



EFFECTIVE DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE STRENGTHENING INDIGENOUS VOICE, DECISION MAKING AND CONTROL

ACFID Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Programs Community of Practice

2017 FORUM SUMMARY REPORT



AUSTRALIAN
COUNCIL
FOR
INTERNATIONAL
DEVELOPMENT

ABOUT THE FORUM

Aboriginal organisations have consistently called for Aboriginal-led and community-driven approaches to Aboriginal program design and delivery. ACFID's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Programs Community of Practice (CoP) supports these calls. Through learning events, the CoP supports practitioners to come together, share experiences, generate new insights, act together to solve problems and contribute to the development of a shared body of knowledge. The Alice Springs Forum was the major initiative of the CoP for 2017.

The forum was held on the 22nd and 23rd of November 2017 and was entitled *Effective Development Practice Strengthening Indigenous Voice, Decision Making and Control*. Leadership in Development Training workshops were also held over a half day on 21st November.

There were forum registrations from 22 Aboriginal organisations and 24 non-Aboriginal service providers, along with staff from five Northern Territory and Australian Government departments in attendance. Over 130 people registered for the forum, exceeding organiser expectations. The mix of not-for-profit, community and government participation provided an opportunity to build shared understanding and collegial relationships in the best tradition of a Community of Practice.

The forum explored how Aboriginal communities and their partners are putting principles of effective development into practice to ensure that decision making and programs reflect community aspirations and priorities. It was an opportunity to learn from communities and development practitioners about some of the best development practice examples in Australia and especially the Northern Territory.

This is the second public forum hosted by the CoP with the [2016 forum report](#) also available for download.

ABOUT ACFID AND THE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

ACFID is an independent national association of Australian non-government organisations (NGOs) working in the field of aid and development and one of its member services is to provide a platform for Communities of Practice. However, the CoPs operate largely autonomously and therefore opinions and outputs of the CoPs do not necessarily represent the view of the entire ACFID membership or management.

The ACFID Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Programs CoP began in 2007 as a working group and now has approximately 40 members, from over 20 organisations. For information about ACFID or the CoP visit www.acfid.asn.au or email main@acfid.asn.au.

FORUM SESSIONS

The program included a mix of workshops, presentations, panel discussions and table discussions on issues of interest. Presenters at the 2017 forum included:

PRESENTERS	TOPIC
WORKSHOPS – Leadership in Development	
Dr Mark Moran The University of Queensland	Discovering Adaptive Leadership to Frontline Challenges (two-hour workshop) This workshop explored how community development practitioners and leaders can navigate the complexity of community development work. It explored the categorisation of community issues as simple, complicated, complex and chaotic and set out strategies applicable in each of these cases. It also considered principles of adaptive community development practice, change spaces defined by authority, acceptance and ability, and program logic. It set out principles leading to the concept of the development entrepreneur and consideration of the next generation of community development solutions.
Liz Skelton Collaboration for Impact Grant Paulson World Vision Australia	Stepping out from the trenches (two-hour workshop) Liz and Grant are two co-authors of Lost Conversations: Finding new ways for black and white Australians to lead together . Lost Conversations documents the journey five Aboriginal and four non-Aboriginal Australians took to explore the complexities and potential roadblocks involved with inter-cultural work. They discussed key findings from this work and suggest ways of understanding and working differently with power to find the collaboration space where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians work together.
FORUM - Effective Development Practice Strengthening Indigenous Voice, Decision Making and Control	
Patrick Dodson Senator -Parliament of Australia	Developing the Vision, Voice and Power of our Communities (Keynote address) Senator Dodson's wide-ranging speech explored national, regional and local influences on the vision, voice, and power of Aboriginal communities.
Dr Ann Ingamells Griffith University Dr Danielle Campbell Central Land Council, Grant Paulson World Vision Australia Dr David Martin Director of Anthropos and Senior Anthropologist Clifton Girgirba Kanyirninpa Jukurrpa	What is Community Development? An introductory overview by Dr Ann Ingamells touched on the history and techniques of Community Development and how these have evolved to its contemporary expression. The other panel members shared some of their perspectives on community development and this was followed by a panel discussion.
Angela Lynch Rene Kulitja Margaret Smith NPY Women's Council	The Uti Kulintjaku Project - Strong Women Think Clearly The presenters talked about an innovative, Aboriginal-led mental health literacy project involving the development of an extensive mental health vocabulary and language-based resources for communities in the Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (NPY) lands. They also showed how traditional stories can be reinterpreted to convey contemporary messages.
Fiona Gibson Sharon Anderson Hamilton Morris Helen Morton WETT Advisory Committee Louise Stanley Central Land Council	Our Money, Our Skills, Our Future' Warlpiri Women tell the story of Warlpiri Education Training Trust The presenters gave an account of the successful community-based administration of over \$22M of Trust funds to deliver education and training outcomes for Warlpiri people.
Rowan Foley Lauren Bowyer Aboriginal Carbon Fund	Aboriginal Carbon Fund; "Indigenous-to-Indigenous; leaving the pith helmets at the colonial club" The presenters discussed progress implementing an Aboriginal Carbon Fund including an Aboriginal Core Benefit Standard and an 'Indigenous to Indigenous' or 'South to South' evaluation methodology that is based on peer review/knowledge sharing from independent Aboriginal groups with similar functions. It is being applied in Cape York, Top End and the Kimberley.

PRESENTERS	TOPIC
FORUM - Effective Development Practice Strengthening Indigenous Voice, Decision Making and Control	
Susie Lowe Mia Mulladad Keith Castle Atyenhenge Atherre A.C.	Voices and reflections from Atyenhenge Atherre Aboriginal Corporation, Santa Teresa The presentation provided an overview of the operation of the Atyenhenge Atherre Aboriginal Corporation over the last decade including successfully overcoming significant governance challenges.
Graham Beasley Peter Corbett Sabrina Kelly Central Land Council	Alekareng Youth Projects: How a community development approach is giving Aboriginal people a stronger voice in community decision making. A successful example of local decision making and community development with over 1000 social/cultural/economic projects completed and over \$50M of land use agreement funds successfully expended under the auspices of the Central Land Council .
Robert Carne NT Department of the Chief Minister	Northern Territory Government Local Decision-Making Policy Initiative An introduction to the Local Decision-Making Policy Initiative being developed by the NT government including how it is tailored to be responsive to the differing needs of communities.
Gary Powell The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet	Collaborating for Impact across the NPY Lands Update on the implementation of Empowered Communities in the NPY lands in the south of the Northern Territory.
Rowan Foley Aboriginal Carbon Fund	Building the Aboriginal Carbon Industry Extended on the previous talk about the Aboriginal Carbon Fund to consider the broader Australian context to carbon farming.
Margo Northey Robert Carne Gary Powell Rowan Foley Dr Mark Moran Rene Kullitja	How are Governments supporting Community Development? This panel discussion highlighted progress with current initiatives including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NT Government Local Decision-Making Policy Initiative • Collaborating for Impact across the NPY Lands • Building the Aboriginal Carbon Industry in partnership with the Queensland Government
Grant Paulson Teresa Hutchins World Vision Australia	Adaptive design approach helping to build trust, understanding and responses to family violence in Lajamanu Overviews the Lajamanu Channels of Hope for Gender project which adopts a faith-based approach to engaging with issues of gender or family-based violence. The presentation introduced the manual developed with community members as a key resource for this project.
Reggie Lankin Nicholas Williams MacDonnell Regional Council Annie Kennedy Tjuwanpa Outstation Resource Centre	“When we get together things can happen”: Stronger Communities for Children Ntaria Described the implementation of Stronger Communities for Children in Ntaria (Hermannsburg) as a successful community-led approach to investing funds for community purposes.
Blair McFarland CAYLUS Lance Jakamarra McDonald Opal Fuels	Central Australia Youth Link Up Service’s Community Development Model Discussed CAYLUS ’ successful community-based engagement that led to an expansion in the use of low aromatic fuel and changes to government policies on youth and petrol sniffing.
Lisa Warner YWCA Adelaide Margaret Cargo University of Canberra on behalf of the Research Team	Strengthening Evaluation Practices and Strategies (STEPS) in Indigenous settings in Australia and New Zealand Provided an overview of the STEPS project to establish a model for community-based evaluation of projects that is culturally appropriate and of benefit to Aboriginal people. The model is strengths-based and framed around the cultural integrity of evaluation.
Peter Johnson Clifton Girgirba Kanyirninpa Jukurrpa	Kanyirninpa Jukurrpa; Nature and value of project design and evaluation methods genuinely based on cross-cultural partnership Described the approach of the Martu leadership Program which draws on developmental evaluation to foster a highly successful both-ways learning initiative.

PRINCIPLES GUIDING EFFECTIVE DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE

Much of the forum discussion reinforced two complementary sets of development practice principles aligned with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. These are:

ACFID Practice Note:

ACFID have developed a Practice Note: [Effective Development Practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities](#). This aligns with the principles for effective development practice under the ACFID Code of Conduct and includes principles relating to:

- Quality relationships and partnerships
- Community participation at all stages
- Cultural competency
- Place based, understanding local context and history
- Commit to long-term engagement and be flexible
- Do no harm and build capacity
- Strength based
- Rights based
- Commit to addressing cross-cutting issues (gender, child protection, environment, disability)
- Work with existing governance structures
- Advocacy and Voice
- Respect of Intellectual and cultural property


A [Companion Document to this Practice Note is also available](#) and sets out case studies of practical implementation of the principles outlined in the Practice Note as well as suggested tools, resources and readings.

The Practice Note will be updated to incorporate learnings from recent forums and practice developments.

APO NT Partnership Principles

Aboriginal Peak Organisations of Northern Territory (APO NT) has developed a set of [Partnership Principles](#) for organisations working with Aboriginal organisations and communities in the NT. These principles support a transition from a narrow service delivery focus to one based on a development approach that enables and empowers communities and supports their self-determination. The full text of the principles is available from the above link but in summary they provide for non-Aboriginal organisations to:

- Consider their own capacity
- Recognise existing capacity
- Research existing options
- Seek partnerships
- Approach partnership in a particular way
- Recognise, support and promote existing development practice
- Work together with Aboriginal people to create strong and viable Aboriginal organisations
- Ensure Aboriginal control, not just consultation
- Develop a clear exit strategy
- Ensure robust evaluation and accountability and
- Develop their cultural competency and appropriate development practice.



KEYNOTE ADDRESS: DEVELOPING THE VISION, VOICE AND POWER OF OUR COMMUNITIES

The Hon. Senator Patrick Dodson, Shadow Assistant Minister for Indigenous Affairs and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, Senator for Western Australia.

Senator Patrick Dodson made connections between the grass roots community development and community decision making being discussed at the forum, and the diverse contexts of the status quo Aboriginal people find themselves facing on a particular day. He posed the question: how do Aboriginal Australians see themselves; as liberated, dominated, or dependents or colonised? or as people trying to find a way through all of this? and asked “Are we concerned with reform? Are we concerned with restructuring the paradigm? Or are we concerned with restarting this, restarting on a new basis in some way, shape or form?” Clarifying your starting point is critical as it will ultimately condition how you determine the vision, voice and kind of power you want and clarify what you’re going to do and how to get there.

Senator Dodson spoke of his frustration that the Uluru statement was dismissed out of hand by the Government despite its legitimacy as expressing the consensus view of Aboriginal aspirations. The current difficulty experienced in finding some common ground with Government has many implications including, he suggests, for what community development initiatives may presently be resourced by Government. However, there are many things that can be done at local, regional and State and Territory jurisdictions and noted that the pathways opening to develop treaties in States and Territories should not be lost.

In his wide-ranging speech, he drew together a range of threads of contemporary Aboriginal politics, and regarding establishing treaties, changes to the Constitution, the Royal Commission (into Don Dale) and changes to native title legislation. He’s also raised the role of community development programs in breaking welfare dependency in the context of income management.

Senator Dodson exhorted forum participants to be mindful of visions for self-determination that have gone before and to proactive about opportunities that arise. He highlighted that Aboriginal people are not bereft of vision, and referred to many statements such as the [Kalkaringi Statement](#), the [Barunga statement](#), the [Manyallaluk statement](#) and most recently the [Uluru Statement from the Heart](#). He urged Aboriginal people to understand where the blockages are to realising these visions and establish a unit dedicated to the politics of clarifying these visions, furthering dialogue and organising against mainstream attitudes. He spoke of the critical importance of constitutional change and treaties and he encouraged engaging immediately in dialogue with Government about its response to the Don Dale Royal Commission because these opportunities to influence systemic change don’t come along very often, concluding. “When one of the windows open a little bit, you’ve got to jump in there and keep it open”.

The full transcript of this speech is available on the Senator’s website.

THEMES

Some of the most significant themes that emerged from presentations and group conversations from this year's forum are captured below.

INTER-CULTURAL WORK IS POWERFUL AND WE ARE ALL CHANGE AGENTS

The leadership workshop drawing on *Lost Conversations* resonated deeply with many forum participants, in part due to the willingness to discuss what is often left unsaid, or unrecognised whilst working inter-culturally. The book title refers to the conversations that are never had, because of the roadblocks that can get in the way.

In inter-cultural engagement, both groups often hold different forms of power, but each group often only sees the power held by the other. Identifying these different forms of power with honesty and vulnerability is essential to engage in conversations in the 'no man's' land that separates Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. *Lost Conversations* encourages us to identify the various power or rank relationships at play in these conversations, including positional rank (e.g. within an organisation), social or unearned rank (that we are born with or into), psychological rank (from life experience) and spiritual rank (from being connected to something greater). Failure to recognise these different kinds of power causes frustration, miscommunication and disappointment and can cause both sides to retreat rapidly to their 'trenches'. When everyone is aware of the power they have, all forms of power can be utilised for a common purpose.

This workshop briefly explored behaviours and feelings that can be personally confronting and uncomfortable in inter-cultural work, often causing people to disengage. However successfully navigating these tensions can open-up opportunities for conversations where cultural differences are no longer an impediment to honest engagement and instead can facilitate deep insights and transformational change.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IS COMPLEX WORK

The workshop *Discovering Adaptive Leadership to Frontline Challenges* touched on how community development practitioners and leaders can navigate the complexity of community development work. First and foremost, building on strengths is fundamental to change. Appreciative Inquiry is one useful technique for understanding complex contexts and potential.

Aboriginal communities are culturally, socially and linguistically complex settings. They also exist in complex government policy and service delivery contexts. The [Cynefin framework](#) is a complexity model that can help make sense of contexts and identify appropriate responses to these. For example, complex systems require a decision model of 'probe, sense, respond' and what comes from this is emergent practice (as distinct from prescriptive good practice as applicable in less complex contexts).

Positive deviance was described as the important activities that many community development workers undertake in response to local priorities, which may not align with their high-level organisational priorities. As a result, formal acquittal stories (recognised within the KPIs, work plans and outcome frameworks of organisations/governments) often fail to value and report on this important work. Ultimately this situation is frustrating and unsustainable for workers.

The 'Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation' approach (Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock, *Building State Capability, 2017*) was presented as a way forward. The approach involves building legitimacy for positive deviance by implementing small, experimental improvements where there is the authority to act and then pursuing high-level buy-in based on early results. This approach can provide knowledge, confidence and authority to make further small steps to progress. This model involves:

- Creating an authorising environment for decision-making with experimentation and positive deviance.
- Facilitating active, ongoing, experiential and experimental learning and iterative feedback of lessons to new solutions.
- Solving problems in local contexts (don't try to transplant solutions).
- Engaging broadly with change agents and political elites to ensure implementation and political support.

The workshop also referenced the '3 As' model (Authorising, Acceptance and Ability) to describe the environment which is necessary for creating a large change space in which community development practitioners can catalyse social change.

The workshop concluded with the presentation of the concept of the Development Entrepreneur, who:

- Take small bets, instead of grand solutions and tries out imperfect ideas, discarding failures and picking up learnings quickly.
- Has the support of a close-knit team of passionate and determined leaders.
- Employs active learning with fast, experiential, experimental feedback.
- Collects actionable metrics that inform experimentation.
- Continues to implement based on best available information, even when in environments of uncertainty. Momentum reveals.
- Nurtures an authorising environment that permits one to 'do things differently'.
- Always stay focused on the next step.

WHAT IS COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT?

Dr Ann Ingamells provided some considerations of community development theory around purpose, method, strategies and techniques (referencing Bhattacharyya, J. 2004 *Theorising Community Development*). Community development has both a controversial and rich history (from colonisation followed by independence movements and conflicts, cultural action, the emergence of community development techniques and models through to present day policy context of neo-liberalism). Having a theoretical understanding can help practitioners navigate overlapping and neighbouring practices and become more effective.

Dr Ingamells suggested that understanding the purpose of initiatives and activities is critical to determining if an initiative is taking a community development approach. Dr Ingamells identified three critical elements of community development:

- It strengthens the community, from the perspective of the community.
- It strengthens personal and collective agency and power to act in a range of contexts.
- It builds trust and a foundation for new relationships that enable deep two-way learning and recognition.

Northern Land Council defined 'community development' as a way of working that involves a set of principles and a process that builds Aboriginal capacity, ownership and control and makes Aboriginal groups or communities stronger through the achievement of social, cultural, environmental and economic outcomes.

The panel discussion focused particularly on the role of community development workers as change agents who facilitate some of this work. If a worker brings an external agenda in with them, it can consume them, even as they begin to see it as unworkable. If their presence is responsive to the agendas of people in the community, then their role as an ally is less conflicted.

Aboriginal people engage actively when they can see their own purposes being prioritised (rather than external agendas). As a common purpose is articulated, people start to talk about it widely which engages other community members. Identifying priorities for community development is political work which requires experience and a capacity to separate practice from one's own bias and preferences for ideas and actions.

Community development work requires the ability to develop relationships, listen, hear, show trustworthiness. Practitioners need to find enjoyment in the relationships and piece together where their work sits in the broader efforts, purpose, networks and dynamics of a community. Their work involves a process of two-way learning, in a movement towards achieving something together. Once a practitioner can see where their work fits and can contribute to a purpose articulated by the community, they can build on this. Only longer-term engagement will show where and how to open new edges and introduce innovations.

COMMUNITY-LED FUNDING MODELS ARE NEEDED

There is almost universal recognition within the sector that for too long, decisions have been made for, rather than by Aboriginal people and communities and this has contributed to disjointed, uncoordinated and ineffective policy outcomes and service delivery. Every government jurisdiction in Australia is experimenting, with various degrees of success, to devolve aspects of decision-making to First Nations. Exactly how this systemic change and devolution of decision making is to occur is subject to considerable debate.

The forum presentations provided successful examples of how decision-making for services and programs, and control of funding, can be devolved:

- The Stronger Communities for Children Model presented by Tjuwanpa Outstation Resource Centre and MacDonnell Regional Council is a particularly good example of government devolving financial decision making. It provides a foundation upon which the community can learn to self-determine and be in a safe environment to learn from experience.
- Central Land Council and more recently Northern Land Council have demonstrated through their Community Development Programs (e.g. Alekarenge Youth Projects) that it's possible for Aboriginal groups to apply their own income to development initiatives that generate positive outcomes. This supports an argument for greater devolution of financial decision making.
- The Aboriginal Carbon Fund highlights the opportunities to build wealth for Traditional Owners with social, cultural environmental and economic core-benefits through the ethical trade of carbon credits with corporate Australia, government agencies and international bodies.
- The Warlpiri Education Training Trust is an example of the administration of funding by community representatives to support education and training to improve the lives of young people.
- New initiatives for devolved decision making were also presented by Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands Empowered Communities initiative and the NT Department of the Chief Minister's Local Decision-Making initiative.

There was a discussion group that focussed on how governments can do more to incorporate quality programming approaches, for example by funding co-design phases for projects prior to the main project implementation. Government performance criteria for projects were seen as sometimes problematic and misaligned to local priorities.

It was suggested that evaluation design should be integrated into project design from the outset. Community-based evaluations were seen as desirable, as was evaluation occurring concurrently with and informing program delivery (as distinct from months after project completion, when there

is less opportunity for the evaluation to influence practice). The importance of independent Aboriginal evaluators and 'South to South' or 'Indigenous to Indigenous' approaches was discussed by the Aboriginal Carbon Fund, with Aboriginal ownership of information and evaluation using peer review or sharing expertise between Aboriginal groups with similar functions. The forum presentation regarding the STEPS project highlighted another approach to establishing community based evaluation of projects that is culturally appropriate and of benefit to Aboriginal people.

CAYLUS discussed how it is important to say no to funding opportunities from Government where the purpose of that funding is considered wasteful, ineffective or inconsistent with organisational values and they provided a powerful example of where they have done this. Attendees commended approaches where there were set allocations of funds to communities, such that a decision by a community to reject a program could be made free of concerns about loss of net income to that community.

COMMUNICATION IS VITAL

The forum noted the importance of recognising sound decision making processes and governance that already exists in communities as well as the importance of accommodating language and culture in decision-making processes. Whilst incorporation of organisations and implementation of strict rules can sometimes be problematic, much can be achieved by establishing simple and pragmatic governance 'rulebooks' that accommodate cultural aspects and which are available in each local language as well as English. The importance of giving all family groups a voice was recognised, including individuals that may not be 'officially' part of governance structures.

Taking time to translate information for community members not speaking English as a first language was observed to be crucial and powerful, as demonstrated through the presentation delivered entirely in language by women from Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara lands, with the support of a professional translator. The Uti Kulintjaku Project showed the importance of dreaming stories and their relevance and application to addressing contemporary issues in communities.

Processes that create space and time for deep reflection and understanding of issues and solutions are critical to success when working in complex cultural contexts. Taking time to translate from English to other languages not only increase clarity for community members, it also ensures a measured pace and pauses for thinking time and engaging others in the community. Other creative ways of sharing information were discussed. For example, rather than having data heavy financial reporting, one organisation spoke of how it used football metaphors to convey key information to facilitate

informed decision making. Some of the best programs are developed in ways that come from culture, story, language and metaphor.

A goal for future forums like this could be the greater incorporation of Aboriginal languages, with a view to privileging Aboriginal peoples in the conversations rather than non-Aboriginal peoples with English as a first language.

STRENGTHENING GOVERNANCE TAKES TIME

With the power to make decisions affecting communities and control of resources comes the potential for its misuse. This is true for any community and is particularly true of communities for which the administration of power and funding is relatively new and where authority historically has often rested with 'outsider' CEOs. In some situations, outsiders manage with a heavy hand, are unwilling to collaborate and act as development facilitators and at worst act in their own financial interest. The complex web of social obligations in communities can also put additional impositions on the exercise of power and funding decisions.

Concerns regarding governance were regularly raised in the Empowered Communities consultations. Communities don't want to see nepotism or other examples of poor governance or financial management undermining community transitions towards self-determination. There is a strong awareness that governance failures could provide ammunition for those that would reject Aboriginal decision making and control. This awareness also places significant pressure on governance bodies. There is a need to provide spaces for communities to make and learn from mistakes along a journey towards self-determination. There is also great value in communities learning from other Aboriginal communities and organisations that are much further along this journey. There is also value in some communities drawing on long-term partnerships and skilled development practitioners to assist in developing governance suitable for local circumstances. It was noted that challenges will also arise where multiple groups are coming together to form umbrella organisations or peak bodies where differences of view will need to be reconciled.

Atyenhenge Atherre Aboriginal Corporation spoke about their organizational journey, which has been challenging at times. The speakers identified a range of key aspects of building governance capacity including transparency, community buy-in, taking demonstrable action, increasing accountability of staff, building trust and stakeholder relationships.

Other presenters shared that for some communities, the starting point is the development of an understanding of how mainstream law, government and companies work.

The Martu Leadership Program in the Pilbara evolved out of the strong interest communities had in better understanding of what might be taken for granted in a mainstream governance context. From learning about how companies work, the participant's interest had moved on to understanding how other mainstream laws impact on their community. With increased confidence and through a process facilitated by skilled development practitioners, this has led to having profoundly significant dialogues and actions with police, magistrates and other service providers.

PARTNERSHIPS WITH NON-ABORIGINAL ORGANISATIONS CAN SUPPORT SELF-DETERMINATION

Australia has a long and often problematic history of non-Indigenous businesses and not-for-profit organisations delivering projects and services in Aboriginal communities. At their worst, practices have been unethical (or occasionally criminal) but more often, well-meaning non-Aboriginal organisations have taken on decision-making roles and absorbed funding that might ideally go to the community itself or another Aboriginal controlled organisation.

Aboriginal organisations have argued that in relation to service delivery they are better placed to leverage greater positive impacts for communities. Service delivery is more likely to be culturally appropriate and in turn cost-effective over the longer term when controlled by Aboriginal people. In addition, there are likely to be greater Aboriginal employment outcomes and potentially business development outcomes associated with Aboriginal-led service delivery.

As a manager in one highly capable and successful Aboriginal organisation observed at the forum:

'whitefellas routinely draw on external experts such as lawyers and accountants - why should we be any different? We may not be interested in developing some specific capacities internally now there are some things communities don't want to have to do for themselves for cultural or other reasons'.

The critical issue in their view was not that 'all funding should go to Aboriginal organisations' but that '*decisions* about funding should go to Aboriginal communities' and then they will make decisions about how to deliver services, which may include establishing partnerships with or securing services from non-Aboriginal organisations.

Non-Aboriginal NGOs operating in the Northern Territory were encouraged by ACFID to become signatories to the APO NT principles for partnering with Aboriginal organisations. One critical principle relates to being mindful of not directly competing with capable Aboriginal service providers and development agencies for service delivery contracts or other funding. The intent is to ensure Aboriginal organisations have opportunities to develop and grow their own capacity to manage and deliver services. Whilst this principle relates primarily to funding, it also applies to the poaching of Aboriginal staff from Aboriginal organisations.

The conversation highlighted the importance for the ACFID CoP to continue to work with APO NT to support the development of a review process with respect to APO NT principles, which could include self-assessment by non-Aboriginal NGOs and verification by Aboriginal organisations.

It was identified that there can be a valuable contribution made by non-Aboriginal agencies that are well grounded in community development practices when working in partnership with communities and Aboriginal organisations. For example, these organisations can work in geographic and sectoral areas where the government is not funding delivery of services or where local capacity is low. NGOs can also bring flexibility to develop or pilot innovative models and can have access to philanthropic and corporate funding sources to help offset the initial cost of program design and delivery. There is also a support role, to be in solidarity with Aboriginal people and organisations collaborating on advocacy. Faith-based organisations can offer spiritual support.

There is a question for all non-Aboriginal agencies as to what is their exit strategy, what should exit look like, and how will communities be best supported to deliver services systematically after the NGO has left?

THERE IS A NEED FOR WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT

Whilst the involvement of external community development workers and other staff can catalyse positive change in remote Aboriginal communities, they can be complex, challenging environments for outsiders. Outsiders are typically not well attuned to the complexity of community family clan dynamics and cultural norms. They usually don't speak the first language of the community and inevitably it will take time to build trust. Inadequate staff selection, orientation and support can lead to negative outcomes affecting both the staff involved and the communities that they are there to support. This is an ongoing issue for service providers and other organisations in remote communities that prompted a lot of discussion at the forum. There was recognition of the great loss of knowledge and experience that can arise from staff burning out and leaving. Some of the specific themes that emerged from the discussion group included:

Recruitment

- Wherever practicable, recruit and train local staff. Whilst resources will need to be invested in training, workers will understand the local context and language, are likely to have local credibility and are more likely to stay in community long-term.
- Universities don't adequately prepare health, education and social work graduates for working in remote communities.
- There was a strong view that community representatives should be included on selection panels for positions in communities.
- Communication and inter-cultural skills were identified as being critical. It is not sufficient that recruits are technically competent in their professional area. They must be open and reflective learners, resilient, resourceful, prepared to get out and about in the community and open to learning some local language, and to learn about family groups. It is also important to recruit people with a sense of humour and resilience.

Orientation and Peer Support

- The observation was made that if the Australian government sent a worker to a context such as Ethiopia, they would likely receive at least six months training for a three-year placement. It was suggested that remote Australian communities can be equally complex spaces and that a comparable, level of in-depth induction with respect to culture, language and politics is needed.
- Care still needs to be taken with the orientation and support of locally recruited staff, recognising that they are likely to be subject to some workplace demands and community obligations and tensions that would not apply to outsiders.

- It was suggested that the main source of burnout related to exasperation with roadblocks: ineffective policies, program failures, and government inertia.
- There was a consensus that effective peer support including opportunities to debrief with peers was essential. Workers need regular (e.g. fortnightly) check-ins where they can be honest, blow off steam and engage in critical reflection, safely and confidentially. There was seen to be a need to find ways to constructively reflect on work frustrations.
- There was also seen to be a need to create formal and informal peer forums or local communities of practice to share and learn from other workers in a sustained and collaborative way.
- Having local community allies was also seen as essential to sustain work in community. These are community members who look out for staff, support them and inform and advise them about the community in an intentional way as part of a formal designated role.

Career paths and retention

- There was a discussion about the importance of providing staff career paths including a technical path for staff not seeking a managerial career. Opportunities to increase responsibility, remuneration and finding creative ways to reward experience were seen as needed to retain talented staff.
- The view was expressed that we need to invest in research to better analyse why good staff don't last in communities, the true costs (including opportunity costs) of losing good staff and effective strategies to keep staff.
- It's powerful for the community to be involved in setting performance indicators for performance reviews and being involved in those reviews. It can be a constructive source of feedback regarding how to improve based on what is important to the community. It helps organisations identify and address where there are community tensions with staff. Even senior staff should be accountable to the community in this way.
- The importance of professional detachment was discussed. While recognising that many people do this work as they driven by purpose and passion, maintaining some emotional distance is important for both the quality of work and self-care.

FEEDBACK

Extensive feedback was received from participants at the end of the forum with this, almost without exception, commenting favourably on the presentations and discussions and insights gained that informed personal practice.

“Was great to open with the inter-cultural discussion which pointed out some of the elephants in the room re cultural difference.”

“There wasn’t a session where I didn’t come away with a useful insight.”

“It was great to hear from Indigenous groups that are out there actively doing the work on the ground and for outsiders to see that the community people have the knowledge and ability to do the work – all they need is support.”

“The sharing of positive stories was inspiring and uplifting.”

“I appreciated the inclusive nature of the forum, with many Aboriginal speakers.”

“Well-chosen presentations with a good spread across the region and variety of contexts and circumstances.”

“Most useful were all the presentations that had strong Aboriginal leadership driving outcomes.”

ONGOING PRACTICE CONVERSATIONS

Participants were invited to suggest topics for future learning forums and conversations. Many suggestions were made, including:

- How to work effectively within trauma affected settings or communities.
- More about adaptive program design and developmental evaluation informed by practitioners and how this can be supported by the government.
- How do we get governments to provide more public access to data to inform community decision making?
- Creating safe spaces to navigate conflict including hearing accounts of people’s experiences of how they managed and came away from hard conversations - positively or not.
- Innovative governance ideas including exploring Western-style covenants and traditional governance working together.
- How to get governments to build into service delivery contracts accountability back to the community and local decision makers?
- Bring more traditional Aboriginal models of practice.
- Decolonizing practice – how to do it?
- Lost conversations – having more of these.
- The realities for Aboriginal people in ‘participating’ including external expectations vs local realities.
- Understanding the spiritual and cultural paradigm that Aboriginal people come from.
- Sharing stories of mistakes and failures that led to positive change (or not) and what we can learn.
- How to energize communities to be more central to the process.
- Best practice partnering between non-Aboriginal NGOs and Aboriginal organisations.
- “To exit or not to exit” – theory and practice including how to build exit strategies into funding agreements.
- Monitoring and evaluation models that align with community and government.
- Improving workforce development and worker wellbeing for frontline community development staff.
- Strategies for understanding and working with complexity in communities (drawing on adaptive leadership principles).
- Having an accessible repository (e.g. website or eBook) of case studies of effective development practice.
- Developing an online platform/blog/clearinghouse for sharing ideas and developments.
- Establishment of an NT or Alice Springs Community of Practice.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Ms Kumalie Riley who welcomed forum participants to country.

The Arrernte people on whose land we met.

The Forum organising committee being staff from Aboriginal Peak Organisations of NT, Northern Land Council, Central Land Council, Fred Hollows Foundation, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands Empowered Communities, Office of Aboriginal Affairs, Department of The Chief Minister Northern Territory Government, Caritas Australia and World Vision Australia.

Priscilla Atkins, CEO of the North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency (APO NT member), who co-facilitated this forum with Jane Holden of World Vision Australia.

Forum report authors: Simon Zavros-Orr and Jane Holden, World Vision Australia.

The forum's financial sponsors who included:

- The Northern Territory Government
- The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
- Caritas Australia
- The Fred Hollows Foundation
- World Vision Australia

FURTHER INFORMATION

For information about ACFID, visit www.acfid.asn.au or email main@acfid.asn.au

For more about the ACFID Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community of Practice, contact the Convenors:
Carl O'Sullivan carlo@caritas.org.au
Keren Winterford Keren.Winterford@uts.edu.au

**The Fred Hollows
Foundation**



World Vision



