

# **Social Equity in Regional Development Planning: Who Plans for Remote Communities?**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper examines the extent to which the concept of social equity was considered in the creation of Regional Development Australia's Far North Queensland and Torres Strait (RDA FNQTS) Regional Roadmap. The research applies Rawls' (1973) concept of social equity to determine the extent to which the disparities experienced by the least advantaged populations in the planning area were considered in the regional planning process. The results indicate that decision making was concentrated in the urban core and that the concept of social equity was not embodied in the plan outcomes. The paper concludes that ignoring social equity issues in regional planning has enduring ramifications for remotely located spatial territories where a significant proportion of the population is both Indigenous and disadvantaged.*

## **Introduction**

The notion of gaining economic efficiencies through regional cooperation and development has persisted since the notion of planning emerged in the UK in the late 19th century (Hall, 1995). In Australia regional planning was pursued by the federal Labour government subsequent to the Second World War in an attempt to address post war development. The concept of regional planning at this time was to specifically address the development of resources, the growth of population, the need for defence and security, decentralising population and economic activity, and the correspondence between available water supplies and population concentration (Harris & Dixon, 1978 in Rainnie & Grant, 2005). Since that time regional planning

initiatives have experienced boom and busts of activity each dependent upon the funding and favour associated with successive governments.

The most recent federal government policy initiative in Australia has been called 'Regional Development Australia' (RDA) and has been created to implement a more efficient regional planning process to help eliminate problems such as development disparities. The RDA has been established as a partnership between the federal, state and territory, and local governments to bring all three levels of government closer together in regional planning (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010a). The RDA initiative seeks to involve communities by establishing regional development committees in an effort to address economic and social disparities and avoid policy duplications. These committees are comprised of local community members that suggest planning priorities for the region and co-ordinate these with the three levels of government (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010a).

This paper examines how one of these 55 RDA committees created their regional plan (referred to as a Roadmap). It analyses the case of the Far North Queensland and Torres Strait (FNQTS) region, a peripheral region in northern Australia which is characterised by a substantial Indigenous population and a relatively high degree of social and economic disadvantage. The RDA FNQTS created their Roadmap "to ensure that we [RDA FNQTS] develop well rounded strategies and recommendations that have the greatest possible chance of reducing disadvantage, increasing social, civil and economic participation, and assist in achieving a greater voice and greater responsibility for members of our communities who may be at the greatest risk of social exclusion" (RDA FNQTS, 2010, p. 4).

This statement suggests that the RDA FNQTS planning process was designed to address social equity within the region. Social equity is a normative planning concept (McConnell, 1981) that maintains that planning ought to include the disadvantaged in decisions that affect their lives. Rawls' (1973) theory of justice is based on the notion that social and economic inequality is only just when the decision results in compensating benefits for everyone and in particular for the least advantaged members of society. When applied to planning this infers that the planning practice will seek ways to improve physical and economic conditions for all people, with particular consideration of those with the fewest resources.

The purpose of this paper is to examine how the new RDA planning process incorporated the concept of social equity in the FNQTS region. The paper investigates the application of the concept of social equity, as defined by Rawls (1973) and McConnell (1981), in the planning process to identify the extent to which the most disadvantaged within the region were considered in the applied planning process. The paper documents the procedures adopted by the RDA FNQTS committee in the development of its latest draft regional plan. The paper draws on a range of demographic, economic and social statistical data to analyse the extent to which disadvantaged peripheral and remote communities were involved in the community engagement process and the extent to which their specific needs were identified in the priority development issues for the region.

## Background

Planning is the process of managing change within communities, and is a human activity undertaken by humans for humans. Yiftachel (2006) suggests that planning describes the publicly guided transformation of space and is an agent of positive change. Chadwick (1971) adds that planning is a process of human forethought, and the subsequent actions based upon that thought that are focused upon the future. Planning is therefore future orientated and simultaneously optimistic, because it assumes the ability of the humans within the system to control the forces that impact upon the future (Chadwick, 1971).

Planning can also be described as an intervention to alter the existing course of events (Campbell & Fainstein, 2003) and has become the role of the government under the auspices of distributive justice (Wadley & Smith, 1998) to equitably distribute the benefits of development throughout the affected community. The alternative to planning is to have no government intervention, thereby allowing the free market to determine individual choice and the distribution of benefits (i.e. wealth). The free market argues that social welfare, justice and equity are maximized by the pursuit of individual gain and that intervention stifles the attainment of this goal. However, intervention based on the notion of equitable distribution of benefits from wealth has raised questions about authority and power. In addressing these concerns, planning utilises data and knowledge to select an appropriate course of action to bring about positive change to the affected communities, in addition to seeking transparent decision making processes to further permit accountability to the public.

Regional planning initiatives have tended to adopt a core periphery spatial perspective to describe non-urban areas and their corresponding relationship with the main economic urban centre (Dredge, 1999). A range of terms have been used to describe those areas that lie outside of the main urbanised nodes, including peri urban, rural and countryside. These terms are often used interchangeably. However, the most commonly used term in the literature is that of the peripheries or the peripheral region (Friedmann, 1966; Ball, 1996; Copus & Crabtree, 1996; Copus, 2001). This term originates from the core-periphery model that describes an economic relationship between two locations and assumes that a predictable relationship exists between the industry-based economy of the urban centre, and the resource-based economy of the periphery (Smith & Steel, 1995).

As planning is an activity usually undertaken in and by the urban core centre, regional planning often fails to consider the notion of social equity from the perspective of a rural or remote community in the decision making and delivery of regional plan outcomes. Broadly speaking the concept of social equity, as it is referred to in regional planning, is equated with the reduction in inter and intra regional differences in per capita income (Glasson, 1978) and employment (Friedmann & Weaver, 1979). The core-periphery model describes the spatial economic organisation of the leading urbanised core and the lagging rural periphery (Moore, 1994). Peripheral areas often experience lagging growth or stagnation and rely on the growth driven by the urban core in the form of increased demand for peripherally located resources

(Friedmann, 1966). The core areas are by contrast industry and knowledge driven as opposed to resource dependent for growth (Smith & Steel, 1995). Therefore, increases in the income levels and employment opportunities in the periphery become dependent upon growth in the industrial core. Accordingly, the core-periphery model is premised upon a possibility that a mature regional economic system may eventually bridge the development gap between the urban and periphery regions (Moore, 1994).

The reality, however, may look different. A substantial body of literature has emerged over past decades, which has examined the processes of development in resource dependent peripheries (for example, Barnes, Hayter, & Hay, 2001; Altman, 2003; Gunton, 2003). Resource peripheries tend to remain on the economic (and social) margin as their development paths become locked in and the periphery remains dependent on demand, investment and decision making from the core. Regional governments often become executive arms of the external investing core as they seek continued investment from that core. As a result, they are inclined to favour decisions that may lead to fast economic growth in the core but not necessarily sustainable development in the periphery (Barnes, Hayter & Hay, 2001). A recent study by Carson, Schmallegger and Harwood (2010) in the Northern Territory of Australia, for example, has shown that major planning and investment decisions were primarily made in the interest of an external investing core (dominated by federal government and multi-national investors). Despite having recognised the need to address economic and social disadvantage in remote (and particularly isolated Indigenous) communities, recent planning and development decisions by the Territory government have mainly focused on projects that were in the interest of external investors. This means that investment has become concentrated in the capital city Darwin while only limited resources have been dedicated to close the development gap between the city and the remote disadvantaged hinterland (Carson, Schmallegger & Harwood, 2010).

What adds to the problem of addressing development gaps in resource peripheries in Australia (but also in other jurisdictions, such as Canada, Alaska or northern Europe) is that these regions tend to be characterised by relatively large and disadvantaged Indigenous populations (Abele & Stasiulus, 1989; Carson, Schmallegger & Harwood, 2010). Indigenous people are often poorly integrated in existing resource economies and therefore tend to suffer greater socio-economic disadvantage than non-indigenous communities. Attempts by governments to address disadvantage and reduce poverty in indigenous communities (for example, through training and employment programs) have repeatedly failed in the past due to the inflexible nature of top-down governance approaches. Such approaches have commonly failed to understand that centralised development decisions driven by established "western-industrialised" standards are often incompatible with the diverse and place-specific histories, cultural practices and worldviews of Indigenous people, making it difficult for Indigenous communities to adapt to new standards and take advantage of (arguably well-intentioned) government sponsored development programmes (McRae-Williams & Gerritsen, 2010).

Regional planning has been described as an intermediate level between national and local that addresses particular problems of growing urban regions and depressed

industrial and rural regions (Glasson, 1978). Martin (2008) suggests that the two reasons for regional planning are to gain economic efficiency and social equity. Regional planning has been subject to fads and fashions (Rainnie & Grant, 2005) and as a consequence is yet to be subjected to the same level of scrutiny and theorising as urban planning. Friedmann and Weaver (1979) maintain that there are two dimensions to regional planning theory. One is concerned with the spatial organisation of a region, namely the problems associated with urbanisation, industrial location and the creation of stronger inner city ties. The other centres on the problems associated with backward regions in industrially advanced nations. Backward according to Friedmann and Weaver (1979) refers to the poor, and the poor are invariably peripheral. It should, however, be noted that the poor are also found in the core and along with the poor in the periphery need to be incorporated in regional planning processes to ensure that their needs and aspirations are considered in the overall decision-making process. However, these two theories are differentiated on the basis of the economic characteristics of spatial territories. The spatial organisation theory relates to areas experiencing problems associated with urbanisation (i.e. too much development) while the other is associated with areas that do not experience development. Both types of regional planning emanate from the broader normative theoretical concepts that underpin planning.

Regional planning in Australia is a state initiative and, therefore, is undertaken to achieve social ends objectives in addition to other objectives. The key normative concepts that describe what planning should achieve include protecting and enhancing amenity; encouraging development or regeneration of certain localities; ensuring a just distribution of environmental goods; social equity and social inclusion; incorporating the public interest; collaborative planning; and sustainable development (Taylor, 2003). An examination of the extent to which all of these concepts were incorporated in the FNQTS regional planning initiative is a task that is beyond the scope of this paper. Our principal interest is in examining social equity, more precisely the two facets of equity (Rawls, 1973; McConnell, 1981; Martin, 2008): equity that is concerned with social inclusion in decision making, and economic equality that is primarily associated with ownership of property and means of production.

### **Social Equity in Regional Planning**

Rawls (1973) maintains that social and economic inequalities are only just if they result in compensating benefits for everyone and in particular for the least advantaged members of society. Accordingly, planning is faced with the dilemma of reconciling three conflicting interests: growing the economy, distributing growth fairly and, in the process, not destroying the environment (Campbell, 1996). The first conflict that Campbell describes arises from competing claims on and uses of property. The second conflict describes the tension between economic and ecological utility of the natural resources. The third conflict is described as development conflict that occurs where planning seeks to increase social equity and, at the same time, preserve the environment.

Campbell fails to consider the role of social equity in overall decision making as a contributor to each of the above conflicts. The overriding principle of all decision making within planning is the notion of a socially rational approach to solving all three aforementioned conflicts to gain a socially just outcome (Flyvberg, 2001). A socially rational approach to planning is based on rational procedures, as opposed to the application of rational technical data inputs (Flyvberg, 2001). A socially rational approach focuses on community inputs as evidence as opposed to rational technical inputs associated with the positivistic approaches to data collection. The notion of social equity in decision making is a fundamental principle in Anglo-American planning systems and presupposes that the public can influence proposals and the planning process (McConnell, 1981). This is different to providing information about the course of action to be undertaken and different again to the public being provided with an opportunity to indicate preferences about different proposals. Decision making translates to economic power (Smith & Steel, 1995). To balance power between the least and most advantaged, planning provides opportunities for socially and economically disadvantaged sectors to participate in decision making (Healy, 2006).

One aspect of regional planning for the purpose of economic growth and development requires land uses within the region to change. These changes alter the course of events and in turn determine the distribution of economic growth and wealth. Where a community is economically disadvantaged due to low levels of land ownership they in turn make minimal economic gain from land conversions. In other words, their level of disadvantage is exacerbated because they do not have access to land ownership and property rights (de Soto, 2000).

There are a number of ways to examine the distribution of benefits to attain equity. Rawls (1973) maintains that a loss of freedom for some is not made right by a greater good shared by others. This is a particularly salient point to make as the purpose of decision making in planning is not to lower the wealth within an economy. Indeed planning would have been rejected by the powerful and wealthy if it reduced overall wealth (Wadley & Smith, 1998). Glasson (1978) argues that regional planning is about addressing economic inequality both within and between regions. The distributive principles (Rawls, 1973; McConnell, 1981) are therefore applied to address inequality. These principles are concerned with who is to get how much of the benefit from development. Rawls (1973) suggests that planning decisions should be made for the greatest benefit of the least advantaged. Utilitarians, however, view distribution differently, and argue that social good and maximum utility is achieved when the greatest net balance of utility is summed over all individuals. The Kaldo-Hicks compensation or neo pareto criterion (Wadley & Smith, 1998) views distribution from the perspective that if the change results in some people being made better and others worse off, the gains of the former are used to compensate the losers. In this instance the gains must be sufficiently large enough to compensate the losers and still have something left over.

The core-periphery model suggests that development in the core provides benefits to the periphery through increases in demand for raw materials. However, in

its current format the core-periphery model does not recognise the multiple scales that create multiple peripheries, i.e. the cores of Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane and in turn their peripheries of Cairns, Townsville and Rockhampton, and the subsequent peripheries to these (which often include higher than average Indigenous populations). Moreover, this model does not make provision for social equity considerations as it is limited to describing economic relationships between areas (Krugman, 1998). Previous studies have shown that decisions about development in peripheries tend to be made by the core, and primarily in the interest of the core (Smith & Steel, 1995; Carson, 2010). Yet according to Rawls (1973), considering the views of the least advantaged is the most socially just and desirable method of decision making in regional planning. The following case study of the RDA FNQTS examines how the concept of social equity was considered in contemporary regional planning in a peripheral region in northern Australia. In particular, the case study focuses on how the region's least advantaged populations were involved in decision making.

### **The RDA FNQTS Roadmap**

The purpose of the RDA is to bring the three levels of government together in each region to identify and achieve the region's long-term visions for future development. The RDA at the national level segmented the nation into 55 regions, each with its own committee that is in turn charged with the responsibility of providing 'strategic and targeted responses to economic, environmental and social issues affecting the regions of Australia' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010a). The committee members are volunteers who represent the community, business and local government within each region. The primary objectives of the RDA at the national level is to reduce duplication of services and programs between the three levels of government; to identify and respond to regional development issues; and to facilitate community leadership and resilience (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009).

The RDA at the national level provided five roles and responsibilities to each committee on how to achieve the required outcomes of government. These include: to consult and engage with the community; to inform regional planning; to engage in whole of government activities; to promote government programs and to foster community and economic development (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). The national government required all 55 RDA committees to develop a Regional Roadmap for their regions and gave them a deadline of early November 2010 to complete a draft plan.

### **Case Study Area: Far North Queensland and Torres Strait Region**

The FNQTS is comprised of 19 local government areas (LGA), of which 12 are described as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Shire Councils. The region is 273,154 square kilometres and accounts for nearly 16% of the total area of the state of Queensland (Figure 1). As at 30 June 2009, the estimated resident population of the region was 269,650 people, which are equivalent to 6.1% of the total state population. At the time of the 2006 census, 45% of the total population were living at a different address five years earlier; 15.2% were born overseas; 14.3% stated they were of Aboriginal or

Torres Strait Islander origin; 35.4% were in the most disadvantaged quintile and 50% of persons over 15 years had a post-school qualification (Queensland Treasury, 2010). Overall the smoothed unemployment rate for the region was 11% in 2010.

**Figure 1: FNQTS Case Study Area**



Source: Commonwealth of Australia, 2010b.

According to data from the regional profiles published by the Office of Economic and Statistical Research (OESR), the least developed areas in the RDA FNQTS region are located in Aboriginal or Torres Strait Shires (Queensland Treasury, 2010). For instance in 2005–06, the total value of agricultural production for the region was AUD\$953.1 million. With the exception of Kowanyama (AUD\$700,000), none of the Aboriginal or Torres Strait shires participated in agricultural production. In the 12 months ending September 2010, there were 1,396 dwelling units in new residential buildings approved in the region. Of these, only 16 dwelling units (.01%) were located in Aboriginal shires. In 2006–07, there were 23,286 businesses within the region, of which only 219 (.09%) were located in an Aboriginal or Torres Strait shire



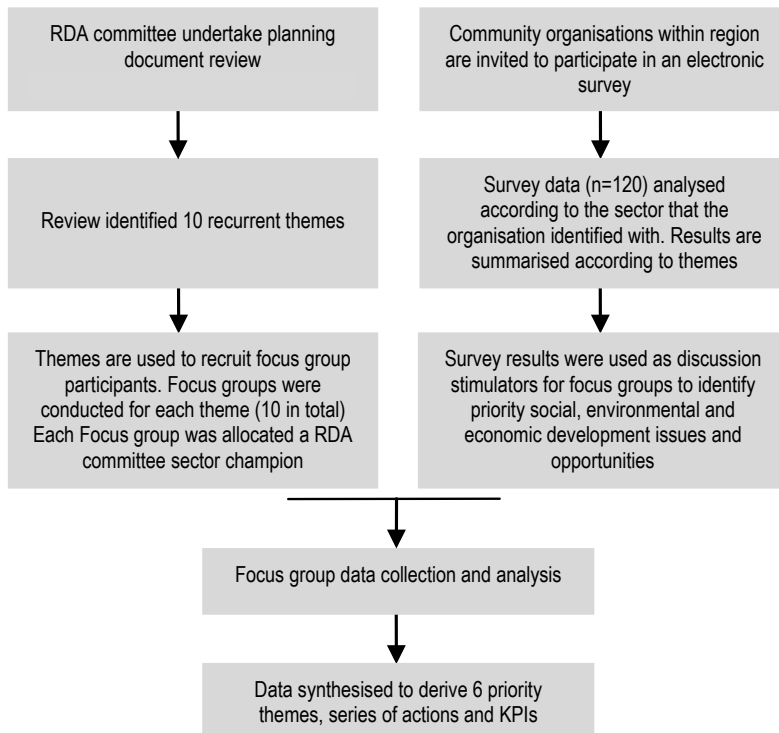
council area. This would suggest that development opportunities are not distributed equally across the FNQTS region. According to regional planning theory that focuses on addressing equity, it would therefore be expected that the FNQTS regional plan would address development opportunities in those areas that do not currently access benefits from development.

The RDA FNQTS committee is comprised of 15 members, five of whom reside in peripheral areas of the region. In calling for applications for positions on the committee, specific attention was given to the need for strong representation from peripheral areas. The committee was established in February 2010 and subsequently employed an Executive Officer in April 2010 to undertake the business planning and facilitate the development of the RDA FNQTS Regional Roadmap.

### The Regional Roadmap Planning Procedure

This section describes the various stages in the planning process of the RDA FNQTS Regional Roadmap. As a first step in this process, the RDA committee undertook a review of all planning documents that had been written within the previous five years to identify the major regional issues identified in these plans (Figure 2). The following ten themes emerged from the document review: Community Services; Governance; Indigenous Communities; Sustainable Communities; Health and Housing; Private Industry; Economic Development; Infrastructure; Youth and Education.

**Figure 2: Data collection strategies for FNQTS Regional Roadmap**



Concurrent to the document review, the RDA subcontracted a research team from James Cook University (JCU) to conduct a survey among community organisations to identify the most important social, environmental and economic development issues and opportunities for the region. Survey participants included, for example, industry associations, local businesses, local economic development agencies, not-for-profit organisations (e.g. parent, citizens and service organisations), environmental groups, providers of health and education services, and local government members. The committee decided to conduct the survey as an online survey which was considered as a more time-efficient method for data collection that would help the committee meet the tight deadline for the final draft of the Regional Roadmap. The online survey was emailed to more than 1000 community organisations within the region. A total of 120 surveys were returned resulting in a 12% response rate.

Results were analysed according to the sector/theme that the respondent operated within and reported using a triple bottom line format, which focused on social, economic and environmental issues. The data was designed to inform discussions in subsequent focus group sessions. These focus groups were established on the basis of the ten themes identified in the document review. Focus group participants were identified by a member of the RDA FNQTS committee and included members from locations in the periphery. Each focus group included a committee representative in the discussions.

At the beginning of each focus group meeting, members were presented with a summary of the survey results. However, in most cases the focus group participants chose to discuss different issues than those derived from the survey data that was considered to be more important for the region. As a result, the survey results were given reduced weighting in further analysis of the planning process and had only a minor bearing on the outcomes of the final draft plan. The focus group discussions centred on determining priority social, economic and environmental issues and the data that emerged from the discussions were used as the basis for decision making in the Regional Roadmap. The results from the ten focus group discussions were analysed and summarised by the independent JCU research team who identified five priority themes that needed to be addressed in the regional plan. These themes included: Regionalism (more specifically, the need for locally based decision making); Economic Diversification; Health Services and Planning; Infrastructure; and Indigenous Communities.

These themes were presented to the RDA committee. After reviewing the themes the RDA committee concluded that the Regional Roadmap would pursue six different priority themes: Economic Vitality; Sustainable Resource Management; Visionary Infrastructure; Inclusive Services and Planning; Empowered people through knowledge and skills; and Reconceptualising Regionalism.

## Measuring Social Equity in the Planning Process

The following section describes the methods used to determine the extent to which the normative planning concept of social equity was considered in the planning process. Social equity was measured through a number of variables, including demographic characteristics, economic equity indicators, and social inclusion indicators (Table 1). These variables are described below in more detail.

**Table 1: Variables Used to Measure Social Equity**

<b>Demographic</b>	<b>Economic Equity</b>	<b>Social Inclusion</b>
% Indigenous	% of population in rental accommodation	# representatives in focus groups
% least advantaged	# of businesses	ARIA remoteness category
% Australian born	% unemployed	

To determine the extent to which the least advantaged were considered in the regional plan, it was necessary to first identify who and where these people were located. Demographic variables were used to describe the least advantaged segment of the population within the region. Data from OESR (Queensland Treasury, 2010) were used to analyse demographic characteristics of each of the region’s LGAs. From this review it became evident that there were very high proportions of Indigenous people in the region and that these populations were located outside the urban centre of Cairns. Further scrutiny of the variables indicated that there were also high proportions of disadvantaged people throughout the region. The analysis also investigated the proportion of Australian born to determine whether places with high numbers of immigrants may be excluded or disempowered from decision making. The Socio Economic Index of Disadvantage is used to reflect the disadvantage of social and economic conditions experienced in geographical regions. The index focuses on low-income earners, lower education attainment, high unemployment and dwellings without a motor vehicle. A score is collated to create five discrete quintiles (20% each) that describe the percentage of the population on a scale of most to least disadvantaged within each quintile.

Economic variables used in this research describe a person’s access to land and property rights (after de Soto, 2000). In this instance much of the land area is not held in freehold tenure. The implications of tenure means that for some people the land that they live on is not possible to be individually owned and therefore the implicit capital value is unable to be accessed to fund production increases. These variables are also based on data from the OESR regional profiles and include information on the number of businesses and the percentage of unemployed residents within a LGA to describe the level of economic activity.

The social inclusion variables utilise the LGA of origin of the focus group participants and the associated Accessibility Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA) classification of the LGA. The ARIA was developed by the ABS as a proxy measure of places where people can access goods, services and opportunities for social interaction (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001). Socio-economic characteristics are

not included in the identification of remote locations, and as such the index provides an indication of accessibility to decision making.

The data were analysed using correlations to determine the presence of relationships between the abovementioned variables and to determine the extent to which social equity had been considered in the creation of the strategies of the regional roadmap.

## Social Equity in the FNQ TS Regional Roadmap

Table 2 summarises the social equity variables according to the 19 LGAs within the FNQTS region. The entire population of residents living within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait LGAs all fell within the most disadvantaged quintile. With the exception of two Aboriginal and Torres Strait LGAs (Wujal Wujal and Yarrabah), these areas are described as "very remote" in respect to accessing places for goods, services and opportunities for social interaction.

**Table 2: Social Equity Variables**

Local Government Area	Total Population (2009)	Demographic Characteristics			Economic Equality			Social Inclusion	
		% Indigenous (2006)	% in most disadvantaged quintile	% born in Australia	% in rented housing	# of businesses (20)	% unemployed (2010)	# of representatives in focus groups	ARIA remoteness category
Aurukun*	1,209	91.6	100	100	100	0	20	0	5
Cairns	164,356	7.8	23.6	72.1	40	14,430	10.1	101	3
Cassowary Coast	30,992	8.3	42.9	79.8	33	3,525	9.6	4	3
Cook	3,899	16.1	70.6	73.4	40	321	25.3	5	5
Croydon	273	29.4	67.3	83.1	46	30	20.3	0	5
Etheridge	939	1.3	15.1	84.1	26	198	19.6	1	5
Hope Vale*	832	93.1	100	99.6	98	0	27.7	0	5
Kowanyama*	1,156	92.6	100	99.2	98	0	19.5	0	5
Lockhart River*	619	88.6	100	98.4	100	9	19.6	0	5
Mapoon*	266	91.2	100	100	95	0	11.3	0	5
Napranum*	930	92.7	100	98.5	97	3	11.1	0	5
Northern Peninsula Area*	2,282	90.4	100	98.8	98	0	15.0	1	5
Pormpuraaw*	676	89.3	100	99.5	100	3	20.2	0	5
Tablelands	46,366	8.9	42.7	77.2	29	4,404	12.8	8	4
Torres**	3,642	69.8	100	97.3	83	204	9.0	1	5
Torres Strait Island**	4,913	91.7	100	99.4	94	0	9.0	1	5
Weipa	3,320	17.0	0	79.9	87	159	11.2	1	5
Wujal Wujal*	352	94.8	100	100	90	0	27.8	0	4
Yarrabah*	2,628	96.9	100	99.2	2	0	19.9	0	4

\* Aboriginal Shire Council

\*\* Torres Strait Island Shires

The proportion of residents living in rented accommodation was used as a proxy measure for access to land ownership and property rights (Smith & Steel, 1995). Between 90 to 100% of the residents within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait LGAs lived in rented accommodation, suggesting that they have limited access to land ownership and property rights. As a result, these residents have limited capacity to increase economic production or create development as they are unable to accumulate capital and access the implicit economic value of land assets. This would in part account for the low numbers of businesses within Aboriginal and Torres Strait LGAs (Table 2). The low levels of economic activity in each of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait LGAs is also described through the relatively high levels of unemployment (for example, seven out of ten Aboriginal LGAs have an unemployment of over 19%). These figures do not reflect the high levels of employment in the public sector within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait LGAs in programs such as Community Development Employment Programs which are highly dependent on ongoing government funding.

Results from the analysis indicate that there is a high proportion of people living within the least advantaged quintile in the FNQ TS region and that these LGAs are more likely to have high proportions of Indigenous residents. There was a strong and positive relationship ( $r=.9116$ ) between being Indigenous and the proportion of the total LGA population within the least advantaged quintile. The RDA FNQTS board committee did not implement specific consultation strategies to address these disadvantaged communities in the development of the Regional Roadmap. The focus group on 'Indigenous Communities' (which included some Indigenous representatives from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities) did make specific recommendations regarding social equity issues. These issues included: participation in and access to development opportunities; provision of infrastructure and services (e.g. roads, housing, education, training and sport); biosecurity; and the need to review existing tenure regulations and government funding models. While these issues were widely discussed by Indigenous as well as non-Indigenous community representatives, they were not pursued as priority regional issues by the RDA committee in the final draft of the Regional Roadmap.

Participating in economic development activities requires access to capital or assets such as land that are able to be converted to implied capital (de Soto, 2000). From the analysis of the FNQTS data, there are a high number of people who live in rental accommodation and are therefore unable to access this form of capital to create production or development. The correlation coefficient ( $r=.920$ ) between the proportion of Indigenous people in the LGA and the proportion living in rented accommodation suggests that Indigenous people are less able to convert assets to access development opportunities. The results also indicate a negative relationship between the number of businesses within each LGA and the ARIA remoteness category ( $r=-.7516$ ). This would suggest that the more remote the LGA, the fewer the number of businesses that are in operation.

These results coupled with low rates of inclusion of Indigenous representatives (120 out of 123 focus group participants were from non-Indigenous LGAs) in the focus groups have serious implications in making strategic decisions about

development. It would appear that Rawls' (1973) distributive principles are not applied in the FNQTS planning process and that decisions are not made for the greatest benefit of the least advantaged.

The correlation between the number of respondents from the LGA and its ARIA remoteness category ( $r=-.610$ ) indicates that there is a strong and negative relationship between the two variables, inferring that the more remote the community the less the opportunity for inclusion in decision making. This finding further supports the assertion that those within the core design the planning process, dominate the decision making and as a consequence the action strategies that follow from the analysis tend to favour the majority within the core. This does not infer that this is a deliberate strategy, rather that the decision making seeks to satisfy the greatest number rather than address the equitable distribution of benefits. Moreover, this form of decision making is typical of that applied in the core-periphery model whereby the core makes the decisions as they control the resources and the benefits flow to the periphery as they are inextricably linked. The concern becomes how to identify and address the inequities faced by those beyond the periphery and in the remote areas of the region.

The results also found a highly significant relationship between the total population in each LGA and participation in focus groups ( $r=.971$ ). That is, the greater the population concentration, the greater the participation in the focus groups (101 out of 123 focus group participants were from the regional centre Cairns). This finding would suggest that the utilitarian distributive principles of justice (Rawls, 1973) are applied to decision making whereby the greatest good goes to the greatest number of people. Decision making is concentrated to the urban spatial node (Cairns) which contains a high population relative to the entire region.

## **Conclusion**

The RDA process provided the ideal mechanism for recognising the multiple core-periphery relationships and people's perceptions of what a core is and where these may be located in relation to peripheral areas. To some extent this was recognised by the committee which ensured that a third of its members were from the periphery and that invites were issued for representatives of organisations in the periphery to attend the focus group sessions. While most focus groups did recognise the needs of the periphery, many of the discussions failed to recognise the differences between traditional and western economies (McRae & Gerritsen, 2010; Porter, 2010). The Cape (Cape York Peninsula) is the intersection between migrant settlers looking to settle and develop a periphery and traditional Indigenous populations caught between a desire to maintain the main elements of traditional society and livelihoods expressed through terms such as country and its care and joining modern society that has a range of different values and aspirations. Traditional society possibly has greater emphasis on quality of life in contrast to the western emphasis on quantity (of economic output for example) as an expression of quality.

In the vast majority of Australian communities measuring social equity is relatively simple because most citizens actively participate in the national economy which can be broadly described as a modified capital model where the state intervenes to ensure that all citizens have basic access to facilities such as education, health and a wide range of social welfare services. Measuring social equity in these circumstances is relatively simple and uses measures such as housing ownership and employment participation.

The results from this case study demonstrate that Rawls' (1973) concept of social equity has not been applied in either the decision making process associated with identifying the regional priorities or to addressing economic inequalities. It was evident from the analysis of the region's demographic characteristics that the least advantaged within the region were located in "very remote" communities and within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Shires. Where citizens follow a traditional lifestyle it can be argued that measuring social equity is difficult because this group may have different values to those of mainstream society. It is also apparent that some members of remote communities may not wish to engage in the typical western model of economic development, but rather remain free to pursue their own modified customary lifestyles. In circumstances of this nature it is difficult to achieve social equity as it is defined by Rawls (1973) and McConnell (1981). However, the views and perceived development priorities of these population groups were largely neglected in the data collection process for the RDA FNQTS Regional Roadmap.

The data collection phase should have actively sought the views, aspirations and opinions of the most disadvantaged in a more personal manner. Sending an email survey to a group secretary efficiently gains the opinions of groups, but fails to gain the breadth of opinions within a community. Consultation with the most disadvantaged when they are remotely located is time consuming and requires investment in human resources. In the RDA FNQTS case, the budget and the tight timeframes imposed by the government(s) did not permit an all encompassing consultation phase, and the outcomes of the draft Roadmap reflect a culturally insensitive process.

There was only one focus group that was specifically dedicated to issues affecting Indigenous Communities. Participants in this focus group identified a range of priority issues that were not experienced by the non-Indigenous core population such as access to safe drinking water, health and education. However, addressing these inequities was not seen by the RDA committee as priorities for the whole region, with little to no consideration of the very remote communities in the final draft of the regional plan.

The original objectives of the RDA FNQTS quoted in the introduction could never have been achieved via the process applied or within the range of action strategies contained within the Roadmap. It would appear that the voice was given to the urban population and that in the process the socially disempowered were muted in the name of government efficiency rather than by personal choice.

The spatial organisation of the FNQTS region possesses similar characteristics to those described by Friedmann's (1966) core-periphery model of regional development. In this model the terms of trade favour the urban centre and the periphery is viewed as a conduit for supporting the economic advancement of the city (Selman, 1995). However, in this particular case study, the very remote are not considered as a conduit to support the growth of the urban core and as such are duly ignored in the regional planning process. It is evident that remote areas do not experience a consistent and predictable relationship with either the urban centre or the periphery regions to enable its inclusion within the core-periphery development paradigm. Communities within very remote areas are therefore denied the opportunity to influence real possibilities for change or mobilisation that would support more socially just ways of being.

There is an immediate need for a fresh approach to regional planning initiatives to ensure the consideration of the least advantaged within the regional territory. In this case study the RDA FNQTS priority issues experienced by the remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait shires were not considered and as such counteract the purpose of regional planning by exacerbating regional disparities. In the absence of a new approach to regional planning in industrially advanced countries that considers the concept of social equity and the Rawlsian principles of distributive justice from both a western and traditional perspective, the question arises: "What is the purpose of regional planning, if it is indeed about anything?"

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