Demand Responsive Services to Desert Settlements

What is the Desert Knowledge CRC .....  

Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre is a national research network which brings together the local knowledge of residents of desert Australia, with the scientific knowledge of researchers, and the administrative knowledge of service-providers. ([www.desertknowledge.com/crc](http://www.desertknowledge.com/crc))

Demand Responsive Services to Desert Settlements is a project which aims to improve access to services in desert Australia. The project will try to find the conditions that encourage successful practice to occur between community members, leaders and service-providers. It will also try to find better technology and management approaches to improve how services are provided.

What are “Demand Responsive Services” .....  

There are many organisations providing services in desert settlements. Most service-providers are from government, but Aboriginal organisations and private companies also increasingly deliver services. From the viewpoint of people living in remote settlements, the service system is hard to understand. There are a large number of different service-providers, covering just about every aspect of life, including housing, water, telephones, power, roads, rubbish, health, education, police, justice, aged care, sports, unemployment, child protection, welfare ... to name not all.

For a long time, there has been talk about how to improve the service system. Everyone agrees - community members, leaders, local employees, and service-providers themselves - that there’s lots of room for improvement.

Almost all of the decisions involving services are made in regional centres and capital cities (from the supply side), with little input from community members, local leaders and employees (from the demand side). For lots of reasons, including limited ability-to-pay, maintaining national standards, and government reactions to social problems, the balance between demand and supply has become overly focused on supply. In fact, very little is even known about the demand side of services, from the viewpoint of consumers and community leaders. The project will investigate whether the service system would work better if it was more responsive to consumer demand, similar to the principles under which economic markets operate.

Many attempts have been made in the past to improve the system, but these have largely been driven by experts working on the supply side. This leads to a yearly increase in the quantity of administration to be processed, as evident in the growing volume of council minutes (see picture below). We think that better solutions can be found by working with people on the ground, where community members and service-providers come together.
Demand responsive is not the same as creating a ‘wish list’. It also does not mean that service-providers should react to political or other pressures, without thinking. To be practical, the project must work within the limited budgets available for services to remote settlements.

The project will give the demand and supply side equal weight. The research team will work closely with community members and service providers, to find out what is happening from both sides, and what new approaches could work better. It will also follow a process that can change and learn as it goes.

Who are we .....

Desert Knowledge has a board of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people from across Australia. Full details of the partners, board and management structure to Desert Knowledge is available from www.desertknowledge.com.au/index.cfm?attributes.fuseaction=team.

Most of the work will be undertaken by a team of researchers from the following partners to Desert Knowledge:

- Centre for Appropriate Technology (Mark Moran, Alyson Wright, Anna Szava Metta Young, Peter Taylor)
- Local and regional Aboriginal organisations (under negotiation)
- University of Queensland (Paul Memmott, Stephen Long)
- Murdoch University (Martin Anda, Natalie McGrath)
- University of South Australia (Deirdre Tedmanson, Drew Dawson)
- State, Territory and Australian Governments
- Charles Darwin University (Zane Hughes)
- Australia Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (Patrick Sullivan)
- CSIRO (Stephen McFallan)
- James Cook University (Owen Stanley)

All of these researchers are experienced in working in remote settlements. In addition, the team will include Aboriginal research workers/trainees, PhD students and government officers.

Funding for the project has been provided by the Australian Government, universities, non-government organisations, private companies, and state/territory government departments that together make up the Desert Knowledge CRC. It is important to stress, however, that all of partners to Desert Knowledge have equal influence, and no single Partner, including the Australian Government, has control over the outcomes.
What the project will do ..... 

The project will take a very practical approach. We will work with people who are on the front line, with community members and service-providers. We will build a picture of what services are coming into desert settlements, and how they are used. We will learn what influence consumers want to have over different services, and their capacity to benefit from services.

The main technique used will be one-on-one interviews and workshops. We hope to review plans and reports that have been done in the past, and we will work closely with other projects that are underway. We will map all formal organisations and informal networks involved in decision making for services, both within and outside of the community. We will learn what we can about the history of how things have changed. We will focus on examples of successful practice and innovation.

We will be working in four different sites, in Western Australia, South Australia, Queensland and the Northern Territory. In addition to interviews at a community level, we will also interview the employees of service-providers, at different levels of the service system, from regional centres and capital cities to Canberra.

The project will run for at least three years. For first year, we will work in desert settlements to understand what is going right and wrong on the ground. Guided by this, we will look for different ways to improve the system, most likely through the use of improved technology and management approaches. The approaches developed will be specific to the sites we are working in, and will be developed with support from community and service providers.

What the project will not do ..... 

- It is not an anthropological study, into culture and private business.
- It is not a part of any negotiations involving native title, Indigenous Land Use Agreements or land purchases.
- It is not aligned to any government policy initiative, but it is hoped that the project might inform the development of future policy.

Some idea of questions we will ask ..... 

Initially, we will focus on household services. Many different services directly impact consumers at their house, including housing, essential services, public health, and education. The project will use these household services as a way to begin exploring demand responsive services. There are lots of questions to be asked. How do the service-providers who supply household services relate with housing tenants as consumers? What do tenants think about all of these services and service-providers? Do tenants use the services that are available, or are there obstacles preventing them from using them? What are their preferred types and levels of involvement, against all of the different functions of services? What is their capacity and willingness to benefit from these services, in comparison to the outcomes sought by service-providers? What, if anything, are they prepared to contribute as consumers? In a limited budget framework, which services do consumer prioritise over others?

Another example of a place where service-providers come together is the council office. A similar set of questions could be asked of community leaders and local employees in their dealing with external service-providers, as representatives of consumer interests. But it must also be said that council and other local organisations themselves are service-providers to local consumers. How these local organisations interact with community members, what works well and what doesn’t, will also be covered.
What are the Benefits ..... 

The short term benefits for the communities are: -

- Employment and training of community members to undertake research.
- Mapping of services and service-providers coming into the community, and information to help understand what they do.
- Procedures and strategies for how to get better outcomes from service-providers.
- Availability of an experienced group of researchers to help with immediate technical and other short term problems.
- Recording of positive stories about successful practice and innovation.

The long term benefits are: -

- Better access to services for community residents.
- Reduced administration for local leaders and employees.
- Technology and management approaches that will improve services.

Have Your Say

There are four ways that you can be involved in the Project:-

- Phone the Leader in your State/Territory (call ? on ?)
- Phone the National Team Leader (call Dr Mark Moran on 0408 897 432)
- Email your comments (mark.moran@icat.org.au)
- Arrange an interview to talk to someone in person (phone one of the people above)
- Join our knowledge community (www.desertknowledge.com)