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# Systems approaches to economic development for indigenous people: a case study of the Noongar Aboriginals of Australia

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## Abstract

This paper illustrates a case study in the application of systems approaches to securing economic development for a specific group of indigenous people in Australia. The case study combines Field Anomaly Relaxation (FAR) with Effects-Based Operations (EBO) planning to realise more purposeful actions and endeavours in pursuit of economic development. The approach is a hybrid of Checkland's Soft Systems Methodology (SSM), Rhyne's FAR and an advancement of the EBO process emerging from within national security domains. The paper focuses primarily on the use of FAR as a means of understanding an economic development problem space within a present and future orientation, with minor reference to EBO planning as a method of bringing about purposeful change within a combined solution and design space. The paper seeks to demonstrate the utility of 'soft' approaches, such as FAR, in the exploration of economic *undevelopment* and how more purposeful corrective actions can result if they are harnessed to a deepened understanding of the problem space.

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## 1. Case background

The Noongar people number approximately 30,000. They are the traditional land-owners of the southwest region of Western Australia. Their economic plight is characterised by welfare dependence, dispossession and poor employment prospects combined with a social situation that breeds inactivity and malaise. In 2002,

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a joint project was launched between Jacobs Sverdrup Australia (JSA) and the Office of Aboriginal Economic Development (OAED) within the State Government of West Australia that sought to use a systems approach to explore their environment, designing solutions that could accommodate a range of possible futures and bringing about purposeful action and change.

The approach brought together six respected Aboriginal business and community figures, and incorporated three stages: firstly, a comprehensive understanding of the *problem space* was developed and shared by participants (*why* is our world the way it is?); secondly, a *solution space* was constructed that contained all the arrangements of ends, ways and means that could be mobilized to force change (what *could* be done to alter the prevailing conditions?); and finally a *design space* that contained what actions would be undertaken as part of an orchestrated campaign for change (what are we *going to do?*).

This examination of economic development using a systems approach deals principally with the use of Field Anomaly Relaxation (FAR) as a method of exploring a problem space. The examination and implementation of purposeful actions (solutions) is limited to minor references only.

## 2. The methodology

The fundamental knowledge on which much of my approach here has been based can be found in the combined works of Checkland [1]; Checkland and Scholes [3]; Emery [11,15]; Emery and Trist [18]. These authors have defined the changing nature of contextual environments for organizations, promoted the use of an active adaptive orientation to planning and “fostered a collaborative, participative-democratic methodology” [19, p. 28]. One that combines pluralism and free will, whereby “the objective world ... is the shared consensus among the perceptions and feelings of a population ... it is constructed through the interaction among individuals” [19, p. 35]. These embody the concerns expressed by Senge in his call for a ‘conversationalist’ orientation to the practise of, specifically, Systems Dynamics but social planning and change more generally [27].

It is only through the principle of democratisation that organizational design can cope with turbulent social fields, developing and nurturing ideal-seeking individuals [14, p. 221]; combining to make purposeful human action effective, exciting, satisfying, rewarding and most of all (usually) successful (at least more frequently than other methods that do not contain these characteristics).

The notion of *purposefulness* has been given clarity through Checkland and Scholes’ observation that “one of the most obvious characteristics of human beings is their readiness to attribute meaning to what they observe and experience” and that “... they can then decide to do some things and not do others. They can take *purposeful action* in response to their experience of the world. By purposeful action we mean deliberate, decided, willed action, whether by an individual or by a group” [3, pp. 1–2].

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