

In search of a sustainable future

Noel Pearson
Director, Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership

Published in The Financial Review
15th November, 2005



Cape York Institute
For Policy & Leadership

J Block, Newton Street, TAFE Campus
PMB 1, Cairns. QLD 4870

Telephone: (07) 4046 0600
Facsimile: (07) 4046 0601

Email: info@cyi.org.au
Web: www.cyi.org.au

The Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership is a public policy organisation formed in partnership between the people of Cape York, Griffith University, and Federal and Queensland Governments. The Institute receives core funding from the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science, and Training and Education Queensland. The views expressed in this paper are intended to further the discussion about the challenges facing Indigenous peoples of Cape York, and possible solutions. The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of Griffith University or the Institute's funding agencies.

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Author: **Noel Pearson**

Noel Pearson is executive director of the Cape York Institute.

Date: 15/11/2005

Publication: The Financial Review

A Cape York Institute study shows viability of remote indigenous communities is a question of choice, writes **Noel Pearson**.

Engagement with the real economy is a necessary requirement to build and sustain acceptable capabilities. Therefore, a real economy was an essential component of every economically viable scenario in our study.

Importantly, proximity to a real economy is not enough. Some Cape York communities are already very close to significant mainstream economic activity (e.g. mining and tourism), yet there continues to be very little engagement with that real economy. This suggests that remoteness alone is not a sufficient explanation for capability deprivation in Cape York communities.

In our modelling, economically viable scenarios required policies and attitudes that actively promoted economic development. They included policies and attitudes encouraging outside parties to invest in the communities, thus creating employment opportunities. They also had a welfare system that actively encouraged people to take up these employment opportunities and move away from welfare dependency.

People must be engaged in both local and non-local employment.

As discussed in a previous Cape York Institute paper, the capability of employment is central to wellbeing. Unemployment not only deprives people of an income, it also has other more serious effects, such as psychological harm, loss of work motivation, skill and self-confidence, an increase in sickness, and disruption of family and social life.

To meet the targets set by this employment capability in economically viable scenarios, our modelling indicated that people had to pursue jobs both inside and outside the community. This again highlighted the importance of mobility.

Our policy interpretation of these results is that a critical precondition of economic viability is that people must be mobile, and that they must enhance their capabilities, especially through education.

If this precondition is met, we consider that economic viability is fundamentally a question of choice. If people choose to maintain their community, they must engage with the real economy to deliver an acceptable level of capabilities, at an acceptable level of outside support. To do this, they must seek out local and non-local development opportunities and minimise the passivity impact of continuing external support.

A common concern is that encouraging mobility will lead to the inevitable decline of such communities. We do not believe that this is correct. The strong and continuing cultural connection to ancestral lands for the indigenous people of Cape York means that it is very likely that people will choose to maintain their communities, even as they orbit back and forth

to the mainstream.

Critically, however, choosing to stay should not be a default consequence of incapability, particularly due to a failed education. This would be a choice of desperation, due to a lack of feasible alternatives. Instead, choosing to stay should be an informed choice from a full range of alternatives that reflects people's passions, talents and preferences.

Nor should the choice to stay be an implicit choice of dependence, with the hope that government support for local development will be enough to solve the current deprivation crisis. Instead, choosing to stay needs to be grounded in a keen awareness of the fundamental economic context, and the policies and attitudes required to build a real economy.

This paper has presented our findings on whether Cape York communities can be viable. We have presented these findings as three separate contributions.

First, we presented a simple analytical framework for assessing the economic viability of communities on Cape York. This framework defines economic viability and enables scenarios of economically viable communities on Cape York to be generated that take into account a wide range of economic determinants and constraints.

Secondly, we have presented our findings on the state of the current economies in Cape York communities. Our assessment is that capabilities are very poor on Cape York and hence that the communities are now not economically viable. However, this does not preclude them from becoming viable at some point in the future.

Our third and final contribution is the demonstration that remote communities can be viable. Our modelling shows that the common themes of economically viable scenarios are that people must be mobile and enhance their capabilities; policies and attitudes must enable engagement in the real economy; and people must be engaged in both local and non-local productive activities.

Importantly, our work emphasises that economic viability involves a significant degree of choice for the community. It may be a strongly constrained choice, but it is a choice nonetheless.