Introduction Desert Knowledge CRC Special Edition

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Guest Editor: Dr Kurt Seemann

Introduction
Welcome to this Special Edition of the Journal of Economic and Social Policy (JESP). We have compiled the final papers of leading researchers who participated in an unprecedented and ambitious program between 2006 and 2009 to investigate various aspects that contribute to the sustainability of rural and remote Australian desert settlements. We acknowledge the generous time and effort afforded to the research by remote, mostly Aboriginal communities as well as the insights from partners and agencies to help us develop and interpret the research. Our work was largely funded through the Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre (DKCRC), as part of its Core Program Sustainable Desert Settlements. This program involved a team of nine universities, working in the back yard of most Australian States, and with several desert community organisations and Government agencies. The research team set out to capture the ideas and challenges of people living in Australia’s vast outback. Their aim was to inform policy regarding how to better invest in what constitutes a special system of human settlements: the class of settlements dispersed across 70 percent of Australia’s iconic arid and semi arid interior.

The methodical study of human settlement systems is widely regarded as a challenge in theory and methodological framework, let alone policy development. Unique skills and ‘tricks-of-the-trade’ were learned in the management of such a vastly dispersed research operation. This special edition, however, draws specific attention to matters of social and economic policy. As researchers, we crossed jurisdictions, worked across poor and rich local economies; we transitioned multiple time zones and sustained efforts across calendar years; and we collaborated across universities, state and federal government agencies, and private concerns.

Our work demanded we learned how to examine issues from cross-disciplinary frames of reference, and accommodate differences in discipline specific language. We also learned to use advanced information technologies in creative ways to facilitate our efforts to maintain our collegial momentum and social organisation over such time-space conditions. The vast distances that teams had to travel also inspired essential support from the families of researchers while they worked in Australia’s interior. Such is the inevitable nature of human settlement research that it was no surprise to find the team
seeking to align themselves with this research journal whose charter fits well with our grand program of work. Recognising the constraints of settlements being sparsely distributed across vast distances, their variability in population, and their diverse cultural orientation and jurisdictional locations, the team set out to capture key ideas that are at least essential to the livelihoods of people living in such regions. They investigated how the human-made and natural systems of desert settlements were responding to the extremes that desert environments impose. These extremes include those of temperature variations and of the great distances between services and other locations of significance and resource for Australia’s Aboriginal people, Settlers, and importantly, visitors and travellers. All these people are drawn to the colour and stark beauty of our deserts, often celebrated in iconic images of Australia. Clearly, Australia’s deserts, and their network of human settlements and communities can only be regarded as one of our country’s most precious assets, deserving of sensible policy and proper investment.

For many Aboriginal Australians and Settlers, it is a life binding and choice affirmation decision to live out bush. A common theme is ‘belonging to land’, but equally, we found that the choice to live there is one of mutual benefit to the wider Australian identity, ecology, security and economy. The network of outback communities gives Australia its interior ears, eyes and voices - losing that asset would not be in Australia’s long-term national interest.

Sincerely,

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