

DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGES IN RURAL AND REMOTE REGIONS; PARALLELS BETWEEN AUSTRALIA AND LATIN AMERICA

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Development issues in Latin America are often considered uncharted territory for agencies in Australia. The barriers of language and culture are demanding. The diversity of political and economic factors makes for a challenging development sector. But overlaps in the experience of development initiatives on the two continents is much greater than commonly understood. This article provides an introduction to some areas of common ground.

RURAL, REMOTE AND INDIGENOUS

Over large parts of Australia, remote area priorities and Indigenous concerns are one and the same. Remote Indigenous communities are located in the backyard of State and Territory administrations based in coastal cities. Struggles over the balance of resource allocation between coast and regions is a feature of Australia's relationship with its outback regions, the Federal investment in the Northern Territory Intervention and state election focus on the regional development levy in Western Australia being the most vivid recent examples.

Although generalisations about Latin America are risky, parallels with Australia exist in the Andean countries. Remote mountain, Amazon basin and predominantly Indigenous areas lie at the end of an often lengthy supply chain of government services from national capitals. As community leaders often say, 'Aqui el estado no llega; the state doesn't reach here. The ongoing development debates in Tarapoto Department of Peru and the turbulent politics of El Alto and Sucre in Bolivia are cases in point. As in Australia, Indigenous perspectives are often central to the character of these struggles.

Development issues in remote areas of both Latin America and Australia can often be characterised as a dynamic around the ways in which people on the social and economic margins of the country connect with the mainstream. Given that improved livelihoods and access to services face challenges due to market conditions, the role of policy and programs in supporting development in remote areas is where most potential lies.

THE IMPACT OF EXTRACTIVE INDUSTRIES

Oil and mining industries in Australia and Latin America are among the largest in the world. Venezuela has the biggest oil reserves of any country, the Amazon Basin is a focus of constant exploration while Australia produces the greatest mineral output for both BHP Billiton and Rio Tinto, the two largest mining companies internationally.

Exploration for and extraction of minerals is a controversial topic on both continents and often brings into sharp relief the wealth disparities between social groups. Mining operations frequently take place in locations where indicators of social and economic development are poor. The injection of a major industry into the regional economy may provide welcome opportunities, but extractive means just that. The matter of what is left behind as a legacy of industrial development as employment and social benefit for local people is the underlying development issue for government and civil society groups.

Common development experiences between Australia and countries of Latin America lie in the nexus between mining corporations, government and local development needs. Social, employment and economic development programs instigated by companies across remote parts of both continents add up to a strong body of knowledge on the subject. The challenge is how to maximise the development outcomes of such initiatives.

COMPETITION FOR WATER RESOURCES

Access to water is a leading development issue in Latin America. Water resources may vary dramatically in abundance across the continent, but competition for them is constant. This dynamic is played out as a struggle between social classes (small farmers against larger ranch and hacienda owners), over uses (for example, irrigation versus hydropower) and between urban and rural users, especially along the arid coastal strips of Chile and Peru. Vigorous political confrontation over the privatisation of water companies in cities such as Cochabamba in Bolivia, is a further dimension. In Australia, the leading edge of political debate on the subject of water is the Murray-Darling Basin and the plans of State Governments to commission desalination plants for the capital cities. Efforts to conserve resources and introduce greater efficiencies are part of the overall water management framework for a continent with diminishing water resources, but the challenge of balancing competing demands for water still exists. Witness the controversy around the north-south pipeline in Victoria and the vitriol between state governments over the issue of permits.

Given that water will continue to be a key development issue into the future, scope exists for initiatives that draw on the combined skills and knowledge of agencies in Australia and Latin America.

BETTER COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Talk to staff of government departments in Australia and many will say that government agencies are still building their capacity to engage effectively with remote communities and that effective government policy and programs depend on it. The Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre has published extensively on the subject of approaches to better outcomes from programs in remote areas. One important and unsurprising conclusion is that more effective community engagement will lead to improved results.

Recent Australian Federal Government policy has focused on achieving a balance between rights and responsibilities of citizens in remote areas to government investment in services and infrastructure. Regional Partnership and Shared Responsibility Agreements represent the central component of this policy. There is a parallel in Brazil, where results of 'conditional transfer' programs for welfare recipients in the poor north-east of the country have demonstrated some promise, again through emphasising commitments such as school attendance as conditions of welfare transfers.

The history of social welfare programs in Latin America and the community engagement processes that underpin them such as latest initiatives in, for example, the margins of the Amazon Basin, represent valuable knowledge on engagement between governments and citizens. Overall, the scope for sharing expertise on approaches to community engagement between practitioners in Australia and Latin America is great, especially to achieve better outcomes from social programs led by government agencies, NGOs and resources companies.

DEVELOPMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

In both continents, improved approaches to natural resource management are central to concerns about sustainable development. The Cooperative Research Centre Program in Australia has generated significant research results on national assets such as rainforest and reef ecosystems, while the Caring for Country Program aims to tackle intransigent issues of, for example, feral pests, with Indigenous people set to play a key role in programs to reduce feral camel populations.

The threat to and sustainable development of the Amazon has led to numerous initiatives that aim to address the tension between the needs of settlers and the pressure on natural resources. Many of these are innovative in their focus on land tenure and security and livelihood development, issues that have featured in policy and practice in Australia too.

Policy and program initiatives that put natural resource management and sustainable livelihoods in harness are feature in both Latin America and Australia. This is another area of common ground and development potential.

CONCLUSION; A DEVELOPMENT BRIDGE BETWEEN CONTINENTS

This short article argues that there are important areas of common ground between the experiences of development in Latin America and those in Australia. Importantly, there is enormous untapped potential for collaborative work between agencies on both continents to achieve better quality programming and improved social and economic outcomes.

For further discussion on the topics raised here or to make an enquiry about feasibility studies, evaluation, project management and development practice relating to development initiatives in Australia and Latin America, please contact Steve Fisher at Community Works, steve.fisher@communityworks.com.au.