

East Kimberley Impact Assessment Project

THE POTENTIAL FOR REDUCED DEPENDENCY AT ABORIGINAL
COMMUNITIES IN THE EAST KIMBERLEY REGION

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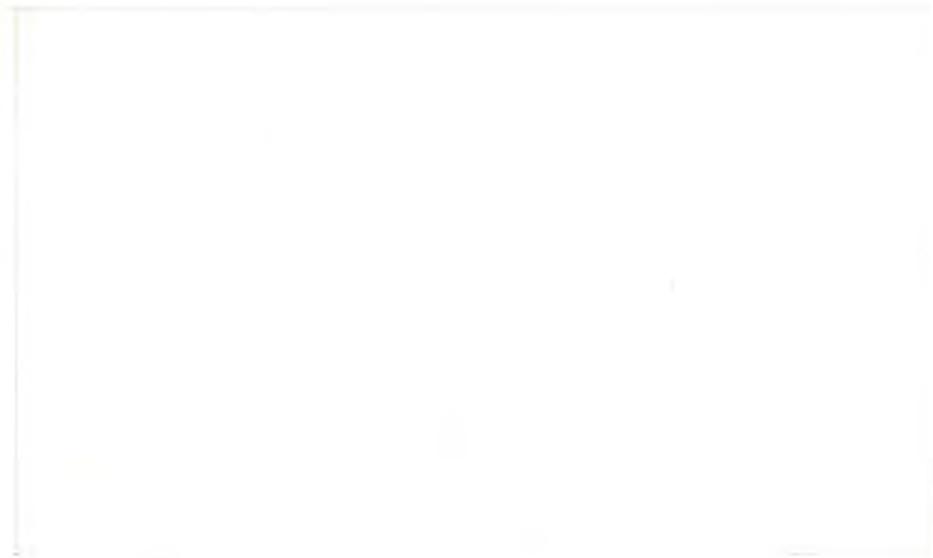
A Joint Project Of The:

Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies
Australian National University

Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies

Anthropology Department
University of Western Australia

Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia



The aims of the project are as follows:

1. To compile a comprehensive profile of the contemporary social environment of the East Kimberley region utilising both existing information sources and limited fieldwork.
2. Develop and utilise appropriate methodological approaches to social impact assessment within a multi-disciplinary framework.
3. Assess the social impact of major public and private developments of the East Kimberley region's resources (physical, mineral and environmental) on resident Aboriginal communities. Attempt to identify problems/issues which, while possibly dormant at present, are likely to have implications that will affect communities at some stage in the future.
4. Establish a framework to allow the dissemination of research results to Aboriginal communities so as to enable them to develop their own strategies for dealing with social impact issues.
5. To identify in consultation with Governments and regional interests issues and problems which may be susceptible to further research.

Views expressed in the Project's publications are the views of the authors, and are not necessarily shared by the sponsoring organisations.

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ABSTRACT

This working paper is the published version of a seminar presented at the Centre for Resources and Environmental Studies, Canberra in June 1987. The author analyses Federal Government Aboriginal affairs policy as it affects the economic situation at remote Aboriginal communities. He points out the contradiction in contemporary policies that stress cultural autonomy and economic assimilation. A general consideration of the economic status of Aborigines in the East Kimberley region moves to case study data on employment, economic opportunities and income in the Warmun Aboriginal community. The author concludes that poverty, unemployment and dependence on the public sector are excessive, but also emphasises that Aboriginal subsistence income, culturally different material aspirations, different expenditure patterns and access to mining moneys have acted to ameliorate this apparent poverty. The author argues that Aboriginal economic development aspirations may not only be substantially different from those in the major society but may also differ between Aboriginal groups. He calls for a recognition of this variability in government Aboriginal affairs policy and practice.

ABBREVIATIONS

ADC	Aboriginal Development Commission
ADM	Argyle Diamond Mines
AGPS	Australian Government Publishing Service
AIAS	Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies
ANPWS	Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service
ASIG	Argyle Social Impact Group
CALM	Department of Conservation and Land Management
CCEP	Commonwealth Community Employment Program
CDEP	Community Development Employment Program
CM & S	Community Management and Services
CRES	Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies
DAA	Department of Aboriginal Affairs
DEIR	Department of Employment and Industrial Relations
EKIAP	East Kimberley Impact Assessment Project
GNP	Good Neighbour Program
KTA	Kimberley Tourism Association
NT	Northern Territory
TMPU	Town Management and Public Utilities
WA	Western Australia
WATC	Western Australian Tourism Commission

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper touches on issues that will be raised in a section on economic options in the final report of the East Kimberley Impact Assessment Project (EKIAP). I begin by briefly analysing the Aboriginal affairs policy of the Federal Government, particularly as this affects the economic situation at remote Aboriginal communities. Then I present some aggregate quantitative data from the 1981 Census for the East Kimberley region. While one may feel somewhat reluctant about presenting 1981 Census data in 1987, at present there is no other reliable regional data base. I suspect that the East Kimberley Impact Assessment Project will be completed before 1986 Census data are readily available. I present the regional data on a range of formal social indicators in a somewhat tongue-in-cheek manner: the call for urgent action at remote Aboriginal communities is usually based on such assessments of poverty and levels of unemployment. If poverty, unemployment and dependence on the public sector are shown to be excessive and this is accepted as a sufficient condition for massive public intervention, then the East Kimberley is a prime target for such intervention.

I will move from the general to the particular by examining the economy of one community in the East Kimberley, Turkey Creek or Warmun, where I undertook fieldwork in August 1986. The Warmun data provide an opportunity to update 1981 Census data and to establish whether the picture presented at the regional level with social indicators is replicated at the community level.

The critical issue that is addressed with respect to this one community is whether its level of dependence on the public sector is of particular concern to its community members, bearing in mind that calls for intervention are most frequently heard from policy makers, activists and academics. If not, then what are the community's development goals and do they correlate with, or are they tangential to, the aims of policy makers? Is there an inconsistency between the broad policy of 'self determination' or 'self management' and the current push for reduced dependency on welfare and on government programs?

2. GOVERNMENT POLICIES

Government policy in Aboriginal affairs over the past twenty years has grappled with an almost insoluble dilemma: how can Aboriginal economic advancement be assured while at the same time allowing, and indeed encouraging, Aboriginal people to maintain their distinct culture and identity. This dilemma has been exacerbated by the heterogenous nature of the Aboriginal population and its geographic distribution. Since the days of assimilation policies, equity between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians has been the guiding principle in government policies. Even the assimilation policy officially defined in 1961 at a Native Welfare Conference stated that Aborigines would enjoy 'the same rights and privileges as other Australians' (Rowley, 1971:399).

The assimilation policy was based on a premise that Aborigines would eventually abandon their own cultural heritage and would adopt the same values as the dominant white society. It stated in part that Aborigines 'are expected eventually to attain the *same* manner of living as other Australians, accepting the *same* responsibilities, observing the

same customs and influenced by the *same* beliefs as other Australians' (my underlining, Rowley, 1971:399). In the economic domain, this policy was grounded in the 'modernisation' or 'development' paradigm and an unswerving belief that the western world's approach to economic issues was unquestionably superior. Assimilation policies were about economic and cultural sameness, but they failed on both fronts. The very cultural practices that Aborigines were required to radically alter remained remarkably resilient. Furthermore, most of the lands that were reserved exclusively for Aboriginal use were of such limited economic value and so remote that they could not have been developed even by the most able capitalist.

It is frequently believed that the policy of 'self determination' began with the Whitlam Labor Government. In fact, by the time of the 1967 Referendum, assimilation was waning rapidly as a policy and had been replaced in 1965 by the policy of integration. As Schapper (1970:56) noted, for a policy to qualify as integration it must cater for real equal-life opportunities but, as distinct from assimilation, tolerate and value cultural differences between persons with dissimilar ethnic heritages. Part of the impetus for the change from assimilation to integration came from the change in the composition of the Australian population with post-war migration of southern Europeans and an increased emphasis on multiculturalism. By 1972 Prime Minister McMahon (1972) stated 'that Aborigines should be encouraged and assisted to develop their own culture, languages and traditions and arts so that these can become living elements in the diverse culture of the Australian society'.

It was not until the Whitlam Government of 1972-75 that self determination was defined as Government policy. In marked contrast to assimilation it was about 'Aboriginal communities deciding the pace and nature of their future development as significant components within a diverse Australia' (Whitlam, 1973). The Whitlam Government set up the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee (NACC) with which it could confer at the national level; commenced the handover of local government powers to Aboriginal councils; and established the Department of Aboriginal Affairs to administer programs specifically targeted at Aboriginal people. The Labor Government also had a commitment to introduce land rights throughout Australia, at least in part as compensation for economic deprivation.

It is now well-known that the Whitlam Government's commitment to land rights never extended beyond the then federally run Northern Territory. While in 1974, the then Minister for Aboriginal Affairs Mr J.L. Cavanagh noted that 'self determination implies a degree of economic independence' (Cavanagh, 1974), it was only Mr Justice Woodward heading the Aboriginal Land Rights Commission in 1973 and 1974 who sought to establish a mechanism whereby Aboriginal interests had access to funds independent of government. Woodward (1974) proposed to allow Aboriginal political organisations (Land Councils) and some communities financial independence by recommending that mining royalties payable with respect to resource development on Aboriginal land be paid directly to Aboriginal interests. This recommendation was unacceptable to both Whitlam and Fraser Governments; it appears that there were limits to economic and political independence, and the payment of mining royalties to Aborigines was to be controlled by the Commonwealth. The economic options open to Aborigines

during the Whitlam years increased somewhat: they could take part in the mainstream economy, in government programs (at award wage rates) or receive welfare (including unemployment benefits).

Will Sanders (1982) in 1981 traced the subtle shift in policy that occurred during the Fraser years. While there was little rhetorical difference between Labor and Liberal policies there was an important shift in ideology. Aboriginal involvement in policy making and decision making was quite acceptable, but with involvement also came a demand to assume responsibility for success, failure, efficient administration and accountability for public moneys. By 1978, self-sufficiency had become integrally linked to self-management. The then Minister for Aboriginal Affairs Mr I. Viner (1978) referred to 'self-sufficiency as the economic face of self-determination'. Liberal ideology demanded that Aborigines engage in self-supporting productive activities, but policies could not produce miracles in remote regions and people remained highly dependent on Government programs and welfare.

Since 1983, with the election of the Hawke Labor Government it has become increasingly hard to isolate a central strand in Aboriginal affairs policy. In the latest (1985/86) annual report of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA), a document of some 119 pages, less than half a page is devoted to 'the policy context'. Even within this half page the greatest emphasis is placed on using social indicators to show that Aborigines, as a homogeneous category, are an extremely underprivileged and impoverished group in Australian society. The policy context is summarised in a single paragraph: 'Federal Government assistance aims to preserve the cultural identity of the Aboriginal people and to enhance their dignity and well-being by achieving a situation of justice and equality where Aborigines have sufficient economic and social independence to enjoy fully their civil, political, economic and social rights as Australian citizens' (DAA, 1986).

This statement sets out a policy agenda that is little different from that of previous governments: it is about cultural self-determination and economic assimilation. The current administration, possibly more than previous ones, stresses the need for economic equality between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. This is the hidden agenda in the almost excessive use of social indicators that continue to show that Aborigines are an economically depressed client group who will continue to receive doses of government aid until their socio-economic status improves. In real terms expenditure in Aboriginal affairs has increased under the current government as a wide ranging set of programs in employment and training, education, health, community affairs, legal aid, social support and enterprise development are funded. In 1986/87, the current financial year, DAA program expenditure amounts to \$328 million and expenditure by other government departments on Aboriginal programs totals a further \$227 million. Aborigines receive a further estimated \$375 million from the Department of Social Security in pensions and unemployment benefits - their civil rights. All told \$390 million is paid to Aboriginal people by the Australian state at the rate of about \$5200 per capita (the Aboriginal population is estimated to be 179,800 at 30 June 1986). The issue is whether these moneys are being expended in a manner that will result in economic advancement and whether they are being spent in a manner that is consistent with Aboriginal priorities.

3. THE EAST KIMBERLEY SITUATION

In Appendix 1, I present six tables that use 1981 Census data to summarise the economic condition of Aborigines in the East Kimberley. The exercise is somewhat artificial, for I set out to compare East Kimberley Aborigines as a group with all Australians and all Aborigines. The policy implication is that if program funding is directed to Aborigines on the basis of their relative disadvantage, then how do East Kimberley Aborigines fare?

The region that I am putting under statistical scrutiny is the area demarcated on the frontispiece map by the boundaries of the Wyndham-East Kimberley and Halls Creek shires, an area that has recently been termed the Ord Statistical Sub-division. This area is a great deal larger than the geographic scope of the East Kimberley Impact Assessment Project that appears to be concentrating on an area bounded by Wyndham in the north and Halls Creek in the south.

In the 1981 Census 7,800 persons were found residing in this region. By the 30th June 1985 this number is estimated to have grown to 8,340. About 41 per cent of the regional population is Aboriginal. There is a marked difference though between the two local government areas- 67 per cent of Halls Creek shire is Aboriginal as against 28 per cent for Wyndham-East Kimberley.

Table 1 shows that the structure of the East Kimberley Aboriginal population is similar to the total Aboriginal population, although the number aged over 65 is inexplicably high. In comparison with the general population the East Kimberley population is young with a high dependency ratio. The extent of this dependency is amplified considerably when labour force participation rates [Table 2] are taken into account. In 1981, one Australian in the labour force supported 0.6 of a person under 15 years of age; for East Kimberley Aborigines that ratio was 1:1.7. The low labour force participation rate appears to have been a consequence of Aborigines in the East Kimberley not being registered as unemployed. By December 1985, 992 Aborigines in the region were estimated by the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) to be unemployed, a figure that exceeds the total labour force (of 856) in 1981. I am not sure if the current high levels of Aboriginal unemployment should be regarded as an improvement, but it does mean that Aboriginal unemployed are receiving their social security entitlements.

In Table 3, data are presented on those East Kimberley Aborigines who are employed. It can be seen that they are almost exclusively employees; in 1981 there were no Aboriginal employers and few self-employed Aborigines in the region. There are marked similarities here with the total Aboriginal workforce and marked differences with all Australians. In Table 4, data on the occupational distribution of East Kimberley Aborigines show that their jobs are heavily skewed towards unskilled and semi-skilled occupations and are deficient in white collar categories. Table 5 provides comparative information on current income: median annual income for East Kimberley Aborigines is far lower than for all Australians and it is lower than for all Aborigines, being 50 per cent of the former and 89 per cent of the latter. Data in Table 6 on housing status are presented to indicate the extent of household capital accumulation rather than housing quality. It can be seen that the majority of Australians either own or are in the process of purchasing their own home, whereas

only 2 per cent of East Kimberley Aborigines are in this category. Given that home ownership is currently the main means that Australians use to accumulate private capital and to make capital gains it is significant that this is an avenue that is not readily available to East Kimberley Aborigines.

In formal terms, East Kimberley Aborigines' relative poverty can be explained in the following way: Aboriginal employment until the late 1960s was almost entirely in the pastoral economy, but since 1968 with the introduction of award wages and structural change in that industry, there have been few employment opportunities for Aborigines. This is partly due to their educational status (data collected in the 1981 Census indicated that 97 per cent aged over 15 had no formal qualifications) and to their limited occupational backgrounds as stockmen, labourers, gardeners and domestics. The result of these structural changes in the regional economy is that a high proportion of the adult population is unemployed. DAA community profiles collected in 1985 estimate that over 60 per cent of adults are not formally employed. Despite this lack of employment, there seems no doubt that with the arrival of the welfare cash economy, East Kimberley Aborigines are financially better off than they were in the past. It is the degree of Aboriginal welfare dependence that explains their relative poverty vis-a-vis the general Australian population.

These data suggest that the rate of government intervention should be higher in the East Kimberley than in other parts of Aboriginal Australia, if statistical equality between Aborigines and non-Aborigines, or indeed between Aborigines, is the goal. Using a rough per capita allocation, in the region of \$12 million per annum should be flowing into the East Kimberley in program funding. Data I have on individual communities within the region indicate that such subvention is not occurring. And as I will argue below, even if it was occurring, would it be spent in a manner that is consistent with Aboriginal aspirations?

This identifies an important constraint hampering policy implementation. Despite the fact that the 1967 Referendum allows the Commonwealth to override the States in Aboriginal affairs matters, this has only occurred once (with the Victorian Land Rights Bills currently before the Senate). Indeed there has always been a marked disjuncture (at least since 1974) between Canberra policies and Perth policies and possibly an even greater gap to Kimberley practice. In 1973, the Tonkin State Labor Government passed the Aboriginal Affairs Planning Authority Act section 13 of which almost mirrored federal policy at that time. However, between 1974 and 1983, the Court and O'Connor Liberal and Country Party Governments took a strong anti-land rights stance primarily to placate mining and pastoral interests. A State Department of Aboriginal Affairs has never been established in Western Australia and programs to alleviate Aboriginal poverty have always been administered by the Department for Community Welfare (which had functional responsibility for Aborigines on town reserves) or by the federal DAA (which had responsibility for remote communities and outstations). It has been suggested (Patrick Sullivan, pers. comm.) that the Court Government regarded itself as post-assimilation in the sense that supposedly there was no Aboriginal problem in WA, only a poverty problem. Aboriginal affairs policies in WA have tended to continually lag behind federal policies. Kimberley Aborigines who were deprived of land rights after the

rejection of the WA Land Bill in 1985 can only wonder how different things may have been if State boundaries had been drawn a little differently and if they had the rights enjoyed by their kinsmen in the Northern Territory.

At another level again, there are the problems associated with implementing policies. In Western Australia, the Department of Native Welfare was disbanded in 1972 with the creation of the Aboriginal Affairs Planning Authority. However, in reality, at the personnel level this merely meant that bureaucrats working for Native Welfare were transferred to the authority, hardly a move that was likely to result in a radical shift in practice or attitudes. In the late 1970s there was no Department of Social Security (DSS) office in the East Kimberley and field staff who visited the region would not enrol Aborigines for pensions and unemployment benefits unless they filled in forms themselves. It was left to staff of Aboriginal resource organisations to act on behalf of Aborigines in matters that would today be regarded as the functional area of DSS.

4. THE WARMUN COMMUNITY

The Warmun community is located half way between Halls Creek and Kununurra. In August 1986 when I conducted a census at the community its population was just over 300 people. Warmun has only had a short history as an incorporated community. In the early 1970s, after Aborigines were moved off pastoral stations in the region they congregated on a reserve at Turkey Creek and drew water from a bore adjacent to a telephone exchange located there. By the mid 1970s the growing population at Warmun and its visibility from the Great Northern Highway resulted in the DAA recognising the community as an 'outstation' and providing it with a somewhat belated 'establishment grant' of \$5000 in 1975. In 1977, Warmun was incorporated and in 1979 its first community adviser was appointed. Since that time the physical infrastructure of the community has grown to include a school, store, community hall, workshop, powerhouse, crafts centre and 30 houses. Most of this development has been funded by Federal and State Governments, although since 1981 Warmun has received Good Neighbour Program (GNP) moneys from the Argyle Diamond Mine about 35 kilometres north.

In recent years there has been decentralisation from Warmun with groups moving to Chinamen's Gardens and Glen Hill and groups establishing proprietary interests to cattle stations (Bow River) and reserve land (Violet Valley). Currently, there are seven incorporated communities in the immediate vicinity of Warmun, but the majority of the members of these communities continue to live at Warmun. Most residents of Warmun are members of at least two incorporated communities.

The Warmun economy bears all the statistical hallmarks of a highly dependent, remote Aboriginal community. In August 1986 there were only 71 full, part-time and casual jobs in the community. Of the 33 full-time jobs only 11 were in the private sector- five on white pastoral stations and six at the diamond mine. The rest worked in Aboriginal pastoral enterprises, at the community school, and on a number of Community Employment Program (CEP) projects. Only 40 per cent of the population aged 15-64 was employed.

There are some interesting features of the Warmun workforce. Firstly, a high proportion is aged, with 20 per cent of the employed being over 60 years of age and in receipt of pensions. Secondly, a high proportion of people in employment are in receipt of social security benefits and are also employed (sometimes on a full-time basis) for top-up amounts of between \$20 and \$50 per week. Only 25 people at the community were earning full-time award wages and 9 of these positions (CEP) terminated during my employment survey. The community employed nine whites, although only three of these (adviser, book-keeper and mechanic) were paid from Community Management and Services funds provided by DAA. The others were funded by Catholic Education, the Health Department of WA and operating surpluses of the community store.

The aggregate cash income of the community (at the household level) totalled about \$40,000 per fortnight in August 1986. Of this 63 per cent came from social security and 37 per cent from employment. Of the social security, 3 per cent was family allowance and 36 per cent pensions. Only 25 per cent of community cash income came from unemployment benefits. There is an anomaly in this classification for as noted above, some people receiving social security did work for a top up amount and it was only this amount that could be included as employment income. Overall, 20 per cent of cash income came from program funding, 17 per cent from the private sector and 63 per cent from welfare. Mean per capita income of \$171 per fortnight was 48 per cent of the Australian average, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics Household Expenditure Survey, 1984 (ABS, 1986).

Warmun appears to be experiencing levels of poverty and dependency that are statistically similar to those experienced by Aborigines throughout the East Kimberley. [For more detail on the Warmun economy see Altman, 1987]. However, there are four important factors that reduce this apparent poverty at Warmun, and possibly elsewhere.

4.1 Subsistence income

Cash income at Warmun is supplemented by non-cash or subsistence income. In the past, people at Warmun established and ran subsistence (referred to as 'market') gardens, but these disappeared with the arrival of the welfare economy. Today, the main source of subsistence is killer cattle-beef that is slaughtered and butchered for local consumption. Fisk (1985) estimates that at townships like Warmun, subsistence accounts for only 3 per cent of total, cash and imputed, income. Elsewhere, I have estimated that this figure is closer to 10 per cent for Maningrida township in Arnhem Land (Altman 1982). In the Warmun case it seems likely that subsistence adds at least 10 per cent to cash income owing to the number of Aboriginal pastoral enterprises near Warmun and to the community's access to feral cattle in the Ord River Regeneration Reserve.

4.2 Expenditure patterns

People living at Warmun have markedly different expenditure patterns from other Australians for there are a range of goods and services that community members receive either free or at a heavily subsidised rate. [The same can be said, of course, for many white residents of remote Australia]. According to the ABS Household Expenditure Survey, 1984, all

Australian households spend an estimated 25 per cent of income on current housing costs, power, household services and operations, medical care and health expenses (ABS, 1986). At Warmun, housing which is owned by the community is provided at a nominal rent of \$10 per fortnight; electricity, water and sewerage is provided at a similar nominal charge of \$10 per fortnight irrespective of quantity used. Education and medical care are provided free. Assuming that all households meet their housing and service charges, these only total 2 per cent of community cash income per fortnight.

The remoteness of the community from industrial centres does mean that goods and services at Warmun are relatively expensive. However, the community owns its general store and prices are kept to a minimum, particularly as the store has to pay no rentals, has no outstanding business loans and is under no obligation to maximise profits.

4.3 Material aspirations

It is fairly common to characterise the material aspirations of hunter-gatherers as limited. While there is no doubt that at remote communities like Warmun values remain determined by a distinctly Aboriginal value system, people are not living in a pristine state- they have experienced a series of articulations in the past 100 years with pastoralists, missionaries, miners, traders and the Australian state. Given the role of cultural values in determining material aspirations, it is important to recognise that the material aspirations of people at Warmun are different from the Australian norm, rather than limited.

These differences are in fact determined by both structural and cultural factors. Structural factors include the poverty of community members and their recent incorporation into the cash economy. Cultural factors appear to operate to inhibit the private accumulation of capital in remote Aboriginal society. This is partly due to the resilience of the kinship relations of production (or in the case of welfare receipts, non-production) that exert strong anti-accumulation and anti-surplus forces on households and individuals. It has been noted that private property rights (in the common law sense) are relatively absent in Aboriginal communities. Property rights that can be exercised are used to accumulate social debt and prestige (social capital) rather than material goods (private capital). As already noted, the existence of public housing at communities like Warmun means that there is no Aboriginal housing market. This in turn means that the most common avenue to private capital accumulation in Australia- home ownership- is closed off to Warmun residents.

4.4 Mining moneys

Warmun and its satellite communities have benefited from two schemes linked to mining at Argyle: the GNP that has operated since 1981 and the Argyle Social Impact Group (ASIG) that has operated since 1985. These two schemes are meant to provide discretionary funds to Warmun (and other Aboriginal communities) to compensate for the negative social impact of the diamond mine. Currently, Warmun and its outstations receive about \$430,000 per annum under these schemes. Moneys from Argyle have been used to provide the community with a general store, workshop, crafts centre,

community centre and schooling needs. These moneys have also been used to procure Bow River station near Warmun (in 1984) and a majority stake in the Turkey Creek roadhouse situated near the community on the Great Northern Highway. Numerous vehicles, which remain the most sought after 'capital item', have also been bought for community use. While it is not clear to what extent these two schemes have merely offset capital expenditure that is normally financed by Federal and State Governments and to what extent vehicle purchases have created additional financial liabilities for households (in running expenses), community income has increased by about \$1400 per individual per annum. However it is important to note that the final decision on the expenditure of these moneys rests with the State Government and the mining company and not with the community.

5. DEVELOPMENT ASPIRATIONS

The development aspirations of members of the Warmun community appear to be constrained by three major obstacles. The first is the remoteness factor: Warmun is remote from mainstream economic opportunities. Given the supplies of land, labour and capital available to the community, it is an undeniable fact that full employment will never be achieved for the Warmun workforce. Even if large tracts of land, massive quantities of capital and labour training programs were provided by Government, Warmun residents would never achieve comparable levels of production and income to mainstream Australians.

This situation is exacerbated by the existence of two further hurdles termed here 'the welfare trap' and 'the ethnic trap'. Aborigines in the East Kimberley have only been receiving their full welfare entitlements as Australian citizens since the early 1980s. As already noted, with welfare Aboriginal people have received higher cash incomes than ever in the past so that they have experienced an increase in income, a real income effect. Welfare income provides a steady income that is paid year round, irrespective of work effort or seasonality. Of greater importance, when receiving welfare Warmun residents are able to pursue their own prerogatives- they may work on a voluntary basis, take part in ceremonial or subsistence activities, move between communities in a wide social network, or concentrate on community affairs. Furthermore, the marginal returns from award wage employment (if available) over welfare are limited. This is partly because welfare makes an adjustment for dependents, whereas award wages do not, they only provide an adjustment in income taxes levied. For example, the current award in the pastoral industry is \$226 per week plus keep (of \$46 value). With a large family one receives a similar amount from welfare. Welfare acts to self perpetuate for two reasons. On one hand, people are able to maximise their economic autonomy on welfare. On the other hand, the marginal returns for moving off welfare are limited, and often do not exceed the supplementary income people can earn in formal and informal employment. From the policy maker's perspective, such welfare entrapment may be undesirable for it must be sustained by state transfers; from an Aboriginal perspective welfare can be economically appealing.

'The ethnic trap' is a term derived from the sociologist Norbert Wiley's (1967) article 'The ethnic mobility trap and stratification theory'. This term identifies a dilemma that is faced by many Aboriginal communities in north Australia: is it possible to maintain one's

distinctly Aboriginal cultural identity while participating in the mainstream economy. Wiley postulates that there is an inevitable tradeoff between ethnic identity and socio-economic mobility: the more strongly a group maintains its ethnic identity and cultural values the less likely it is to enjoy economic advancement.

This tradeoff is particularly relevant at communities like Warmun owing to the 'remoteness factor'. To get ahead economically, individuals or family groups must break ties either with their community and migrate in search of employment or business opportunities, or stay in the community but break ties with the constraining kinship relations of production. The former strategy is unlikely to succeed, given people's limited occupational backgrounds and they are likely to end up on welfare isolated from their community. The second is an option that could be expressed in the following manner in East Kimberley parlance: does one want to remain a 'countryman' or does one want to be a 'burnt potato', a colloquialism for assimilated Aborigines who are black on the outside but white in the middle. At present it seems that Aboriginal prerogatives and a relatively simple lifestyle sustained with a high degree of welfare dependence are of greater importance than improved income status, a more materialist lifestyle and reduced dependency on the public sector.

Under all these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that community goals stress social and cultural priorities rather than material and commercial ones. What is surprising is how economic opportunities offered by policy makers to foster self sufficiency and statistical equality are often welcomed by Aboriginal groups, but for quite different reasons. Let me provide three brief examples from Warmun.

1. In the 1970s, policy makers believed that pastoral stations would provide Aboriginal groups economic opportunities at remote locations. In an East Kimberley Impact Assessment Project seminar in April 1987, Elspeth Young outlined how all pastoral enterprises in the Warmun vicinity have been commercial failures (see Young, forthcoming). The reasons for failure are complex but are primarily a result of Aboriginal groups buying marginal stations that have subsequently been undercapitalised, understocked, poorly managed and overpopulated. It has frequently been stated that an Aboriginal community can hardly live well off a station that a white owner-operator sold because of its marginality. Aborigines in the Kimberley want stations as a means to gain access to land (in the absence of land rights in WA) and as a means to gain a degree of political autonomy from larger communities. The priorities of Aboriginal groups are usually cultural and social, but funding agencies expect commercial viability.
2. In the 1980s, with tourism perceived as the panacea to reverse the economic decline of regions like the Kimberleys, roadhouses have been regarded as important commercial opportunities for Aboriginal communities whereby the locational disadvantage of isolation could be turned to commercial advantage. In 1986, Warmun purchased the Turkey Creek roadhouse as majority owner in a joint venture with a white businessman. Warmun bought the roadhouse for non-economic reasons: community members wanted to limit the possibility of a liquor licence being granted to the roadhouse and they wanted to restrict the operations of a white tour operator (whom they regarded as racist) based there. It does not seem that community members expected to be

paid dividends from the roadhouse or for it to reduce their dependence. One senior member of Warmun told me that he was unsure if the roadhouse purchase was commercially sound- if it made a profit the community would have to give money back to the Government in taxes.

3. In June 1987 the Community Development Employment Program (or CDEP) will be introduced at Warmun. This program provides lump sum payment of unemployment benefit entitlements to a community, plus a 20 per cent on-costs component that can be used to procure capital items and to pay for administration of the scheme. CDEP is basically a 'work for the dole' scheme, with the big advantage that it is not income tested so that groups partaking in CDEP can generate income without funding being progressively reduced.

CDEP is currently popular with Government because it shifts people off welfare and onto program funding. People receiving CDEP are not registered as unemployed, even though communities are at liberty to pay CDEP funds to people for doing nothing. It is believed that in the longer run CDEP may decrease overall dependence because it allows for income generation.

Influential members of Warmun are also keen to introduce CDEP but for different reasons. Most members of the community aged over 40 were employed in the pastoral industry and are inculcated with a work ethic that often required great effort under harsh conditions. These people are concerned with the level of youth unemployment at Warmun and the lack of a work ethic among the young (Helen Ross, pers. comm.). They are also concerned about their loss of authority over the young that has resulted from the economic autonomy provided by welfare.

There are other reasons why CDEP is appealing. A number of young people are currently gaining secondary education in Broome and older people regard it as essential for the community that these people are enticed back with jobs. To date, some educated young have worked at the community school where 16 positions are being maintained with one teaching assistant salary (of \$16,000 per annum). The school has raised funds from stalls and community 'chuck-ins' to fund positions, but all Aborigines work at the school for social security entitlements plus a top up. The school is regarded by older people as the place to pass on language, culture and identity, as well as formal education to the young. They want to use CDEP to fund positions in the school as an investment in cultural reproduction rather than material production.

These three examples indicate how communities like Warmun could reduce their dependence and increase their income status. The critical program appears to be CDEP as it will provide community members with a guaranteed minimum income, but will also allow further earning without income testing; CDEP allows a way out of 'the welfare trap' because income generation will not be offset against entitlements. However, it should be noted that CDEP has two potential shortcomings. Firstly, pensioners are excluded from the scheme which is limited to people eligible for unemployment benefits. Consequently their social security incomes will be income tested and their incentives to take part in productive enterprises will continue to be undermined. Secondly, CDEP allows participating communities full discretion in the types of projects that they establish. Rather obviously, it will only be income generating programs

that reduce dependency and increase income status. When CDEP is used to fund community priorities, like employment at the school, it will not generate income.

Subsistence activities, at pastoral stations or on other lands where Aborigines have (or can gain) usufruct rights, will increase income-in-kind and will reduce dependency. Other activities that Warmun residents could foster are those where they hold a distinct comparative advantage, like the production of artefacts that could be marketed through their roadhouse. Similarly Warmun residents could take up employment opportunities where they have a locational advantage. For example, there are plans to employ four men at the roadhouse under CDEP. Presumably these employees will have an opportunity to increase their CDEP entitlements by extending the hours they work.

It appears that in the foreseeable future, communities like Warmun will only be able to reduce their overall dependence and increase income levels by partaking in programs like CDEP that recognise the lack of mainstream economic opportunities at remote locations and provide minimum income support to community members which can be supplemented without income testing.

6. CONCLUSION

To conclude this paper let me move from the particulars of Warmun community in the East Kimberley to two general issues: the way program funding is spent and an inherent contradiction in current Aboriginal affairs policy that stresses cultural autonomy and economic assimilation. These two issues are closely inter-related in that both fail to acknowledge the cultural heterogeneity of the Aboriginal population and the different economic opportunities available in different parts of Australia.

In 1976, when in the Economics Department at the University of Melbourne, I was involved in a study on the economic status of Australian Aborigines. In the preface to that study, John Nieuwenhuysen and I noted 'that Aboriginal poverty has to date been regarded as a problem more of social welfare than of economic policy' and 'that economists in general have shunned the study of Aborigines in the Australian economy' (Altman and Nieuwenhuysen, 1979:xiii).

In the past ten years, I too have eschewed the issue of Aborigines in the Australian economy from my research agenda, concentrating instead on micro and regional economic studies. In the meantime only one authoritative book has been written on the situation of Aborigines in the national economy: Fred Fisk's 'The Aboriginal Economy in Town and Country' (1985) which summarises the findings of a five year project undertaken at the Development Studies Centre at the Australian National University.

While Fisk's book was published some two years ago, it appears to have had a limited impact on policy makers. The main exception has been the Miller Committee of Review of Aboriginal Employment and Training Programs that was quick to utilise Fisk's comprehensive estimates of National Aboriginal Income and his finding that 71 per cent of this derived from government, mainly as transfers for social welfare purposes. The Miller Committee was horrified at this situation and

promptly recommended that a reduction in dependency (on the government) must have a high priority in government intervention policies- a statement that appears contradictory but has its own logic as will be explained below.

There appears to be an important reason for the neglect of Fisk's book. As Fisk (1985:103) noted his monograph aimed 'to provide the type of economic information that an economist would need for policy formulation in this field'. This aim was admirably fulfilled, but I would argue that there just are no economists out there reading and comprehending Fisk's book and formulating policy. In particular, it seems that Fisk's macro-economic observation that the economic situation for Aborigines will deteriorate during a time of national retraction, has been missed or misunderstood. This is not surprising given that, to the best of my knowledge, there are no staff with formal economics training in senior positions in the Department of Aboriginal Affairs.

Fisk suggests that the best policy would be to concentrate on the successes already achieved. This offers Aborigines a choice between two options: entry into the mainstream economy or participation in the outstations movement. The former option involves total economic assimilation, whereas the latter requires continuing welfare support but with a degree of economic independence resulting from subsistence activities. Fisk realises that the availability of these two options is heavily constrained in practice.

In his conclusion, Fisk endorses the relatively higher funding of primarily social development programs in contrast to economic programs in Aboriginal affairs. Fisk's (and the government's) position is predicated on a blind faith in some unspecified version of the 'cycle of poverty': if sufficient funds are earmarked for Aboriginal education, health, housing and employment programs then somehow this cycle will be broken and material betterment will automatically follow. There are major problems with this proposition. Firstly, it is clearly inappropriate in areas of Australia where there are inadequate economic opportunities for this is a structural constraint that will not change irrespective of the amounts spent on social welfare programs. Secondly, it ignores the possibility that without the specific targeting of public expenditure there is no automatic correlation between government funding and improved economic status. It seems essential that if funds for housing, education and so on, are provided to communities then they should be provided as part of a systematic strategic plan and not on an ad hoc basis. Finally, it ignores the fact that for many Aboriginal people in remote parts of Australia incorporation into the mainstream economy will have adverse impacts on their cultural system.

The Miller Report makes similar criticisms of government employment programs and states in part:

The thrust of government's response to Aboriginal unemployment has seriously failed to take account of the fact that a significant proportion of the Aboriginal population do not want to leave those remote and rural areas in which they live. The prospects for regular labour market opportunities, or development to generate them...are severely limited in such areas. Even more important is that such employment and economic development is very often totally in conflict with local Aboriginal aspirations

to establish and develop the economic bases of their communities in a way that is consistent with their particular lifestyle (1985: 182).

The Miller Report brings out into the open something that is rarely discussed in policy circles; namely, that there are differences in the lifestyles and cultures of Aboriginal people throughout Australia. This links back to the concept of the 'ethnic trap': while cultural autonomy and economic assimilation may be feasible and acceptable for some Aboriginal people, it is an impossibility for others.

The implications of this for the 'statistical equality' agenda are critical. Given that many Aborigines live in remote areas devoid of economic opportunities, government will either have to provide these people with artificially high welfare transfers or minimum income, or else ensure that the incomes of those Aborigines with mainstream opportunities are so high that they balance out the low incomes of those in remote areas. The first option would be unacceptable because it will merely increase dependence on the public sector; the second would create two Aboriginal classes, urban rich and rural poor, with a far more inequitable distribution of income than in the wider society.

Fisk states in his conclusion that 'the determination of policy objectives is not an economic function, it is a political function, and it would be inappropriate to attempt that political function here' (1985:113). Also, 'it is not the function of this monograph to formulate, nor even to suggest, government policies' (1985:116). I must admit that I am not in favour of such a 'hands-off' approach, preferring the political economics alternative, so let me end with two broad recommendations.

Firstly, I condone the major thrust of the Miller Report with respect to remote Australia. If it is accepted that many areas are devoid of viable economic opportunities, then programs cannot be placed under mainstream commercial scrutiny. Miller recommended that the CDEP program be escalated rapidly at remote Aboriginal communities and that a new program called CEEDS (Community Enterprises and Employment Development Scheme) be implemented. As already noted, CDEP allows income generating activities to be undertaken without income testing, while CEEDS aims to provide capital grants to purchase enterprises that may not be commercially viable. Already \$20 million of new money has been allocated to CEEDS, although there is some disagreement within the bureaucracy about the need for a 'sunset clause' in funding. The Miller Report argued that while such programs will increase public subvention of communities in the short run, they will result in increased employment and income in the longer run, and decreased overall dependence.

In my opinion, the Miller Report does not go far enough in emphasising the inherent inconsistencies in current Aboriginal affairs policy. For many groups in remote regions the twin policy objectives of self-sufficiency and statistical equality are not only unachievable, but are also contradictory- the more communities have of one, the less they have of the other. If on the other hand new policies are formulated with the interdependent and achievable objectives of reduced dependence and income generation, then there may be success. This in turn implies that

the 'poverty cycle model' should be abandoned for remote regions and that there should be a reallocation of program funding from social welfare to economic projects.

Secondly it seems essential that the heterogeneity of the Aboriginal population is both recognised and accepted. Likewise, it is imperative that there is variability in policy prescriptions. This means that it must be accepted that 'culture' means different things to different Aborigines and that the extent that culture can be maintained while groups are assimilated into the mainstream economy will vary. This in turn means that the implicit policy goal of statistical equality that may be quite appropriate for some sections of the Aboriginal population will be totally inappropriate for others. In short, the principle of vertical equity (special treatment of Aboriginal as distinct from non-Aboriginal Australians on the basis of disadvantage) that is the guiding principle for program funding needs to be applied to the Aboriginal population itself. In other words Aborigines living in different areas and with differing lifestyles may require different programs. The danger here is that simplified categories like remote and settled areas; rural and urban; traditional and non-traditional may arise for funding purposes. Such simplifications will only disguise the complexities that exist in areas like the East Kimberley where a whole spectrum of community and cultural types co-exist.

Ultimately, it seems that if Government economic policies in Aboriginal affairs are not to be assimilationist, then they must allow individual Aboriginal communities and groups to decide on their own tradeoff between cultural and economic priorities, rather than including them in a broad policy agenda that attempts to make the tradeoff for them.

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APPENDIX

THE ECONOMIC STATUS OF EAST KIMBERLEY ABORIGINES; A FORMAL AND QUANTITATIVE PERSPECTIVE, 1981 CENSUS

TABLE 1: AGE DISTRIBUTION OF EAST KIMBERLEY ABORIGINAL, TOTAL ABORIGINAL AND TOTAL AUSTRALIAN POPULATIONS, 1981 CENSUS

Age Bracket		East Kimberley Aborigines*		Aboriginal population	Australian population
		Number	Per cent	Per cent	Per cent
0-14	1309	41.0	42.6	25.1	
15-64	1669	52.3	54.2	65.1	
65+	214	6.7	2.8	9.8	

* Halls Creek and Wyndham-East Kimberley Census districts

TABLE 2: EMPLOYMENT STATUS OF EAST KIMBERLEY ABORIGINAL, TOTAL ABORIGINAL AND TOTAL AUSTRALIAN POPULATIONS, 1981 CENSUS (PERCENTAGE TERMS)

	East Kimberley Aborigines*	Aboriginal population	Australian population
Unemployment rate**	10.9	24.6	5.9
Workforce participation rate***	45.0	47.3	61.3

* Halls Creek and Wyndham-East Kimberley Census districts.

** Proportion of total labour force that is not currently in employment but is seeking employment.

*** Proportion of the total population aged 15 years and over that is in the labour force.

TABLE 3: OCCUPATIONAL STATUS OF EAST KIMBERLEY ABORIGINAL, ABORIGINAL AND GENERAL LABOUR FORCE, 1981 CENSUS (PER CENT OF TOTAL)

Occupational status	East Kimberley Aborigines	Aboriginal labour force	Australian labour force
Employer	0.0	0.4	5.0
Self-employed	0.4	1.4	8.5
Employee	87.5	73.0	79.6
Helper (unpaid)	1.1	0.6	0.9
Unemployed	10.9	24.6	5.9

TABLE 4: OCCUPATIONAL DISTRIBUTION OF EMPLOYED EAST KIMBERLEY ABORIGINAL, ABORIGINAL AND TOTAL AUSTRALIAN POPULATIONS, 1981 (PER CENT OF TOTAL)

Occupation	East Kimberley Aborigines*	Aboriginal	Australian
Professional, technical	5.9	7.0	13.6
Managers, administrators	0.3	0.9	5.3
Clerical workers	3.0	8.2	17.1
Sales workers 0.9	2.9	8.5	
Farmers, fishermen	34.7	11.4	6.4
Miners, quarrymen	0.1	1.1	0.6
Transport, communication	2.2	4.8	4.8
Tradesmen, labourers, etc.	18.4	31.6	28.1
Service, sport, recreation	22.3	12.5	8.4
Armed services	0.0	0.6	1.0
Not stated, inadequately defined	10.9	19.1	6.1

* There is a great deal of rounding error within categories owing to the smallness of the population and ABS attempts to maintain anonymity of individuals.

TABLE 5: EAST KIMBERLEY ABORIGINAL, TOTAL ABORIGINAL AND TOTAL AUSTRALIAN CASH INCOME STATUS, 1981 CENSUS

	East Kimberley Aborigines	Aboriginal	Australian
Median annual family income	\$5,639	\$6,626	\$12,191
Median annual individual income	\$3,260	\$3,667	\$6,509

TABLE 6: HOUSEHOLD MEMBERS BY NATURE OF DWELLING OCCUPANCY, EAST KIMBERLEY ABORIGINAL AND TOTAL AUSTRALIAN POPULATION, 1981 CENSUS, PER CENT

	East Kimberley Aborigines	Australian
Owner/purchaser	2.2	71.0
Tenant, housing authority, Government agency	32.6	5.3
Tenant, other landlord	19.8	17.6
Other, not stated	45.5	6.1

**ATTACHMENT 1
EAST KIMBERLEY WORKING PAPERS 1985-87**

- 1985/1 East Kimberley Impact Assessment Project: Project Description and Feasibility Study.
East Kimberley Working Paper No.1
ISBN 0 86740 181 8
ISSN 0816-6323
- 1985/2 The East Kimberley Region : Research Guide and Select References.
M.C. Dillon
East Kimberley Working Paper No.2
ISBN 0 86740 182 6
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Compiled by Ian White
East Kimberley Working Paper No.13
ISBN 0 86740 X
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Aborigines and Tourism in North Australia: Some Suggested
Research Approaches.
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- 1987/15 Guidelines for Research into Social Impacts Deriving from Non-
Aboriginal Developments on Aboriginal Land.
Sue Kesteven
East Kimberley Working Paper No.15
ISBN 0 86740 277 6
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- 1987/16 Conservation Priorities in North-Western Australia.
Richard J-P. Davies
East Kimberley Working Paper No.16
ISBN 0 86740 282 2
ISSN 0816-6323

1987/17 Social Impact Assessment Bibliography
Compiled by Donna Craig
East Kimberley Working Paper No.17
ISBN 0 86740 302 0
ISSN 0816-6323