

9. Implications for regional planning

The purpose of this analysis has been to portray the social and economic status of the population resident within the Thamarrurr Regional Council area at the commencement of initiatives resulting from new arrangements for regional governance. The value of such a profile is twofold. First, it assists in providing a quantum to discussions of need, aspirations, and regional development capacities. Second, it creates a benchmark against which the impact of any developmental decisions and future actions associated with them may be measured. Thus, the content of this report provides the basis for a dialogue in regional planning, as well as the means to measure aspects of its impact. With this in mind, the key implications of findings in regard to each of the baseline indicators presented are summarised below.

Demography

Contrary to the situation of population decline and ageing that constitutes the 'regional problem' for many parts of agricultural Australia, the 'problem' in the Thamarrurr region is how to accommodate growth and a burgeoning youthful profile. This is an expanding population with high growth momentum, that is committed to country (undeniably mobile, but not overtly migrant), and which is likely to produce the Territory's fourth largest town within a generation. From the time of their first contact with non-Aboriginal people in the mid-nineteenth century, but especially since Catholic missionaries arrived to settle in the 1930s, Aboriginal peoples of the region have experienced significant demographic change involving the concentration of previously dispersed population groups into the town of Wadeye and substantial growth in population numbers due mostly to natural increase. This recent phase of high population growth coincides first of all with the integration of Aboriginal people into mission life, and more recently, with the extension of citizen entitlements and related expansion of service provision in the region, notably in areas of health and social security.

As for the non-Aboriginal residents, their numbers have increased since the days of mission control although they remain fairly steady as a share of the regional population (around five per cent) given the direct link between non-Aboriginal residence and skilled employment mostly in administration and the provision of essential services. If one of the development impacts in coming years is an expansion of economic activity and service provision requiring further skilled labour, one effect that the Thamarrurr Region Council will need to consider is the possibility that this will lead to an increase in the non-Aboriginal population of the region.

While the Thamarrurr population can be geographically defined, it is in no way socially bound, with family, social and economic links to all surrounding regions. Already, a floating population from this extended pool adds to the numbers resident in the region at any one time and results in additional loads placed on services, notably housing. To the extent that this short-term movement into and out of the Thamarrurr region is a response to a perceived balance of opportunities and constraints (pushes and pulls) between

different localities across a much wider Top End social and economic network, the potential for developments at Thamarrurr to alter the balance of regional place utility in its own favour may serve to increase service population loads. Examples here might include an upgrading of the school to secondary status, improved housing availability, or successful economic development leading to job creation.

The overriding demographic characteristic is high Aboriginal fertility leading to sustained rapid population growth and a high proportion of infants and children. This will lead to an almost doubling of the Aboriginal population within a generation with high potential for continued growth beyond that. However, the big unknown in this demographic equation remains net migration, although it does appear that individuals born within the region conduct their affairs and pass through life mostly *in situ*. This demographic stability reflects, in part, the strength of cultural continuity and a desire and growing capacity to sustain chosen lifestyles on country. But an untested and important question is the extent to which it also reflects an incapacity to engage wider social and economic structures for want of adequate human capital.

While the projections of population are correct according to the algorithms applied, they provide only a possible scenario. One device frequently deployed for planning purposes is to canvass a range of possible outcomes based on varying assumptions. An obvious further development, then, would be the generation of alternative scenarios based on possible combinations of falling, rising or stable fertility and mortality and varying assumptions about net migration. While there is some exploratory potential here in providing answers to *what if* questions, this should be based on plausible assumptions. Just as an example, if the TFR in the present projection was allowed to decline by one per cent per annum, and all other projection assumptions remained intact, then the regional population by 2023 would be noticeably lower at 3564, while the base of the age pyramid would be less pronounced with much reduced population momentum. Such a scenario is entirely feasible. Indeed an even more substantial reduction in future population growth could easily be envisaged if, for example, wholesale use of fertility control technology were to be adopted, in particular female contraception (information on the prevalence of family planning is not easily acquired, and so the extent to which current fertility might already be controlled by such methods is difficult to assess). In such a situation the effects of reduced fertility would substantially impact on future numbers with planning consequences quite different from those implied by the present set of figures. Thus, an abiding feature of population projections is the stimulus they provide for debate on the future demographic outcomes of particular social and economic behaviours. As such, they enable community discussion about alternate paths to regional objectives.

Local interest in such matters of demography is clearly evident. Because of concerns regarding the accuracy of official population figures, a highly significant step in developing baseline demographic data was the decision by the Thamarrurr Region Council to organise to count its own people. A key to the success of this count was the use of locally generated population lists as a cross-check against individuals recorded at dwellings—a device that has been demonstrated elsewhere to enhance population coverage (Martin and Taylor

1996). As a consequence, Thamarrurr Council now has a baseline demographic database of the usual residents of its region, plus an estimate of the regional service population, with which to consider the size of current and future needs. This process was an important exercise in capacity building for governance as it involved key local people in collecting and verifying their own population data to be used for their own purposes. No longer do Canberra or Darwin tell Thamarrurr who they are, Thamarrurr tells them!

Jobs and economic status

Against the stated aims of key Commonwealth and Territory policy initiatives, it is clear that economic outcomes for Aboriginal people in the Thamarrurr region are way below optimal. Less than one-fifth of all adults are currently employed, and the vast majority of these are tied to CDEP. Aboriginal people occupy fewer than half of the 130 or so jobs outside of CDEP. The result is that 82 per cent of Aboriginal income is sourced from welfare payments. Of the estimated \$4 million in personal income from mainstream employment, only 16 per cent of this goes to Aboriginal employees. Viewed historically, it is likely that Aboriginal people are less inclined now to be participating in the workforce than in previous generations. Of particular concern is the fact that 45 per cent of those who are not in the workforce, and 35 per cent of the unemployed, are in the 15–24 age group.

The scale of job creation required to make an impact on this labour force status is very substantial as the working age population is set to expand rapidly. Just to maintain the current very low employment rate will require a doubling of those in work over the next 20 years. Even if Aboriginal people were to occupy every job in Thamarrurr, at current levels this would be far too few to make inroads. Either way, though, cheap policy options appear unavailable—resources will either be needed for remedial action to enhance education, training and job creation, otherwise the costs of welfare and management of social pathologies due to business as usual will escalate. Whatever the case, a fiscal response is unavoidable.

The other clear message is that the majority of adults are likely to be unemployed or outside the official workforce into the foreseeable future. This is especially so if the whole adult population is seen as eligible. However, given the focus in the Thamarrurr Agreement on youth and children, improvement in measurable employment outcomes would be made more achievable by targeting particular cohorts for attention. In this regard, the present low participation rate in the school-to-work transition years is striking, and any attempt to enhance future employment outcomes would need to address the general level of readiness for work.

In the meantime, employment generation is most likely to occur via an import substitution model embracing activities such as the construction and maintenance of housing and physical infrastructure (including roads), education, health services, retailing, public administration and planning, transport, media, land restoration, land management, and tourism. Some of the diversity in economic activity encompassed here is already in place via CDEP schemes, although it is rarely recognised as such, often being seen amorphously as ‘just’ CDEP work. The degree to which this represents cost-shifting and substitution

for proper Commonwealth, Territory and local government funding of employment in the provision of essential services needs to be examined and addressed.

Presently, imported non-Aboriginal workers occupy many regionally based jobs, as they tend to be managerial, professional and trade positions requiring particular skills and job-readiness. While there is unlikely to be rapid 'Indigenisation' of such positions, the system of mentoring local middle managers in many occupations is an important first step. Alongside this, there is a parallel need to tackle deeper structural hurdles if local people are to successfully compete for skilled mainstream jobs with potential in-migrants, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. These include the minimal numbers who progress to secondary level education with requisite literacy and numeracy skills, which in part reflects low school participation and attendance levels, as well as relatively low participation and successful completion in post-school, certificate level training courses.

However, even if local people occupied all such positions, there would remain a large deficit in numbers employed according to projections of working age population. Thus, the real planning need is to explore ways of generating labour-intensive economic activity which, in the particular cultural setting of Thamarrurr, places an emphasis on strengthening elements of customary economic activity as epitomised, for example, by the Thamarrurr Rangers program, and as manifest in the widespread production of arts and crafts. Since 1997, as many as 126 local artists have sold works via the Dirrmu Ngakumarl gallery, and while only a handful remain associated, and fewer still have received significant economic return, the potential for enhancing economic activity in the industry is nonetheless clear, as recognised by the Northern Territory government's Indigenous Arts Strategy (Altman 2003; Northern Territory Government 2003b).

Also significant here are the Thamarrurr Regional Council's plans for the development of local employment opportunities based on the establishment of a regional construction industry. The basis for this industry planning lies in the substantial existing backlog of regional housing and infrastructure need, as well as the expanding requirements to accommodate population growth and provide maintenance services. Notwithstanding keen interest, one difficulty that communities experience in converting such economic opportunities into local employment is their inevitably higher cost structure in competitive tendering with urban-based contractors. To the extent that this is an issue at Thamarrurr, the 'whole of government' partnership that forms the basis of the COAG ICCP trial provides a potentially unique framework to consider the opportunity costs of government tendering processes in terms of the social consequences and dollar costs of foregone regional employment. In effect, the lowest tender for public works may not necessarily present the cheapest option for government overall.

Education and training

Poor employment outcomes for Aboriginal people in the region are to a large degree tied to poor educational status. It remains the case that not all of those in the current school age group are enrolled. Only half of the region's school age population is enrolled at school, and only half of those enrolled actually attend classes, and even then often on an irregular basis. The low level of commitment to school attendance in the region is re-

flected in minimal retention to post-primary years with less than one-fifth of teenagers of compulsory school age estimated to be attending classes. In effect, only a handful of school leavers enter working age with high school level achievement and skills.

Likewise, the very low participation in Certificate level VET courses means that the vast majority of Aboriginal adults in the region are likely to be left uneducated, unqualified, unemployed, or underemployed on CDEP, and effectively marginalised in the face of any competition for jobs from more qualified countrymen or outsiders. Thus, a key regional development challenge is going to be in ensuring equitable, not just partial participation. Having said that, even qualified local people are underemployed, with many holding Certificate level qualifications that have never been practically applied. One glaring example concerns the 27 Wadeye residents who achieved level II certification from the Northern Territory University in Tourism (site guides) in 1999. The aim was to prepare a workforce for a tourism venture that never materialised. This underlines the case that skills development needs to be closely tied to the creation of employment opportunities.

Housing and infrastructure

By Territory standards, Wadeye is a settlement of significant size. Within a generation it will be larger than present-day Nhulunbuy. Despite this, it fails to match the levels of infrastructure development and housing adequacy that are normally associated with Australian settlements of equivalent size. With housing for Aboriginal residents provided initially by the mission, and now by the Council, supply is entirely program driven and falls far short of demand. As with employment, the backlog is such that a substantial increase in stock will be required simply to prevent the current high levels of overcrowding from being exacerbated.

Currently, the Northern Territory government estimates the cost of meeting agreed standards in housing for the Thamarrurr region at \$52 million, based on an average bedroom cost of \$60 000. In addition to this is a need to ensure that adequate maintenance funds are available and sufficient to ensure minimum environmental health standards, while expansion in the housing stock will be necessary to accommodate new household formation in a rapidly growing population.

While the available data provide some basis for estimating housing needs, more precise information is required on the functionality of dwellings in terms of environmental health infrastructure, and there is a need to better understand the load on housing stock created by short-term mobility into and within the region. At a more general level, it would be useful to draw comparison between Wadeye and other Australian towns of comparable size and growth rate to establish the degree of difference in infrastructure and approaches to physical planning for growth.

Health status

With reference to just one statistic—mean age at death (which currently stands at 46 years for Aboriginal people in the Daly SLA)—the physical limitations on prolonged and

full participation in the workforce become all too apparent. If we add to this the fact of relatively high morbidity rates commencing in the mid-30s and rising throughout the prime working ages, then a pattern emerges of severe physical constraints on the ability of many in the community to engage in meaningful and sustained economic activity. From a labour market perspective, the extent to which poor health status impacts on the workforce participants would be better understood if data were available on any links between health status and below average school performance. There is also the likelihood that less direct impacts on workforce participation might exist, such as individuals not seeking work due to responsibilities in caring for sick relatives.

Among the issues underlying health status, the profile emphasises the significance of ongoing backlogs in achieving adequate environmental health infrastructure (including a reduction in overcrowded dwellings), a continuing gap between ideal and actual staffing levels in health personnel, and difficulties in achieving better nutritional status in the population given the high cost of food and low incomes. One of the key health issues for the future is the distinct prospect that overall morbidity and chronic disease levels will rise in line with growing numbers in older age groups. While health status generally reflects prevailing social and economic conditions in the region, there is an inevitable lag between any improvement in the latter and its possible effect on the former. This lag will be further prolonged by the expansion of older age groups.

Criminal justice

A pressing issue for Thamarrurr is the degree to which past and present convictions and interaction with police, courts and prisons influence individual chances of participating successfully in the regional society and economy as defined by the goals and objectives of the ICCP partners. While limited by data availability, an estimate is provided here of the population for whom contact with the police and a criminal conviction might represent a barrier, or at least a brake, on social and economic participation. What emerges is a picture of some 10 per cent of adults aged under 30 (almost all male) who are in custody at any one time. Many of these are repeat offenders, and while custody rates decline with age, feeding into this group is a larger number of juvenile offenders and even more children of primary school age who essentially experience an apprehension-free apprenticeship into recidivist behaviour. Not that sanction by the criminal justice system appears to matter much as a deterrent, indeed it may even be sought.

The main thrust of research into underlying causes of such behaviour among Aboriginal youth in remote communities emphasises the futility of custody in circumstances where the normal progression from school to paid work is the exception rather than the rule (Ogilvie & Van Zyl 2001). While the educational profile of offenders recorded in official crime statistics appears to be in line with the general Thamarrurr profile, one can't help but postulate at least some link between the lack of participation in schooling observed in the region, the low level of youth labour force participation, and the scale of youth participation in recidivist activity.

As Ogilvie and Van Zyl (2001: 4) point out, if an individual's most defining experience of growing up is primarily about custody, (and one might add gang allegiance in the

case of Wadeye), then it would seem unlikely that such an experience would equip young males for lives outside of criminal subcultures. In pursuing this theme, they call for a reconsideration of expenditure involved in incarceration in favour of facilitating less destructive modes of growing up (Ogilvie & Van Zyl 2001: 5). To this extent, continued poor school attendance and failure to engage youth economically 'to satisfy the need for more than just boredom and marginalisation' (Ogilvie and Van Zyl 2001: 5), represent clear opportunity costs to both government and the regional community.

Information systems for regional planning

In order to maximise the positives from regional governance, it is central that any 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. Accordingly, this need to measure outcomes from a baseline is fundamental to development plans negotiated between government and regional governing bodies.

As an example of this, the Shared Responsibility Agreement signed in 2003 between the Thamarrurr Regional Council, the Northern Territory Government, and the Commonwealth, identifies as its first objective 'the establishment of partnerships for achieving measurable and sustainable improvements for people living in the region.' The measures required to inform both Thamarrurr and government about progress were determined partly by the development priorities set out within the Thamarrurr Agreement, and partly by the availability of public information specific to the regional population.

While by their very nature, baseline data are cross-sectional, the projection of the regional population to 2023 (a generation from now) encourages forward thinking and anticipation of needs so as to hopefully respond to them before they are realized. 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 for good governance is a 'proactive' methodology that seeks to anticipate and plan for expected requirements. In this way, the content and intent of regional agreements with government can be translated into a required quantum of program and partner commitments over a given time frame. This issue of future needs leads naturally to a discussion of capacity building for regional governance.

Partnerships and capacity building

The process of developing a baseline profile of the Thamarrurr regional population involved a large number of agencies and individuals from Wadeye itself, and from Territory and Commonwealth agencies. Regional data for a customised area such as Thamarrurr are not readily available; they need to be requested, even cajoled, from a variety of sources and then locally interpreted. Aside from ABS census data, other indicators to do with welfare, income, housing, employment, education, health, crime, and even demography, have to be constructed with assistance from line agencies.

Thus, an early test of the partnership arrangement in the context of developing the baseline profile 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. In the Thamarrurr exercise, 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. Although much can be promised at such gatherings, the speed of response can be variable and considerable follow up is necessary. As seen from the data list, administrative and public domain information is largely restricted to aggregate region-level data.

The emphasis 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 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. Culture-wise, it requires social mapping into groups that have local significance such as age grades, family groups and clans.

In Thamarrurr, the basis for an accurate count of the population was established by the Regional Council itself, working with the various groups established within the Thamarrurr governance structure to address priority issues. Of particular note here were the Thamarrurr Regional Housing Authority, and the Palngun Wurnangat Womens Association. This process alone was an exercise in capacity building for governance as it involved key local people in collecting and verifying their own population data to be used for their own purposes.

The outcome is a database that enables the Regional Council to consider options and needs for the future. With this information, the Council now knows that just to achieve a very modest goal and keep the regional employment rate at its current very low level (14%), the number of adults in work will need to double over the next 20 years. Also, with the school age population rising to well over 1000 within a generation, there is a strong case for upgrading the school to secondary status. As for health issues, the fact that older age groups are likely to increase fastest over the next 20 years has substantial implications for health spending and provision of facilities in the region, given the age profile and nature of morbidity. Finally, in planning to address housing needs, substantial additional resourcing is going to be needed just to sustain the current regional occupancy rate at 16 persons per functional dwelling, let alone reduce it.

For effective planning it is essential that the information system constructed to inform regional governance should be ongoing, constantly updated, and expanded where necessary. Aside from the ability to establish region-wide needs, the database developed for Thamarrurr can be further developed by configuring it into family/clan groups, while additional information such as housing, jobs, and education can also be grafted on to suit the needs of the various ICCP priority working groups. Accordingly, this task should be seen as a core function within the regional governance structure. Indeed, it could be argued that one measure of success in terms of establishing good governance, is that re-

gional councils, such as Thamarrurr, begin to assume responsibility for the compilation of their own indicators (in partnership with government agencies who often hold the necessary data), and to progress in stages to their interpretation, presentation, replication, and dissemination with the ultimate goal of their application for planning. What is presented in the current profile is akin to the rapid appraisal approach to social and economic profiling with associated shortcomings as described by Birkhead (1999). For the next phase in the development of regional information systems, more appropriate models should involve enhanced community participation and various approaches to this exist (Howitt 1993; Josif & Associates 1995a, 1995b, 1995c; Walsh & Mitchell 2002).

In particular, agencies faced with imperfect data for development planning have moved to establish demographic surveillance systems at various sites across the developing world (Binka et al. 1999; IDRC 2002). These now provide an internationally recognised set of tools, methods, procedures and guidelines for the successful tracking of regional population dynamics and measurement of intervention impacts that would bear useful replication in the Thamarrurr context.

As with many aspects of Indigenous life, information gathering and interpretation tends to be presently done *for* communities *by* outsiders. With appropriate resourcing, training and skills development for local personnel, the ICCP trials represent a unique opportunity to build internal regional capacity for planning within the framework of associated emerging governance structures. This sense of ownership and participation in the planning process, and the information flow that informs it, is central to good governance and community development.

