

Foundations for employment and full participation in remote areas

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The third speaker in this session this morning and that is Jan Ferguson who is the Managing Director of Ninti One and the CRC for Remote Economic Participation. Jan lives in one of my absolute favourite parts of this state—the rugged arid beauty of the Northern Flinders Ranges, and she has a long-term personal passionate engagement with the communities and people of remote Australia. She's a leader and manager in a multi-partner cross-jurisdictional organisation dedicated to improving the prospects of desert and remote Australia, through research and delivery of outcomes. Jan is skilled in the management of multi-partner organisations, that cross jurisdictional approach, and rangelands, ecology and economics. She has the ability to facilitate difficult and complex negotiations across multiple groups in government, research and the community, a wonderful skill to have, to look at the foundations for employment and for participation in remote areas. Please welcome Jan Ferguson.

Thank you. I'd like to thank the organisers of the conference for the opportunity to be here today and also to acknowledge the traditional owners, the Karuna people of this part of Australia, and all of the traditional owners and Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander peoples that we work with in the course of our work. What I'd like to do this morning is to talk about the characteristics of remote Australia, our work at Ninti One and particularly to discuss our Aboriginal Community Research Program, and obviously provide some concluding remarks.

So what is remote Australia? Remote Australia is 85 per cent of the land mass. There's all sorts of different measurements but somewhere between ... it depends on which bit of the ABS thing you count, somewhere between 78 and 85. But 85 per cent of Australians live within 50 kilometres of the coast, 3 per cent of Australians live in remote Australia, as you can see there's not very dense populations. Remote areas comprise many diverse settlements including pastoral, farming, mining, tourism and Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander communities. The social, and I'm sure this is not news to a lot of the people in the audience here, but the social and economic determinants of health vary across those communities markedly, 25 per cent of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations live in remote or very remote Australia, when overall they only represent 2 per cent of the overall population.

So remote Australia ... we've done a lot of science on remote and desert Australia and whilst each of the features about it are not individually unique, when you put them together, they are unique, and they form a concept called desert syndrome. We would argue, if you're doing anything in remote and very remote Australia, you need to take account of these particular things. I'm not going to talk about all of them today; you can find all this information on our web site. But there are things like we live in areas of very high climate variability and it has been hot for any of you who have been out there, sometimes it rains a lot, sometimes it rains a little. We have scarce resources so that may be rain, that may be plant material, that may be access to the shop that was mentioned earlier, but we do have scarce resources.

We have sparse and mobile populations. I defy any of you to track my health records because I just have to go and find health practitioners wherever I happen to be, and without the national system you don't have a snowball's chance of knowing terribly much about me, and that's true for an awful lot of people who live and work in remote Australia. We deal with the issue of remoteness, we have distant markets, we're distant from markets, we're distant from decision making, and one of the few countries in the world that is like us, as the Canadian lady mentioned this morning, we do have a lot of similarities to the Northwest Territories in what we do, and having visited there myself, I was struck how much like Cooper Pedy that place was.

We also have limited research in this part of the country, I mean we are one of the organisations that, we're about to have our tenth anniversary, has continued to do research in this space over a long period of time. As I said we call this desert syndrome and it depends a lot on local knowledge. The importance

of remote Australia however is markedly different. Remote Australia contributes to the national GDP significantly; mining contributes 8.4 per cent of Australia's GDP, 60 per cent of the nation's mining platforms operate in remote and very remote Australia. Mining, for example, employs 239,100 people and in 2011 there are 40,000 SMEs in remote Australia, we have 1 1/2 times per capita the number of SMEs in remote Australia as anywhere else, but we don't get that level of service to those SMEs.

Remote Australia contributes 2.2 per cent to Australia's GDP in the agriculture sector. We identify ... we actually contribute enormously to the national psyche, when you actually research people about what they see as uniquely Australian, it comes up as the outback, however people tend to define it. So there's a whole lot about our national psyche which comes from remote Australia. It's interesting when you actually get into the businesses that operate in remote Australia, the multipliers in terms of their return to communities are very different. Mining is not the highest, it happens to put in very big numbers but it is not as great as, for example, the cultural and art sector, or the agriculture sector, in terms of what it returns to the actual local community itself. Just to give you another couple of examples in terms of remote employment, agriculture is 13 per cent of remote employment, retail trade is 12 and mining is 11. So you can see some of the notions that you might have about where employment comes from are not entirely accurate.

Remote Australia, for all its success in an economic sense, remains distant from economic and political decision making, in general, remote Australians have lower incomes, lower employment rates, lower education than the rest of Australia, and those trends are exacerbated when you get into the Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander peoples. In 2008, for example, only 35 per cent of Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander people had a level of education above Year 10. Now the Closing the Gap Strategy is making some impact on that, but we've yet to see whether that is sustained. Only 3 per cent of people have a Bachelor degree or above, and in 2010, 46 per cent of the Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander population were regarded as employed. That gives you some sort of idea of the context of remote Australia.

If you move to the health and wellbeing of individuals who live in remote Australia, overall they continue to show poorer health outcomes than residents in metropolitan centres. The health of Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander communities remains unacceptable. We have poorer educational outcomes, lower incomes and generally lower socioeconomic circumstances, which contribute to the significantly poorer health outcomes. All of those differences are very well documented but there are some things that don't necessarily come across.

When I walked in here today and there are the bowls of fruit out there, I can only dream of running a conference in remote Australia and having that quality of fruit and vegetables to actually have on a bench. (A) it would cost me a mint and (B) I wouldn't be able to access that quality, so it was interesting that that was the thing I noticed when I walked in, that we would struggle to do this if we were having this in Alice Springs, for example. We also know, as has been mentioned by previous speakers, that climate change will have some impact on all of those issues.

Whilst we can talk in those very general terms what we're doing at Ninti One is, actually, Ninti One is a research, innovation and community development organisation. So what we're trying to do is get behind the social determinants of health and wellbeing and actually understand them. Ninti One's approach is to provide practical responses to the complex issues that drive things like health and wellbeing and economic participation. We do this through establishing partnerships, as has been discussed, one of our projects has 59 ... one of our big contracts has 59 partners, another one of our contracts has 19 partners. When I talked about desert syndrome before, that's one of the things about the desert is lower critical mass, desert or remote Australia is low critical mass, so what we have to do to work anywhere in remote Australia is establish the critical mass before you can actually have an impact. We have 12 projects in the Cooperative Research Centre, and they come from a systems approach, investigating regional economic systems, enterprise development, remote education and employment systems.

We take a whole of system approach because we believe, sometimes, if you tweak a system you sometimes get an unintended consequence that you actually didn't want. I'm going to talk now about one of the projects that we're working on, which we're trying to establish the interplay between health and wellbeing. The key research question our interplay project is trying to answer is, what are the relationships between health and wellbeing, education and employment for individuals and communities? It is important, and Rob mentioned this before, that we look at it from an individual perspective and also from a community perspective because the outcomes can be different.

In the long term we hope, by developing this framework, that we can actually provide it as a tool, we're a public research organisation, so this will be provided generally for everybody to use. When we've tested this, this will be provided in the terms of tools, that when people talk about, for example the Royalties for Regions Program, it will give you a good evaluation to actually check what impact the particular initiatives that you are planning or have done, have had, or will have, and give you a measurement of the impact.

This is still at an early stage, I wouldn't want you to think this was finalised, we've done an enormous amount of work comparatively, internationally and nationally, and for those of you who have got good eyesight you'll be able to read some of it, for those of you who haven't, like me, you can read the headings. All of this will go to our website shortly so you will be able to find it.

What we're looking for is objective measures of the complex or inter-relationships between all of the factors that affect wellbeing. We're about to pilot this in ten communities and this is where the difference in approach that Ninti uses will hopefully come to the fore. Ninti works extensively on the ground with people who live in remote communities and do work or aspire to work in remote communities. We have local Aboriginal research teams working in these remote communities where we intend to test this, Ninti has a network of 80 Aboriginal community researchers who live in remote communities. They will work with us to test this particular methodology, we work with technology, we use iPads that at the moment is presented in English, it will be presented in whatever languages that community actually speaks fluently, or languages should there be more than one, and people will be interviewed about this in their own spoken language. These people are trained in research methodologies, they have a very good understanding of intellectual property ethics, they work with us exactly the same as anybody who happens to have a PhD or other form of education. So those researchers will go into communities and they will test this framework and once we've piloted it, we'll run it out over a large group of communities to check the veracity of the document.

To give you a little more understanding of the methodology and how it leads to practical outcomes, we have actually worked across a series of remote communities in partnership with FaHCSIA, where we were commissioned to do work using this methodology so that communities could do things that they needed done themselves, so that they could find out information that they wanted. We worked, for those of you who are familiar with remote Australia, in Ntaria, [phonetic] Yuendumu, Amete, [phonetic] Emimily [phonetic] and Largamounti [phonetic] and not easy places to get to working or have the sort of success that we've been having.

To use the Ntaria example, the women particularly were fed up with people being killed on the road to Alice Springs and they wanted to understand why. So they worked out a questionnaire so that they could go through their community and work out why this was happening. They then converted that into the iPad technology—iPads go down a treat I got to tell you, they are a real draw card in terms of how the technology works. What they did was they came up with a whole series of recommendations which are now being, working in partnership with Ninti, being turned into practical outcomes.

One is investigating how a local driving school at Ntaria might be progressed, the second is a driver rehabilitation program that's delivered in Alice Springs, is investigating that being run in Ntaria, and broader community consultation about the relationship between vehicle maintenance, driver attitudes and safe driving at Ntaria. The practical side of this is we've worked with the police to get them to

change some of their policing methods, which has made a difference, and we're now working with the community on getting a garage so they can actually make their vehicles safer, so they don't finish up in the Alice Springs Hospital, or worse still the morgue, as a result of an accident.

As you can see that's a multifaceted approach, we go seeking the information, the people actually come back with the ideas themselves and then we'll take it to a practical outcome of what needs to actually change. It's a unique way of working, we haven't found anyone else who is working in this manner, but we're happy to work in partnership with anybody who wants to work with us on these sorts of projects, it's not cheap working in remote Australia, it does have its costs, having said that we aspire to have this network across every remote service delivery community in remote Australia.

When I was asked to speak here I was asked to give some positive examples of our impact, so using those same methodologies and working with women in the bush foods industry about what was happening, they actually were getting \$8 a kilo for their bush tomatoes, bush tomatoes are about the size of my fingernail, little finger nail so not very big, awful lot in a kilo, I wouldn't pick them for \$8 a kilo. We managed to lead them to understand that they were actually accepting the price that somebody offered them, they weren't setting the price for themselves, so collecting bush tomatoes is a really important thing in terms of a social determinant of health, it gets people out on country, it keeps people active, it gets kids out there experiencing culture, at the end of the day it's got an economic result because they actually sell something.

So where we thought people were in that value chain they weren't, we needed to actually do a lot of value chain work with the women, we particularly took them on a tour across Australia to show them where the bush tomato started and where they finished up in high-end restaurants in places like Adelaide, it was hilarious as much as what they learned about high-end restaurants and about what high-end restaurants learned about where the food came from. There was the sort of thing that happens when you've got very remote people, and it was the situation we were all getting on the escalator and nobody is moving, and so we're stuck at the airport and we can't even get on the plane to go and do what we wanted, and so pushing people to say, they're all right, I know they're not in your world but they are safe so please get on it.

So there were all sorts of things that we learned that we didn't expect to learn, but the most important thing was that these people understood that for their bush tomatoes to get the price that they needed, there needed to be constant supply in the market place, and we're now taking that on to work with plots much like the gardens idea of growing bush tomatoes in remote locations so people actually have an economic outcome.

We can talk about some success stories, as a result of all of this work, particularly some that we've worked on in Alice Springs, who are running successful ... particularly some we've worked with in Alice Springs, successful Aboriginal catering businesses, they source their bush tucker from Aboriginal communities and they sell into a mainstream market and their employment is growing. There's an awful lot of work gone into that but it's been successful in providing a good health and wellbeing outcomes, as well as obviously a good financial outcome.

Just in conclusion it's important that, and you can see by the way I've spoke we try and take a holistic approach, it's important that we take a holistic approach to health and inequity, we need to improve education, employment, infrastructure and I think, I don't know whether the conference has talked much about this, but I think we need some very good adaptation strategies for climate change. One size fits all policies don't work, particularly don't work in remote settings, they just need to be tailored to the unique settings of each individual community and place, and you can work in partnership with the local people and provide extremely good economic outcomes to them in the form of a job if you're prepared to do the hard yards. More interdisciplinary and cross-agency programs are needed to maximise health outcomes and the West Australian gentleman talked about his cross-agency group and that's extremely

important. We would recommend more frameworks like desert syndrome and the interplay frameworks be established so that we can be sure that we understand our investments are well placed.

Thank you.