

Important Questions for Indigenous Policy Makers

Sara Hudson of The Centre for Independent Studies (CIS) suggests that in the wake of the Northern Territory Intervention ‘academic expositions, such as Jon Altman’s on the virtues of “hybrid economies” and the development of curricula relevant to local settings, were increasingly seen as ridiculous’.⁸⁵

The suggestions here are twofold:

First, that there is something impractical about my advocacy for hybrid economies. And second, that my academic work has somehow hidden the living conditions of remote Indigenous communities from public view.

Later in her piece Ms Hudson suggests that ‘We need to rise above the petty name-calling and polarisation in Indigenous Affairs and look at effective policies instead’.

I could just politely suggest to Ms Hudson that she should follow her own advice about name-calling and critically engage with my decades-long research that has highlighted the extent, causes and consequences of Indigenous economic marginalisation, and proposed practical solutions.

Instead I will say something about the ‘virtues’ of hybrid or diverse economies, not just in remote Australia, but everywhere, using official data collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) from the 2008 NATSISS.

To begin, what is the hybrid economy that the CIS finds so obnoxious?

Put simply, it is a form of economy that recognises a customary or non-market sector alongside the more usual private and public sectors. I developed this model because when working in remote regions I found it impossible to explain economic activity if I chose to ignore the existence of the customary sector and its inter-linkages with market and state sectors of local economies.

Much of my early work on economic hybridity was undertaken in Arnhem Land where people harvest wildlife for food and produce art for sale from naturally-occurring materials. And so it could be dismissed by the sceptics as highly atypical. But since 1994 the ABS has collected information nationally on participation in the customary sector and so my case studies could be tested more broadly.

Recently, I interrogated the 2008 NATSISS in collaboration with two colleagues to see what information is available on aspects of the customary sector, focusing on harvesting activities and cultural production. Looking at the

⁸⁵ Sara Hudson ‘Petty name-calling just adds to polarisation’, *The Australian* (Surry Hills), 12 May 2011.

survey population of nearly 9,000 adults we found that across Australia, over half the population aged over 15 years participated in fishing, hunting and gathering wild plants for consumption. And 28 per cent participated in cultural production, making arts and crafts, performing music, dance and theatre, and writing and telling stories. These are significant proportions.

Undertaking further regression analysis we made many other important observations. Not surprisingly, those who live in remote Australia are more likely to participate in harvesting in part because living at and recognising homelands provides access to resources. Interestingly, being 15–19 years of age in remote areas; speaking an Indigenous language; and being employed in CDEP all enhanced likelihood of participation in harvesting, whereas differences in high school education were not associated with harvesting.

There was no difference in participation in cultural production between remote and non-remote regions because such activity is not land dependent. But speaking an Indigenous language made a big positive difference as did recognising an area as a homeland.

In terms of motivation, people mainly harvest for food, although such activity is also a source of enjoyment and social interaction. Similarly people engage in cultural production mainly to learn or engage in ceremony, for their own enjoyment and for social interaction. But in remote Australia cultural production is significantly more likely to be undertaken as part of an integrated learning process and to make money.

We also looked at the relationship between harvesting and self-assessed measures of wellbeing and found statistically significant links between being full of energy and likelihood of hunting and between hunting and happiness. Conversely we found those in fair or poor health and those who rarely felt full of life are significantly less likely to participate in physically demanding activity like fishing, hunting or dancing.

These 2008 NATSISS findings have received no media or policy attention to date. They raise some important questions for policy.

Should economic development just focus on mainstreaming, especially given the growth of the Indigenous estate and associated property rights in resources harvested? What are the prospects of Closing the Gap, especially in remote and regional areas, if we ignore harvesting and cultural production? Does the stated aim of policy to standardise economic norms make sense? Will closure of education gaps assist people who harvest and engage in cultural production for a livelihood? Should the CDEP scheme that assists both be effectively abolished?

These findings all indicate that a different policy approach might be needed

especially in places where Indigenous people own land. Putting aside the national policy obsession with closing statistical gaps, Indigenous livelihoods and wellbeing could be improved through a combination of harvesting and cultural production to supplement any available formal employment. Such productive activities in the customary sector are likely to be significantly higher if people are on CDEP, living at homelands/outstations and speaking an Aboriginal language.

These findings do not, in themselves, suggest that participation in harvesting and cultural production will provide better outcomes than formal employment, only that in the absence of enough mainstream opportunity where Indigenous people live it would make sense to acknowledge customary contributions and for policy to support their undertaking. It is unfortunate that the 2008 NATSISS did not collect information on the contributions that Indigenous people living and working on country make in the provision of environmental services in the national interest. Such conservation work is growing as both the size of Indigenous estate and the number of Indigenous Protected Areas grow: the hybrid economy is undoubtedly even more significant than 2008 NATSISS data suggest.

At present in Australia there is a coalition of powerful vested interests, including the CIS, that is promulgating the beautiful lie that development is market freedom and that closing statistical gaps is desired by all and is possible everywhere. In my view development is about people having freedom to pursue lives that they have reason to value, including through hybrid economies with vibrant customary sectors and within a set of values that may differ from that of mainstream Australia.

Evidently, evidence-based policy making is back in vogue but there are some who can have influence even as they ignore the official evidence and espouse practical solutions based at best on ideology, at worst on fantasy. And the Australian Government is listening.

Australia might generate more effective policies if we did three things:

- First, ask people at diverse local levels what their economic aspirations might be.
- Second, look at what is possible.
- And third, look at what has worked and might be replicated with state assistance.

In other Third World contexts this is called participatory development; in other settler majority societies, self-determination. And it works more effectively in addressing socioeconomic disadvantage than Australia's current approach of normalisation.

16 May 2011