**Jim Turnour**

**How does your research pertain to governance?**

My research is focused on improving economic development policy with a particular focus on government Indigenous and agriculture policy as it is applied in northern Australia. Using case study methodology I am exploring the influence of current neoliberal governmentality on local communities. I am particularly interested in how these policies can be reformed to address the needs of local communities in a way that supports the development of sustainable livelihoods.

Governance is a term that can mean different things to different people and interests. I understand it as a term which describes how groups of people, communities and more broadly society formally and informally organises itself through institutional structures and processes. These informal and formal structures and process may exert influence in ways that are not always obvious to individuals or communities. This is because we can be blind to the established power structures, values and norms that guide everyday life in a community. My work seeks to make more explicit particularly how government policy influences the way that communities function in positive and negative ways.

**What interesting things are you thinking or finding?**

That public sector governance reform is required to make policy more responsive to the needs and aspirations of individual communities and places. This is particularly important when working across cultures where the rationalities implicit in neoliberal governance are different to those within Indigenous culture knowledge systems. Western governance and its accountabilities can seem foreign and bureaucratic to Indigenous groups where their governance and accountabilities maybe expected to align with the values and norms of traditional cultural knowledge.

There is a need therefore to explicitly support the Indigenous sector to develop their governance systems in a way that enables Indigenous peoples’ to balance their cultural responsibilities with engagement in mainstream economic activity. Governance support for Indigenous organisations and their aspirations however, tends to be narrowly focused on specific accountabilities around individual projects or support for business development and mainstream employment. Bridging the divide between Western and Indigenous cultural knowledge around ‘good’ governance requires reform of the overall system.

Paradoxes can emerge as what might seem true at one scale or culture may not at another. This is particularly the case when policy is discussed, developed and implemented in the abstract removed from the context in which the problem it is designed to address exists. Researching policy within real world contexts through case studies makes more explicit the relevance of the policy’s underlying assumptions and its impact on a local community. For example the disconnect between some western assumptions about what is economically rational can become clearer when development is considered in an Indigenous context. Scale can similarly produce policy paradoxes. Aggregating a nations resources for example in considering economic competitiveness can fail to recognise the unique strengths of individual regions.

Place-based approaches encourage collaboration between a range of different stakeholders in a community to tackle complex social, economic and environmental problems. They build on local values and strengths while keeping communities open and engaged without values and ideas. They potentially provide a policy framework to address the challenges of Indigenous disadvantage and rural community decline.

**Some of the theory you are using or making?**

Neoliberalism, sustainable livelihoods, place-based and post-colonial theory are all helping to inform my thinking.

Through literature review I have identified neoliberalism as an ideology and governmentality as useful theoretical frameworks. Ideologically it has been the dominant policy framework in Australia since the 1980s although there is a great deal of contradiction in its application. As a governmentality it has been useful in understanding how governments can use power diffusely through the way they structure programs and priorities. Governance could be seen as an example of this as ‘good governance’ becomes a basis for funding particular groups.

The sustainable livelihoods approaches grounded in international development theory takes an assets based approach to development and highlights the importance of institutions and governance to the development of sustainable livelihoods. When considered within a place-based context they provide potentially a new way to approach economic development.

Post-colonial theory has been important in understanding Australian history and the context for Indigenous disadvantage. It highlights the need to be respectful of alternative knowledge systems and to first and foremost make research relevant to Indigenous peoples and communities.

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