for lands owned by Aboriginal entities to reflect landowner and native title aspirations, as opposed to the top-down state-based constraints model to planning that focuses on developing large city centres.

Turnour et al. describe how the enduring productivist models of agriculture pervade because of the need to do something with the empty and unused lands in the north. The authors describe the impact of policies’ circular conundrum (from failure to high expectations) that impairs the capacity to learn and adapt from past mistakes. This creates a perception of failure that is attributed to location such as being remote and north. The authors propose a move to a post-productivist model of agriculture that focuses on the relationship between the farmer, the wider community, landscape values and environmental protection, referred to as a place-based framework. The authors argue that the place-based framework provides a new narrative for northern agriculture that involves a deeper understanding of the physical, environmental and sociocultural assets of the region.

The chapters by Babacan and Gopalkrishnan and Davis et al. describe how Commonwealth investment can be directed more efficiently to gain more effective outcomes for northerners.

Babacan and Gopalkrishnan describe the effects of spatial disadvantage in Northern Australia that leads to social disadvantage and marginalisation. The authors argue that ineffective investment in the social and human services sector exacerbates Northern Australia’s lack of competitiveness, reinforces the persistence of weak human capital and increases the cost of service provision. The focus of this chapter is on the creation of policy to

support a sustainable model of rural and remote human service delivery that includes sustained service funding, policy coordination, community involvement in planning and delivery, and adoption of place-based approaches, creating a Northern Australian evidence base and building the capacity of the sector's workforce.

Davis et al. describe the critical health challenges experienced in Northern Australia, including poor health status, shorter lives, higher rates of accident and injury, greater levels of illness and lower rates of certain medical treatment. This is significantly worse for Indigenous Australians living in the north. The authors describe the range of reforms to service provisions such as integrated telehealth, a move to prevention to manage health and lifestyle and a focus on connected primary health care as opposed to reactionary acute care models. These reforms in service delivery necessitate changes to the way in which health care professionals are educated, trained and supported after graduation. The health service delivery and workforce training models continue to suffer from the circular conundrum described by Turnour et al. and require strategic collaboration across the north to deliver place-based responses, but these continue to be hampered by legislative and regulatory discord between jurisdictions.

All the chapters in this section highlight the fundamental principles underpinning a competitive region. These include place-based policy responses, explicit recognition of the impact the circular conundrum has on the capacity of northern residents to design and respond to appropriate models of land use and service delivery, and a fundamental need to support Northern Australia in developing policy in and with the north, by the north and for the north.

Reference

Megarrity, L. (2018). *Northern dreams: The politics of northern development in Australia*. Melbourne, Vic.: Australian Scholarly Publishing.

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