

# A word about work ‘orbits’

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It has become quite apparent that the word ‘orbit’ in relation to work mobility has a different meaning or inference to different people. This essay will clarify what I mean by work orbits.

Noel Pearson had this to say about work orbits:

I have introduced the concept of orbits as a solution to the problem of how we can avoid economic integration becoming a one-way ticket for the young away from their origins, a prospect that many parents and community elders dread. Even though Norman travelled and worked in other areas, he **retained a strong link with Kuku Yalanji country** (bold added) and spent much of his life there. He was a person who would have been able to embark on orbits of the kind I envisage. His example shows that it is possible to choose to **maintain an Aboriginal identity and be completely able to interact with modern society** (bold added).

Mining Magnate, Andrew Forest, used the term ‘orbit’ in his report to government titled, “Creating Parity”, which the government has used to base its present Indigenous employment policy. Forest offered no explanation of the term, other than what was provided by the Cape York Institute. But he then went on to say that we need to support people to come and go from ancestral lands for the purpose of work without losing their access to housing or employment in their home community. It’s not exactly clear who he is talking about here. He could not be talking about the vast majority of people for whom there are no employment opportunities in these remote communities and there never will be. And I have never heard of any person returning from a period of employment arranged by Boys from the Bush Projects having difficulty in returning to the same living arrangements that were available to them prior to going away. His report stated:

The Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership introduced the term (*sic*) ‘orbiting’ in relation to Cape York communities—see <http://cyi.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/Cape%2520York%2520Agenda%2520final.pdf>. Broadly speaking, the term refers to the mobility of Indigenous people from remote communities to take up education and employment opportunities in regional and metropolitan centres, while also retaining **their connection with ancestral lands** (bold added). We need to build on existing programmes and significantly expand support for people to take up work where the market provides it, and enable them to orbit back to their home communities **without losing access to housing or employment** (bold added).

Sociologists also use the term ‘employment orbits’ to describe the spatial distance in which workers are able to travel each day from their home to their place of employment (See for example, Bracey, H.E. (2002), *English rural life: Village activities, Organisations and Institutions*, Routledge). Anthropologist, Jon Altman, used the peculiar term ‘orbit in’ as opposed to ‘orbit out’, to describe Aborigines reoccupying empty landscapes to ‘manage the country’ (whatever that means) (*Altman, J., What future for remote Indigenous Australia? Economic hybridity and the neoliberal turn*, Altman, J. & Hinkson, M. (eds.) (2010), *Cultural Crisis —Anthropology and Politics in Aboriginal Australia*, UNSW Press).

In circumstances where people choose to relocate for the purposes of work, we normally use the term ‘migration’—this can be either internal (within the country) or external (outside of the country). Speaking of ‘internal migration’ for the purposes of work, Deshingkar and Grimm (*Deshingkar, P. and Grimm, S. (2005), Internal Migration and Development: A Global Perspective*, Overseas Development Institute, IOM International Organisation for Migration) have identified four broad kinds of internal migration: 1) rural-urban, 2) rural-rural, 3) urban-rural, and 4) urban-urban.

1. Rural-urban movement occurs as a result of an urbanising economy; rural workers moving to larger towns, cities, and industrial centres where there is a higher demand for labour, more and varied opportunities.
2. Rural-rural movement occurs when workers from rural areas with few jobs travel to another rural area where there are more jobs.
3. Urban-rural movement usually occurs when individuals return back to their home town. Often, these people bring back skill sets that benefit their home area.
4. Urban-urban movement takes place from city to the outer suburbs, or vice versa, or from one city to another.

In addition, we have ‘**circular migration**’ or ‘repeat migration’. This term refers to the temporary and usually repetitive movement of a migrant worker between home and host location for the purpose of work. It represents an established pattern of population mobility, whether cross-country or rural-urban (*Newland, K. (2009), ‘Circular Migration and Human Development’, Human Development Research Paper (HDRP) Series, Vol. 42, No. 2009*).

Circular migration is a developing concept. It refers to a loose notion of various definitions. Fargues (*Fargues, P. (2008), ‘Circular Migration: Is it relevant for the South and East of the Mediterranean’, CARIM Analytic and Synthetic Notes – Circular Migration Series, 2008/40*) notes that:

One finds both restrictive definitions like the one adopted by the European Commission, and the wider, more inclusive definitions of some researchers. They take into account the ‘transnational’ nature of many modern migrant communities around the world, and anticipate that in the future, thanks to easy and cheap transport and communications and to the close ties migrants can keep with their country of origin, **circulatory will become the rule, not the exception** (bold added).

Agunias and Newland (*Agunias, D.R. and Newland, K. (2007), ‘Circular Migration and Development: Trends, Policy Routes, and Ways Forward’, Migration Policy Institute*) have identified four types of circular migration: 1) Permanent migration—one or several generations later—permanent return, 2) Permanent migration and temporary return, 3) Temporary migration and temporary return, 4) Temporary migration and permanent return. Agunias and Newman have listed a number of criteria that make migration circular:

- i. Temporary: periods of stay are limited in duration;
- ii. Renewable: several periods are possible;
- iii. Circulatory: freedom of movement between home and host communities is fully-enjoyed during each period of stay;
- iv. Legal;
- v. Respectful of the rights of migrants;
- vi. Managed in order to match labour demand in one location with supply from another location.

Using the above conventional typologies, the type of migration taken up by young Anton McMillan, mentioned on page 2, is a **type 3 rural-rural voluntary circular migration**.

Evidence shows that circular migration, for the purposes of employment, has been an important route and necessary condition for sustainable development and poverty alleviation. An analysis of remittance flows throughout different parts of the world reveals enormous sums flowing back to home communities and can account for a substantial proportion of household incomes (Sok, H., Chea, H. and Sik, B. (2001), *Annual Economic Review*, Development Resource Institute, Phnom Penh, Cambodia; Al-Ali, N. (2004), 'The relationship between migration within and from the Middle East and North-Africa and pro-poor policies', Report by the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter for DFID; Karan, A. (2003), 'Changing patterns of migration from rural Bihar, in Iyer, G. (Ed.), *Migrant Labour and Human Rights in India*, Kanishka Publishers, New Delhi, pp. 102-139). In addition, returning migrants may also bring back a range of skills which can benefit their home areas immensely (Zhao, Y. (2001), 'Causes and Consequences of Return Migration: Recent Evidence from China', Working Paper No. E2001010, China Centre for Economic Research, Beijing University).

But is or could this be the case with individual Australian Aborigines from remote communities? Certainly, it was the case in the early 1960s, before the introduction of unemployment benefits. For example, a feature of the mission's economy on Bathurst Island was the migration of able-bodied males for a period. They'd travel to labouring jobs in Darwin, the salt works in Shoal Bay, and the forestry work on Melville Island. In 1960-1961 the total wages (training allowance) paid to people on Bathurst Island was £2,173.40d, added to this was £943.19.4d for the sale of local produce, whereas, in the same period £8,611.2.4d was spent by Aborigines in the local cash store. The difference in these amounts was mainly due to earning brought back by the migrant workers (James, M. (2015), *The 1960s Aboriginal Fruit-picking Scheme: A Critical Evaluation*, Australian eBook Publishers). These migrant workers were in effect subsidising the mission. There was also the situation where in 1964 a large group of men from Ernabella Mission migrated up to the forestry works near Darwin for 11 months of the year (James, M. (2015), *The 1960s Aboriginal Fruit-picking Scheme: A Critical Evaluation*, Australian eBook Publishers). But the broadening of the criteria for welfare payments, in particular the provision of unemployment benefits to residents of remote Aboriginal communities, much of this migration ceased.

According to Deshingkar and Grimm, international experience has shown that policies, programs or actions that tend to restrain mobility or to provide incentives for people to stay on their land do, in the long run, lead to unmanageable situations (Deshingkar, P. and Grimm, S. (2005), *Internal migration and development: A global perspective*, International Organisation for Migration, No. 19, Switzerland). And this is what has occurred in so many remote Aboriginal communities, to the point where the Western Australian Government and Federal Government are now proposing to shut down between 100 and 150 Aboriginal communities in Western Australia (A document prepared by the Federal Government in 2010, titled, 'Priority Investment Communities – WA', categorised 192 of 287 remote settlements as unsustainable).

But how then do we explain the reason for young Anton McMillan engaging in his third circular migration? And for that matter, how do we explain the near 200 young people that have signed up to circular migration with From the Bush Projects over the years, many of whom were receiving welfare or CDEP payments? (See: James, M. Rural & Remote Area Work Scheme, Progress Report #4, 31 January 2011, [www.fromthebush.org/papers](http://www.fromthebush.org/papers)). Their willingness to engage in circular migration can be explained by the term '**accumulative migration**'.

The term accumulative migration is used in the international literature (Deshingkar, P. and Start, D. (2003), 'Seasonal Migration for Livelihoods, Coping, Accumulation and Exclusion', Working Paper No. 220, Overseas Development Institute, London). A study by Rao distinguishes between migration for **survival** (sometimes referred to as **distress migration**) and migration for **additional income** or the **acquisition of new skills** or to **gain new experience**, all of which has been named accumulative migration (Rao, G.B. (2001), *Household Coping/Survival Strategies in Drought-prone Regions: A Case Study of Anantapur District, Andhra Pradesh, India SPWD-Hyderabad Centre*).

The stone-age hunter-gather existence of Australian Aborigines is an example of **survival migration**. The nature and scope of this migration varied widely from those living in the wetter coastal regions to those living in the harsh central inland desert regions where it was necessary to roam over great distances (Young, E. and Doohan, K. (1989), *Mobility for Survival: A Process Analysis of Aboriginal Population Movement in Central Australia*, Darwin: North Australia Research Unit, The Australian National University).

In the contemporary context, it's important to note that economic distress or survival migration is not limited to deprived families, and that accumulative migration is not limited to families who are relatively well-off (Deshingkar, P. and Anderson, E. (2004), *People on the move: New policy challenges for increasingly mobile populations*, Overseas Development Institute', *Natural Resource Perspectives*, No. 92, London). In the case of Anton McMillan he states that his motivations are all of the above: income, acquisition of additional skills and qualifications, and new experiences.

We are all aware of the social and economic situation in remote Aboriginal communities. There is no real employment for most of these people, and to remain living in these communities means settling down to a life of total welfare dependency. A few will drift away, but not necessary for the purposes of employment. Some young people will drift to urban centres in search of youth culture, fun and excitement. Some will leave home to spend time with relatives. Others will leave to seek certain goods and services not available to them in their remote community. This sort of movement can be defined as various forms of accumulative migration. Others leave to escape the chaos and violence (**distress migration**). Take for example the situation in 2011 when over 100 people fled Yuendumu in fear of their safety (See article by Verity Edwards, 'Aboriginal people flee to Adelaide to escape Yuendumu violence', *The Australian*, 10 February 2011). This sort of movement is best described as distress migration. Very few have the inclination, confidence, skills, and resources to leave unassisted for the purposes of employment.

Many of us are aware of the growing number of Indigenous youths that have disengaged from education and training and get into all sorts of strife. Moreover, many of them are not responding to standard forms of intervention. From the Bush Project was established specifically for these young people. What we offer these young people is fulltime employment in a meat processing plant at award rates and under award conditions with intensive on-site and off-site support and supervision. It is a voluntary scheme, but designed in a manner that favours their continued participation. We have on occasions accepted referrals from the Children's Court as an alternative to ordering a custodial sentence.

Our scheme is not a recruitment agency for labouring jobs in other parts of the country for the purpose of financial gain (see for example, *Migrant Workers – China* - YouTube). Our scheme recruits disengaged youths for meat processing work in other parts of the country to help save a failing social system. This is a form of migration that is not described in the international literature.

This scheme has been developed by From the Bush Projects for the Cape York Institute as a **type 3-4 rural-rural voluntary circular migration** project that provides a number of **accumulative** benefits for the participants, their families, and home community. It has been named the **Aurukun Youth Orbiting Project**. The accumulative benefits include:

- Diversion from the use and abuse of drugs and alcohol
- Diversion from offences against persons and property
- Diversion from family/parental abuse and neglect
- Diversion from other negative influence within the community
- Diversion from the justice and welfare systems
- Provision of a suicide prevention strategy
- Provision of real employment paid at award rates and under award conditions
- Provision of financial self-reliance
- Provision of savings and investment support opportunity
- Provision of the opportunity to boost family income through remittances
- Provision of pro-employment and pro-social role models
- Provision of good physical and mental health activities
- Provision of 24 hour support and supervision
- Provision of constructive social, recreational and cultural activities
- Provision of life skills and life education, which includes helping to develop a moral character, the expression of gratitude, and framing of desires
- Reducing the demand on public housing and other public services in their home community
- Paying tax on income
- Creation of social capital at an individual level
- Creation of social capital amongst family, friends and community
- Creation of social capital in the workplace
- Creation of social capital in the host community
- Creation of social inclusion

(See: James, M. Rural & Remote Area Work Scheme, Progress Report #3 dated 8 May 2010, and Progress Report #4 dated 31 January 2011, [www.fromthebush.org/papers](http://www.fromthebush.org/papers).)

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