

1. Background and conceptual issues

Writing in 1971 on the cusp of change from the assimilationist years of welfare administration to the era of Indigenous self-management, Charles Rowley (1971a: 362–4) described the myriad mission and government settlements across remote Australia as instrumental in frustrating urbanisation. In his view, these settlements functioned as ‘holding institutions’ serving to prevent the inevitable migration of Aboriginal people to towns and cities (Rowley 1971b: 84). With the benefit of more than 30 years hindsight, during which time Indigenous people have been free from the institutional and legislative shackles that governed their place of residence, Rowley’s proposition is only partially upheld. While migration from the bush to towns and cities has undoubtedly occurred, the overall flow of migration to and from cities has been more or less balanced since the 1970s (Gray 1989; Taylor 2003). Consequently, much of the substantial growth in urban Indigenous population that has been observed in recent decades simply reflects an increase in the enumeration of urban-based Indigenous people. That being so, the more striking and profound observation concerning Indigenous population distribution of the past 30 years (precisely because it does run counter to expectations such as those expressed by Rowley) concerns the growth in size of remote Aboriginal towns alongside the increased dispersion of Aboriginal population to outstations on Aboriginal lands. In effect, there is considerable continuity of non-urban residence despite rising urbanisation (Taylor & Bell 2004).

Some contemporary opinion would lament this continuity of Indigenous rural settlement seeking the means to socially engineer migration to urban areas (Reeves 1998; see also K. Windschuttle, ‘Assimilation already a reality’, *The Australian*, 1 March 2004). It is interesting to compare such views with the current activities of Federal, State, and Territory governments which appear increasingly prepared to respond to the reality of a growing Indigenous population in remote areas by seeking ways to enhance life chances and life quality *in situ*. Such efforts are in line with a growing search for more efficient regionalism in Indigenous community governance (Sanders 2004; Smith 2004). This study takes its cue from these policy directions. It addresses the issue of how and whether current social and economic conditions in remote regions can be quantified for the purpose of establishing a baseline against which the impacts of policies designed to improve them might be subsequently measured. Two recent policy initiatives (one from the Council of Australian Governments [COAG], and one from the Northern Territory Government) raise the need for such a question.

As part of its unfolding response to the report of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, COAG agreed in April 2002 to identify up to 10 communities or regions across Australia to serve as trial sites for Indigenous Communities Coordination Pilot (ICCP) projects aimed at effecting whole-of-government cooperative approaches to service delivery with the aim of enhancing social and economic outcomes. These were to be based on a concept of ‘shared responsibility’ between the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments, and communities with the idea of streamlining government processes and supporting

some restoration to local Indigenous populations of responsibility for, and control over, decision-making regarding service delivery and general planning for social and economic development.

Because of long-standing discussions between the Northern Territory government and the population of the Wadeye region to the south-west of Darwin around the issue of restoring a more customary mode of regional governance (Thamarrurr), the Wadeye community accepted a proposal to become one of these trial sites. Accordingly, the newly designated Thamarrurr Regional Council entered into a Shared Responsibility Agreement with the Commonwealth and Northern Territory governments in June 2003. The first stated aim of this agreement was to establish partnerships and share responsibility for achieving *measurable* and sustainable *improvements* for people living in the region. The select emphasis above is to highlight the fundamental role that measurement of improvement was set to play in establishing the efficacy or otherwise of the trial. This has further import as it is also a stated requirement of the regional planning goals set out in the Northern Territory Government's *Stronger Regions Policy* which was announced later in the same year (Northern Territory Government 2003c; Smith 2004) with the ultimate goal of establishing up to 20 new regional authorities across the Territory.

Bureaucratic processes established under both of these policy initiatives will serve to identify mutually determined social, economic, and service delivery outcomes, together with the means to achieve them and assumed responsibilities. Significantly, these are to be codified in a negotiated regional development plan, and then subjected to a regular process of evaluation and monitoring against measurable outcomes. Clearly, for the latter to occur, it is necessary at the outset to establish baseline indicators of social and economic conditions against which any subsequent change can be calibrated. This is what the present study seeks to provide for the Thamarrurr Regional Council area. Such a baseline also generates essential input to the identification of priority development issues and assists in the building of capacity for regional governance by enhancing the flow of information and the degree of local knowledge of social and economic circumstances.

Viewed historically, from a Northern Territory perspective, these policy developments signal a conscious effort to move away from a silo mode of planning and development focused on specific sectors such as Asian trade, growth of the Darwin urban area, pastoral management, the mining sector, and the separate servicing of Aboriginal communities, towards an approach which views Territory development as an integrated whole with the strengths and weaknesses of one region (and community) impacting on all others. It is also an equity and efficiency based model, with needs assessment, equalisation of resource allocation, and measured outcomes as the key drivers. For reasons of spatial distribution and historical exclusion, the implications of the Stronger Regions policy, and the lessons that might emerge from the ICCP Thamarrurr trial, will impact most on the estimated 72 per cent of Aboriginal residents of the Northern Territory who have residential ties to Aboriginal lands (Taylor 2003). It is they who now occupy most of the land area outside of the Territory's urban areas, and it is they who to date have been kept largely outside of formal Territory planning processes.

Partly for this latter reason, the extent to which data of sufficient quantity and quality might exist for the purposes of establishing meaningful baseline profiles for customised areas such as the Thamarrurr region is a moot point. Some indication is available from previous attempts at regional profiling which have been reasonably successful in producing a range of relevant social indicators, though with variability depending on the geographic scale of analysis and on the strength of agency commitment and capacity to generate data from administrative collections (Taylor 1999, 2004; Taylor, Bern & Senior 2000; Taylor & Westbury 2000). What is clear from these efforts, though, is that standard small area statistics as available from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) in the form of Indigenous community profiles provide only a starting point. Not only do these require 'ground-truthing' in terms of cultural match (Morphy 2002), they are also restricted in scope (and sometimes coverage) and raise the need for additional data to be compiled from alternative sources.

Of course, in regard to the ICCP trials and to the Stronger Regions policy, the measurement of outcomes and provision of associated data is a partnership responsibility involving whole-of-government agencies way beyond the ABS alone. Indeed, compared to previous ad hoc attempts at constructing regional profiles, this notion that all partners to regional agreements have some responsibility to inform the process with available data is innovative. Thus, as the officially sanctioned exercise charged with marshalling baseline information for the Thamarrurr ICCP trial, this study serves as a unique test of the capacity of ICCP partners to produce such data. First, it demonstrates what is currently possible at the regional level. Second, it raises the need for awareness of regional social and economic conditions as an essential input to the identification of priority planning issues. Finally, it outlines key policy implications for regional planning development in the Northern Territory. In particular, with the use of regional population projections, it seeks to shift the emphasis in government and community thinking from one of responding reactively to historic needs, to a more proactive approach based on anticipation of future requirements.

Methods

The task that the ICCP partners have set themselves falls within the disciplinary parameters of regional planning. As an area of public policy and academic endeavour, this is a multifaceted activity and significantly has its roots as a form of applied economics in the United Kingdom of the 1930s where preferential taxation rates and subsidy packages were made available for industries willing to establish themselves in newly proclaimed Special Areas in the more depressed areas of the north and west (McCrone 1969: 93–105). Subsequent regional planning has acquired a firm theoretical basis and assumed far more complex and integrated tasks, being a common tool of government policy (Balchin, Sykora & Bull 1999; Glasson 1983; Gore 1984; Stilwell 1992; Stohr & Fraser Taylor 1981). Its content ranges across the breadth of government functions including the management of environmental, social and economic development, to the point, in some cases, of full regional devolution. The essential point is that regional planning has a long history and

has acquired, over the years, a defined literature outlining a set of established conceptual frameworks and analytical techniques.

Of course the ultimate purpose and vehicle for effective regional planning is the strengthening of regional governance, and a key task for policy analysts is to consider what this might mean, how it might be implemented, and above all, to establish the elements that contribute to *good* governance practice (Dodson & Smith 2003). As the background notes to the Northern Territory government's *Building Effective Indigenous Governance* conference pointed out (Northern Territory Government 2003b), 'governance' is not the same as 'government'. 'Government' means having a jurisdictional control, whereas 'governance' is about having the processes and institutional capacity to be able to exercise that control through sound decision-making. Good 'governance', on the other hand, is all about the means to establish this with the ultimate aim of achieving the social, cultural, and economic developments sought by citizens. If this is the aim of good governance, a fundamental question is how do we know when this is accomplished? What information is required to establish this? What data are available to assist in answering these questions? All of these issues are addressed by the establishment of baseline indicators for regional planning.

Regional planning

Regional planning is a sequence of actions designed to solve problems in the future for a specified region (Glasson 1983: 19). Thus, while regional planning problems may vary, in a public policy context they inevitably involve a sequential process that can be conceptualised as a number of logically ordered stages that (interestingly) are discernable in the processes undertaken by Thamarrurr Regional Council and ICCP partners to date:

- demarcation of regional boundaries;
- identification of regional goals;
- formulation of measurable objectives related to goals;
- projection of the future situation;
- generation of alternative courses of action to achieve stated goals and the acceptance of a preferred plan(s);
- evaluation of planned outcomes versus actual outcomes.

Within this schema, Glasson sees a broad distinction between *physical or infrastructural* planning (for example, land use, communications, public utilities etc.), and *economic and social* planning (for example, job creation, housing development etc), although these are often interrelated and co-dependent (for example, in terms of the relationship that potentially exists between the provision and maintenance of public housing and the formation of a local skilled labour force at Thamarrurr).

Glasson also draws distinction between *allocative* planning and *innovative or development* planning. The first of these is concerned with efficiencies and coordination of the regional system. It deals with conflicts over resource allocation, and ensures that processes unfold literally according to plan. Development planning, on the other hand, seeks to change

the regional system in ways that are presumed to be for the better. One obvious example would be the pursuit of new industry development in a region, although this raises an immediate question about precisely what is meant by ‘development’—an issue that is likely to loom large in the Northern Territory where development planning might include the strengthening of customary economic activity, just as much as it might refer to the enhancement of more mainstream activity (Altman 2002).

Another vital distinction is drawn between planning *goals* and planning *objectives*. Goals are ideals and should be couched in general terms—for example, ‘improvement of the living standards and well-being of the regional population’ is one that is often stated, and no doubt will be repeatedly so across the COAG ICCP trials and in the course of Northern Territory regional development planning. Objectives, on the other hand, while obviously related to goals, need to be more precisely specified and they should be capable of both attainment and measurement. Their purpose is explicit, rather than implicit—for example, to raise the employment rate in the Thamarrurr region to the Northern Territory average, to reduce the regional housing occupancy rate to an acceptable level, to increase school attendance and enrolment rates, to reduce specific morbidity rates, and so on. While on the surface such objectives appear laudable, and, in theory at least, achievable, the extent to which they are measurable at the regional scale is the more important issue for regional planning and represents the key question for this study. However, before considering measurement issues, the other conceptual foundation of regional planning needs to be considered, namely: What is the region? How is it defined?

What is a region?

The region is a classificatory concept designed to represent physical, cultural, social and economic characteristics for given portions of the earth’s surface. The touchstone of regional analysis is diversity—if none were evident, there would be no regions. That regions exist, then, is almost axiomatic. However, there are diverging views as to what they represent and how they should be defined.

The first view of regions considers them to be natural phenomena, as organic entities, representing the spatial manifestation on the earth’s surface of long-standing relationships between particular human populations and the lands they occupy. In this scheme, the key defining features of regions are uniformity, coherence, common identity and homogeneity all identified by detailed description of man–land relationships. Such a view provided the basis of much regional analysis (so called regional geography) up to the 1950s where the aim was to identify and map out formal regions based on the spatial identification of internal consistencies and the mutuality of geographic contrasts and distinctions (Freeman 1961; Hartshorne 1939). Peterson’s (1976) Aboriginal cultural areas associated with major drainage basins provide the ultimate Australia-wide example. The intellectual roots for this enterprise stemmed from nineteenth-century geographic determinism with the physical environment seen as underpinning the human environment. While now superseded and intellectually marginalised as explanatory of human organisation given the complexities of space in the urban-industrial and globalising world, it may be salutary to reflect on these methodologies when contemplating the design of re-

gional boundaries in the Northern Territory and elsewhere given the continuing importance of the land base as an organising feature of Aboriginal social and economic life.

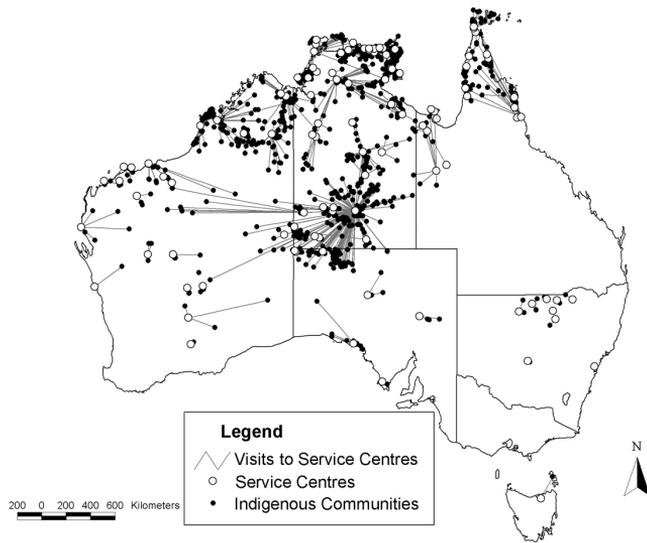
The second, more recent, view sees regions simply as a method of classification—a descriptive tool defined according to particular criteria, with as many regions as there are criteria to define them. In this scheme, a particular approach is to identify regions according to their function, thus distinguishing functional regions from the formal regions mentioned above. A functional region is one that displays a certain functional coherence—an interdependence of parts—when defined against certain criteria. They are often described as nodal regions composed of heterogeneous units and populations (typically a network of towns and dependent smaller communities) often identified, or circumscribed, spatially by the pattern of flows of goods, services and people. The term ‘hinterland’ captures this notion well.

In the Northern Territory, for example, the physical separation of people from services generates substantial population mobility. The fact is, despite the predominance of usual residence in small, widely dispersed communities, urban centres loom large in the lives of remote Aboriginal populations. According to one calculation from census data, as much as 10 per cent of Indigenous populations present in regional centres such as Darwin and Alice Springs at any one time, are temporary residents from smaller rural communities (Taylor 1998).

The effect of this mobility to service centres is to create a pool, or catchment, of population around each service town. Some sense of the size of these population catchments, and their spatial extent, was provided for the first time using data from the ABS’s 1999 Community Housing and Infrastructure Needs Survey (CHINS) which asked key informants to indicate the nearest town that members of each community usually travel to for banking and major shopping services. In answering this, a total of 35 service centres across the Northern Territory were identified. These ranged in size from large centres, such as Darwin and Alice Springs, to small localities such as Timber Creek and Borroloola. An indication of the spatial pattern of these catchment areas, and therefore of functional regions, is provided in Figure 1.1.

While subjectivity applies to these data due to the nature of the survey methodology based on information sought from key informants, the map clearly illustrates a major functional region centred on Alice Springs and extending across the Western Australian and South Australian borders. In all, 259 communities nominated Alice Springs as their primary source of higher order services, and this encompassed a population of some 15 000. Moving north, other functional regions are evident around Darwin and Katherine, while some parts of the Territory are functionally tied to cross-border towns, as in the case of Kununurra in the East Kimberley region of Western Australia. Wadeye can be seen to form part of Darwin’s functional region.

Figure 1.1. Journey to service centres: discrete communities in remote Australia, 1999



Source: Taylor (2002)

Somewhat intermediary between formal and functional regions is the notion of programming, or administrative regions (Stilwell 1992: 46). This provides a more pragmatic view of regions recognising the fact that economic and social institutions tend to operate within administrative boundaries. These represent the boundaries of governance, and for better or worse, invariably provide the framework within which planning decisions are made and services delivered. Within the Australian federal system, State and Territory governments have tended to represent the key intermediary planning level. Perhaps as a consequence of this, planning at the truly regional level has rarely been achieved, with local government and metropolitan jurisdictions acquiring most regional-type functions, although exceptions do exist as in the case of the Kimberley Development Commission and the Murray-Darling Basin Commission with the latter straddling several State boundaries and now encompassing governance arrangements for some 30 Indigenous nations (Taylor & Biddle 2004). In the Northern Territory to date, the five government administrative regions have been established according to an urban centre and hinterland model reflecting (or creating?) functional regions not unlike those identified above.

When it comes to deciding on regional boundaries for new Northern Territory regional bodies, it is likely (if not advisable), that some combination of these regional definitions will be brought to bear, with a possible trade-off between formal cultural regions and the need for economies of scale and recognition of existing service delivery frameworks. This much seems implicit in the Northern Territory Government's definition of a region as:

an area that the people in it see as a region and that the government agrees should be treated as such; where a reasonable community of interest exists; where there is capacity to achieve economies of scale in

the achievement of outcomes; and where there is demonstrated capacity or need for whole of community action to cooperate in the achievement of shared objectives (Northern Territory Government 2003c).

Aside from the Thamarrurr Region, which is already in place, the sorts of regions identified for consideration in this way by the 'Stronger Regions' policy include the Tiwi Islands, Greater Darwin, Kakadu/Coburg, East Arnhem, Groote Eylandt, Maningrida and surrounds, Pine Creek/Coomalie/Douglas-Daly, Katherine, Katherine East (Nyirranggulung), Katherine West, Roper River, Gulf region, Anmatjere, West MacDonnells, Alice Springs, Warlpiri communities and the Tanami, Southern Arrente, Southern Central (Imanpa, Mutitjulu, Kaltukatjara), and Barkly.

While such groupings might appear intuitively sound, complexities are almost certain to arise in seeking to establish boundaries for the purposes of representing regional 'communities of interest' with 'shared objectives'. Some insight into the nature of such complexities for regional planning purposes is available from Sutton's (1995) critique of Davis and Prescott's (1992) work on Aboriginal boundaries, and Morphy's (1999) critique of the Reeves' proposals for reform of the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976*.

With reference to the latter, it is pointed out that populations that are now centred around former government settlements and mission stations might appear to provide some basis for regional groupings, but they are unlikely to define traditional levels of regional organisation, which in any case are often indeterminate being blurred at the edges. Even in Eastern Arnhem Land, where a case can be made for a degree of regional coherence based on the kinship system and relatedness of Yolngu languages, people in the western part of the Yolngu region interact with non-Yolngu groups centred in the Maningrida region, while southerly Yolngu groups such as the Ritharrngu have close links with people in Ngukurr and Numbulwar. In both cases, these links are probably closer than the links to the Yolngu communities at Yirrkala and Galiwinku. According to Morphy (1999: 36), regional differences that seem so clear at a distance often dissolve at the boundaries between regions due to intermarriage and shared ceremonial and economic activity.

While this is no doubt the case, at the end of the day, boundaries for regional planning will need to be established—as, indeed, they already have been for a wide range of service delivery activities including health spending, policing, housing, CDEP, local government distributions, and so on. However, if new regional authorities are to assume an innate sense of regional representation, common purpose and joint planning, as specified in the Stronger Regions policy, it is essential that considerable effort be applied to the careful design of regional boundaries. One important aspect of this is related to the monitoring and evaluation phase of regional planning. At the very least, consideration should be given to matching regional boundaries with the ABS Australian Standard Geographic Classification (ASGC) and Australian Indigenous Geographic Classification (AIGC), as this is the basis upon which official population counts and estimates are developed, for which census data are available, and against which many agencies seek concordance.

However, this is not to preclude the possibility that ABS and agency service delivery boundaries might themselves have to change in order to match new regional planning boundaries. This is not as radical as it might sound. Since 1986, the ABS has successively redesigned Collection District (CD) boundaries to more closely align with socio-spatial groupings on the ground (ABS 1998; Taylor 1992: 171–3), although just how accurate these are in some instances is a matter for debate. It seems highly likely that such realignments might occur again if new regional boundaries suggest the need. In this event, some form of coordination will be essential between relevant Territory government departments, the ABS, and any other relevant agencies such as the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, and Land Councils. However, as long as the respective boundaries are spatially nested, most of the difficulties presented by any mismatch can be overcome.

The Thamarrurr region

The formal establishment of the Thamarrurr Regional Council can be traced to the collapse of Kardu Numida Council in 1994 and the subsequent search for a more appropriate and sustainable governance structure. This process culminated in a rolling series of Northern Territory government-sponsored workshops and consultations. These were held between January 2002 and March 2003 among Kardu Diminin as traditional landowners of Wadeye, as well as with members of the other 19 clan groups from throughout the region who have variously taken up residence at Wadeye since 1935 on Diminin land. Viewed from a Diminin/Murrin-Patha perspective, these other clan groups include Rak Angileni, Rak Kirnmu, Rak Kubiyirr, Rak Kulingmirr, Rak Kungarlbarl, Rak Kuy, Rak Merrepen, Rak Nardirri, Rak Nemarluk, Rak Nganthawudi, Rak Nuthunthu, Rak Thinti, Rak Perreder, Rak Wudipuli, Yek Diminin, Yek Maninh, Yek Nangu, Yek Ngudanimarn, Yek Wunh, and Yek Yederr.¹

The purpose of these workshops was to explore and give form to a governance structure that could provide both a legal representation of government functions as required by the contemporary world while reasserting and enabling customary residential rights, albeit in a contemporary form. The term offered to capture this structure, or way of life, was Thamarrurr (Desmarchelier 2001: 4) which described a regional forum that pre-dated European incursion whereby senior people of the different clan groups in the Daly River/Port Keats region would meet periodically to preside over issues of ceremony, use of natural resources, economic transactions and minor law and justice matters (Kardu Numida Incorporated 2002).

Final determination of the regional boundary was made according to instructions obtained via these workshops and it was gazetted on 21 March, 2003 as shown in Figure 1.2. Of interest from the point of view of data collection, is the degree to which this gazetted boundary coincides with other boundaries for which statistical information is available,

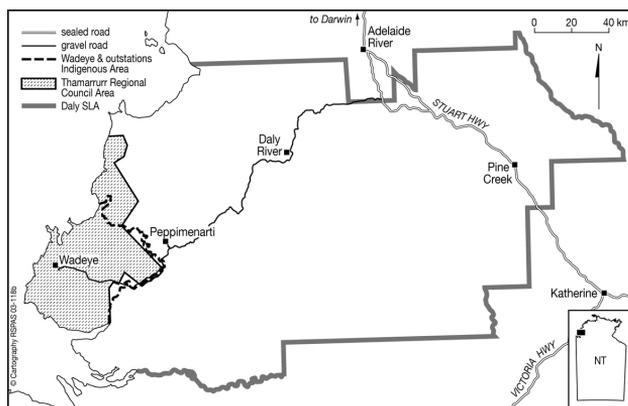
¹Use of the term ‘clan’ is subject to debate among anthropologists. It is used here since it is a term used by Stanner (1936a) to describe Murrin-Patha social organisation and has current legitimacy among Aboriginal people of the Thamarrurr region to describe descent groups with a clear position in the constitution of regional governance.

notably from the ABS and from government agencies concerned with the delivery of services to the region. As Figure 1.2 indicates, the Thamarrurr boundary is almost coincident with the ABS Indigenous Area (IA) for Wadeye and outstations, but it forms only the western corner of the much larger Daly Statistical Local Area (SLA). The degree of match with a range of other administrative boundaries is shown in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1. Thamarrurr region: summary of boundary concordances

Data type	Boundary match
Census counts and characteristics	Almost complete CD/IA match
ABS population estimates	Nested in Daly SLA
PHCAP Health Expenditure Zones	Nested in Top End West Zone
ATSIC CDEP and HIPP/NAHS	Nested in Jabiru Regional Council
NT Education	Nested in Darwin Administrative Zone
NTG Administrative Regions	Nested in Daly sub-region
Police and emergency services	Complete match

Figure 1.2. Thamarrurr region and ABS geography



The lack of complete match with ABS CDs (two Thamarrurr outstations fall into a non-Thamarrurr CD) is unfortunate but can be easily rectified with a simple CD redesign. As for official population estimates, because Thamarrurr is nested in the larger Daly SLA, these have to be apportioned to Thamarrurr by ratio allocation to split CDs, although this inevitably involves further reduction in reliability. For this reason, the ABS does not routinely produce such estimates, although it has done so on a consultancy basis for the Northern Territory Department of Health and Community Services. All other boundaries listed cover areas that are substantially wider than the Thamarrurr region, and it is interesting to note that this includes the Commonwealth’s Primary Health Care Access Program (PHCAP) Zone boundary as this was reportedly developed following some degree of local consultation and consideration of language and cultural relationships, though with added consideration given to the logistics of existing health service delivery and associated economies of scale (Bartlett et al. 1997: 51).

The tendency, it seems, is that regional boundaries based largely on locally defined cultural criteria (such as Thamarrurr) will produce more, smaller, tightly defined areas, than regional boundaries based on administrative criteria. This was certainly the experience with the evolution of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) regional council boundaries, which were originally created on the basis of cultural diversity producing 60 regions, though it is interesting to note that these were later reduced to 36 regions due to a declared need for administrative streamlining (Smith 1996).

This lack of boundary match between administrative units and the Thamarrurr Region does not preclude the generation of data for the latter, it simply means that special measures may be required to generate it, whilst care is needed in its interpretation, especially in regard to client data on usual place of residence. For example, administratively, the Kardu Numida Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme at Wadeye falls under the Jabiru ATSIC Regional Council, yet participant data can be generated separately for the Kardu Numida scheme. At the same time, some of the participants live and work in Palumpa which falls outside the Thamarrurr region and this needs to be both known, and accounted for, when assessing the role of CDEP within the regional employment structure. Likewise, data for clients of the Wadeye clinic can be generated, but not all residents of Thamarrurr are necessarily active clients of Wadeye clinic, with some more likely to be registered at Daly River and elsewhere. The same goes for school enrolments, with some usual residents of Thamarrurr enrolled at school in Palumpa, while high school options are available only in Darwin. Basically, the issue here is that regional boundaries inevitably cut across patterns of service utilisation and administration and this needs to be taken into account when applying administrative data for the purposes of regional profiling.

Baseline profiles

It hardly bears mention that change arising from the COAG trials has the potential to place strain on the social fabric of affected communities, as well as to provide opportunities for betterment. In order to maximise the positives and minimise the negatives, it is central to the implementation of respective agreements that any such consequences of development should be managed rather than arbitrary. A fundamental step in establishing mechanisms for the management of development processes is the construction of a baseline profile of social and economic conditions at the outset. Without this, it is difficult to determine the subsequent effects of one course of action over any other.

The Shared Responsibility Agreement signed in 2003 between the Thamarrurr Regional Council, the Commonwealth, and the Northern Territory Government clearly identifies this need in setting out as its first objective 'the establishment of partnerships for achieving measurable and sustainable improvements for people living in the region'. Two aspects of this key objective have relevance for the present analysis:

- First, it recognises that change must be measurable.
- Second, it acknowledges that measures need to be capable of being established for a regionally defined population.

This requires, as guiding principles, that data items selected for baseline profiling and for subsequent performance measurement and evaluation are replicable over time, and that they are capable of such for the specific population/geographic area selected for the trial.

In responding to this, the approach in the Thamarrurr region was to develop a range of social indicators covering aspects of several key areas of social and economic life that form the basis of policy interest and intervention. Just to elaborate, social indicators are aggregate summary statistics that are strategically selected to reflect the social condition or quality of life of a society or social subgroup. They are typically employed to evaluate the impact of actions taken within a social context for the purpose of producing a particular planning objective.

Thus, determined in part by the development priorities set out within the Thamarrurr Agreement, and dictated also by the availability and replicability of public domain information specific to the Thamarrurr population, the profile presented here covers the demographic structure and residence patterns of the regional population, its labour force status, education and training status, income, welfare, housing and health status, as well as indicators of interaction with the criminal justice system. For each of these categories, the aim is to identify and describe the main characteristics of the Thamarrurr population as at 2003, and to highlight outstanding features and limitations in the data. Also provided are projections of the regional population to 2023 (approximately a generation from now) so as to encourage forward thinking and to anticipate needs and hopefully respond to them before they are realised. This capacity to project future population levels is an essential adjunct to the preparation of baseline data. All too often in Indigenous Affairs, policy has been 'reactive' by responding to historic levels of need thereby creating a constant sense of catch up. What is required if the COAG trials are to be effective catalysts for change is a 'proactive' methodology which seeks to anticipate and plan for expected requirements—essentially a means of translating the content and intent of ICCP agreements into a required quantum of program and partner commitments over a given time frame.

The emphasis placed in the Thamarrurr agreement on evidence-based outcomes underlines the need for accurate demographic data. Whatever the detail of regional plans, it is crucial that these are based on reliable estimates of the population that they are intended for. Globally, this requires reliable totals. Program-wise, it requires reliable breakdown into infants, mothers, school-age children, youth, young adults, middle-aged, and older people. Ideally, it also requires that statistical events in the population (such as employment numbers, school enrolments, hospital separations) are drawn from the same population universe, such that numerators accord with denominators for the calculation of rates. Unfortunately, in constructing regional Indigenous indicators, this is not always certain (Cunningham 1998). That aside, one product of the baseline exercise was the construction of a unit record, demographic database compiled by local working groups and now administered under the umbrella of the Thamarrurr Regional Council as a basic planning tool. This provides a starting point for enhancing the quality of rate calculations as well as for producing data according to family groups, households, and even (as in

the Thamarrurr case) clan groups or other socially defined categories in accordance with regional planning goals.

As for other data, an early test of partnership arrangements in the context of baseline profiling was the extent to which Commonwealth, Territory, and local community agencies could, and did, deliver on access to relevant data to support the construction of social indicators as described above. In the Thamarrurr case, the range of data items secured is shown in Table 1.2. An important first step in accessing these data was the bringing together of all relevant Commonwealth and Territory agencies to a common meeting to discuss and negotiate the means by which this would occur. As seen from the data list, the resulting administrative and public domain information is largely restricted to aggregate region-level data.

Cultural relevance

Whatever the availability of data may or may not be, it should be recognised that all sources of social indicator data have drawbacks in terms of providing a meaningful representation of the social and economic status of Aboriginal people in the region. With census data, for example, there are concerns about the cultural relevance of information obtained from an instrument principally designed to establish the characteristics of mainstream Australian life (Smith 1991). Thus, having observed the 2001 Census count first hand at a Northern Territory outstation, Morphy (2002) has described the process of enumeration as a 'collision of systems'. Along with others engaged in the same exercise in Alice Springs (Sanders 2002) and Aurukun (Martin 2002), she concludes that census questions often lack cross-cultural fit and produce answers at times close to nonsensical.

Economic status, for example, would seem to be an unproblematic concept. In mainstream society this is generally measured by indicators such as cash income and levels and ownership of assets. However, among many Aboriginal groups it is often measured in quite different ways. For example, in some tradition-oriented communities, a person's status can be largely determined by access to ritual or religious knowledge rather than to material resources. Similarly, social status can be accrued by controlling the distribution of material resources rather than by being an accumulator (or owner) of resources (Altman 2000: 3–4). In short, materialistic considerations may be of less importance among sections of the Aboriginal population where the emphasis is rather on reciprocity in economic relations (Schwab 1995).

Table 1.2. Data items secured for the Thamarrurr region from various Commonwealth, Territory, and local agencies

Population

ABS census counts and ERPs of Indigenous and non-Indigenous population by five-year age group and sex for Wadeye town and outstations as a group.

Community approval and assistance in conducting a census that distinguishes Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations by single-year age and sex. These data can be manipulated by community working groups into sections of town, individual outstations, and clan groupings.

Clinic estimate of 'active client' Indigenous and non-Indigenous population by five-year age group and sex

Thamarrurr Housing Office population list used to estimate service population

Age and sex of Centrelink customers

Age and sex of regional residents on the electoral roll

Number of Indigenous persons registered with Medicare with a usual address in Thamarrurr

Labour Force

Census data on labour force status, industry, occupation, hours worked, employment and non-employment income by Indigenous status, age and sex

CDEP participants by age, sex, and occupation

Community survey data on individual occupations and skills

Centrelink data

Education and training

School enrolments by age, sex and grade level

School attendance by age, sex and grade level

School Multi Level Assessment Program (MAP) test results for Year 3 and 5 reading and numeracy

Enrolments by training provider category by field of study by certificate level and accreditation category by outcome status by Indigenous status, age and sex

Housing

Housing occupancy rates

Housing stock by occupancy and number of bedrooms

Housing stock by repairs needed

Estimates of housing need

Functionality of environmental health hardware

Health

Chronic disease incidence by age and sex

Growth characteristics of under-fives

Regional food costs compared to elsewhere in NT

Cost of family food basket

Fresh food variety, quality, availability

Unique hospital patients by Major Diagnostic Code (MDC), five year age and sex

Hospital patient separations by MDC by five-year age group and sex

Birth weights

Active client population for clinic by five-year age group and sex

Clinic staffing classification by Indigenous status

Justice

Reported regional property offences and offences against the person
Persons in adult correctional centres by last known address and birthplace (Wadeye)
Juveniles in detention by last known address and birthplace (Wadeye)
Adult conditional liberty caseload according to office (Wadeye)
Juvenile conditional liberty caseload according to office (Wadeye)
Conditional liberty order commencements by office (Wadeye)

Welfare

Centrelink payments by type and number by five-year age group and sex, and \$ amount
Non-employment income estimates from the census

Equally, while social indicators report on observable population characteristics, they reveal nothing about more behavioural population attributes such as individual and community priorities and aspirations for enhancing quality of life—indeed the whole question of what this might mean anyway and how it can be measured in an Aboriginal domain has yet to be addressed. Exploratory work on the measurement of community strength in Wadeye provides some initial guidance here (Memmott & Meltzer 2003), while Brady, Kunitz and Nash (1997), and Senior (2003) have explored various notions of well-being in regard to health status. However, none of these provide a universal basis for establishing measurable indicators at this stage. Nor do formal indicators adequately capture the complexity of social arrangements between individuals, families and households. For example, census data identify discrete dwellings as households, but the basic economic and social units of consumption in remote Aboriginal communities are often comprised of linked extended households rather than single ones (Smith 2000). In the Thamarrurr region, there are some 60 extended patrilineal family groups spread across the stock of housing—a key sociological and economic characteristic that is not reported in census data.

