Governance at the heart of reform in remote Australia

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Australia has changed significantly, and continues to change, in fundamental ways.

Over the past 30 years, it has become the most urbanised continent in the world. Australia’s view of itself has shrunk to its coastal fringe. More than 85% of our population lives within 50 km of the coastline and our system of democracy and national economy and the accompanying policy and program settings have progressively been altered to serve the coastal areas and the large mass of people in urban Australia.

In numerous ways, this has been at the expense of how remote Australia and its people and communities are governed, leading to what is nothing less than a crisis in governance, and an urgent need for systemic change. The persistent efforts of policy makers in a multitude of sectors are likely to be frustrated in the absence of systemic reform of governance. This and the lack of a declared national interest in remote Australia hinders the policy and program efforts of many professionals, agencies and organisations.

The remoteFOCUS project initiated by Desert Knowledge Australia concluded that:

- governance arrangements are a threshold cause of policy failure in remote Australia
- policy for remote Australia needs to be separately conceived and framed, and ‘custom built’ to meet its specific circumstances and needs
- the challenge in designing new approaches to governing and administering remote Australia is that a paradigm shift in policy is required—and this cannot come from within the present governance framework.

A framework for governance reform is proposed in the recent report entitled ‘Fixing the Hole in Australia’s Heartland: How government needs to work in remote Australia’. This paper presents the next steps that have been taken to progress these findings, including building a public alliance and examples of the principles and framework in action in the Pilbara and Central Australia.

Increasingly place-based initiatives, co-production of service delivery and innovation strategies are being practised in sectors like health, disability services, etc to overcome the dysfunctions highlighted in the remoteFOCUS project. This paper suggests these concepts will not translate immediately into remote contexts or provide durable outcomes without a concurrent reform of governance and recognition of the unique operating environment in remote Australia.

This paper concludes by offering alternatives that address the systemic drivers that contribute to the difficulties of governing the vast, valuable and sparsely populated backyard of the nation.