

Section 6

Governance Systems in Northern Australia

Allan P. Dale

This book reminds us that charting a vibrant future for Northern Australia will rely on our communities envisioning and securing sound economic, environmental and social development outcomes. Some refer to this as genuine or triple bottom line development. Development where there is wealth creation defined by more inclusive forms of growth. Development where policy and decision-making about natural resources delivers economic outcomes, efficient resource use and protects and manages the wider cultural and environmental services needed by society. Achieving this, however, requires both a strong and underpinning societal culture and systems of societal governance that are purposeful, deeply engaging, evidence based and adaptive.

Consequently, the final section of this book picks up on the key feature of the quadruple bottom line—the social culture and emergent governance system(s) that underpin decision-making. Weak societal governance could see a dystopian future for the north emerge—deep and entrenched disadvantage and poverty in many communities, populations and regions; boom–bust economies; continuing demographic instability; and a progressive decline of the north’s environmental assets. Stronger or healthier systems of governance could set the scene for a much brighter future.

The section starts with a discussion of potential new pathways for governance of the north by Dale et al. This chapter unfolds some of the past myths of unidimensional forms of development ranging from the grand economic schemes of past governments to extensive regulatory and distantly managed forms of landscape protection. The chapter introduces the importance of regionally and locally led forms of development that sit

happily within a more nuanced national policy frame. This particularly reminds us of the importance of Indigenous-led development as an alternative to more top-down, nationally competitive forms of program management under the Closing the Gap policies. The authors' stress most importantly that development must be both engaged and evidence based.

The second chapter in this section further explores the notion of Indigenous governance systems needed at the centre of Indigenous-led notions of development. Ford et al. particularly reflect on the important role of researchers as partners in improved, but community-led governance in the contemporary environment. They provide hope that development might best spring from local aspirations, capacities and innovations, rather than from remotely anchored Commonwealth and state/NT-driven intervention or funding programs.

In the third chapter, at a perhaps wider scale, Carter absolutely reinforces the importance of place, and the perspectives of those that live there, in driving development narratives and outcomes. He takes the importance of local knowledge and aspirations—concepts frequently challenged by development plans and approaches derived from higher policy scales. He implores the importance of co-design, deeply infused by local knowledge, in reconciling different development narratives and producing results that are culturally rich and ultimately more meaningful to all.

The fourth chapter takes us more into a methodological space, exploring the further potential for the development and application of critical systems theory and, more specifically, the Governance Systems Analysis (GSA) method (in part developed and applied through the Northern Futures Collaborative Research Network [CRN]). Positioning societal governance as a more systemic concept worthy of equally systemic and collaborative analysis is a feature of this chapter. Stephens et al. collectively and critically evaluate the importance and potential for further application of the GSA tool as a mechanism that could better inform shared conversations about continuously and adaptively refining our governance systems. Such systemic approaches could help to reconcile the seemingly incommensurable tensions between the three arms of triple bottom line outcomes. They could see a more policy-centric form of governance emerge that enables people and place to re-emerge as important features of decision-making.

Finally, as one might expect from the focus of this book, Cram explores the critically important role of the academy and researchers in infusing our governance systems (from pan-northern to local scales) with new governance concepts and the theoretical thinking and empirical evidence required to inform good decision-making and monitor the impacts of those decisions. Consequently, he reviews the important governance-building contribution of the Commonwealth's recent investment in developing the CRN. The CRN has been instrumental in building the new thinking and contributions essential to this book.

Together, these chapters remind us that, for Northern Australia and Northern Australians to have a prosperous and meaningful future, we all need to get the governance foundations right. I have previously argued that bilateral and bipartisan establishment of a northern development policy framework, while extremely economically focused, presents the opportunity for discussion about what the future of Northern Australia might look like and how it is governed. I equally think that, for the first time, we have quite powerful pan-northern governance frameworks emerging. With clever thinking, Northern Australians have the opportunity to grab the initiative and help drive these arrangements to identify and drive innovative policy and investment decisions to imagine a more durable, engaged and evidence-based system of governance for the north.

This text is taken from *Leading from the North: Rethinking Northern Australia Development*, edited by Ruth Wallace, Sharon Harwood, Rolf Gerritsen, Bruce Prideaux, Tom Brewer, Linda Rosenman and Allan Dale, published 2021 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.