



STORIES OF CHANGE THROUGH EFFECTIVE DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE

ACFID Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community of Practice

2016 FORUM SUMMARY REPORT





Punmu community.

Photo: Jo Maloney, World Vision Australia

ABOUT THE FORUM

On 21st–22nd November 2016, the ACFID Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community of Practice hosted a 1½ day learning forum in Canberra entitled *Stories of Change through Effective Development Practice*.

The forum explored successful community-led development processes around Australia, where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and their partners are putting principles of effective development into practice and achieving outcomes. It was an opportunity to hear from communities about their success stories.

WHY A FORUM?

A different approach to engagement is required to address the complex multidimensional challenges faced by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Much has already been documented around the limitations of engagement at the 'inform/consult' end of the participation spectrum as described by the International Association for Public Participation and the value of moving towards the 'collaboration/ empowerment' end of this spectrum. There are now many voices joining together, calling for more meaningful engagement, policy frameworks and Indigenous-led solutions that respect local understanding of the complexity of issues in communities.

The forum brought together development practitioners, Indigenous communities and government representatives in a collaborative space to build on existing knowledge, experience and learning to foster effective development practice in Australia. The venue was provided by the Indigenous Affairs Group of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C) in order to facilitate networking between PM&C staff and members of the Community of Practice.

ABOUT THE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

The Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) is an independent national association of Australian non-government organisations (NGOs) working in the field of aid and development. Whilst its main focus is international development, one of the Communities of Practice it hosts, seeks to apply ACFID Development Principles to the Australian context.

The Community of Practice began in 2007 as a Working Group of ACFID in response to increasing interest between ACFID members to share and learn effective community development approaches in working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities. It transitioned to a Community of Practice in 2015. The ACFID Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community of Practice has around 25 active members, with the Canberra forum being one of its major initiatives for 2016.

PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE

Much of the forum discussion was underpinned by the ACFID Practice Note: *Effective Development Practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities*. The Practice Note aligns with the principles for effective development practice under the ACFID Code of Conduct and with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The practice note documents 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 & 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.

FORUM SESSIONS

Ninety people participated in the forum. A 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 program provided a mix of sessions that were focussed on presentations and others on small table discussions on issues of interest. Presenters at the 2016 forum included:

SPEAKERS	TOPIC
<p>Rod Little National Congress of Australia's First Peoples</p>	<p>Setting the Scene</p> <p>Rod provided a brief overview of some issues that led to the forum and background to the Redfern Statement. This June 2016 statement was led or endorsed by a wide range of Indigenous and other organisations and calls on the Commonwealth government to undertake a broad range of initiatives to support self-determination. One of these is committing to the funding of the <i>National Congress</i> www.nationalcongress.com.au/about-us/redfern-statement</p>
<p>Rod Little National Congress of Australia's First Peoples</p> <p>Geoff Richardson Department of the Prime Minister & Cabinet</p> <p>Gerry Moore Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care</p>	<p>Achieving Systemic Change- how to enable a development approach in Indigenous Affairs.</p> <p>Three long time advocates for Indigenous self-determination led a panel discussion on some of the key steps that need to be taken to progress a development approach, drawing on perspectives of three organisations and audience questions.</p> <p>The conversation tracked major themes in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues relating to developmental practice as well as outlined the Family Matters Campaign.</p>
<p>Participants from the Martu Leaders Program together with support staff from Kanyirninpa Jukurrpa (KJ) and World Vision Australia</p>	<p>Martu Leadership Program</p> <p>Martu people from the Pilbara region in WA have participated in the development of this innovative and successful program. Participants gain skills to operate successfully in two worlds whilst learning to manage Aboriginal organisations and participate in collaborative community leadership. www.kj.org.au/leadership</p>
<p>Lynda Edwards Centacare</p> <p>John Lochowiak National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council</p>	<p>Caritas and Community Joint Statement on Subsidiarity</p> <p>The presenters shared a joint statement on subsidiarity applicable to an indigenous context and explored how this can drive policy making and service delivery in a regional NSW context.</p>
<p>Dr Janet Hunt Australian National University</p> <p>Dr Danielle Campbell Northern Land Council</p>	<p>Translating Aboriginal land rights into development outcomes.</p> <p>This joint presentation sets out factors contributing to the Central Land Council's successful Community Development Program www.clc.org.au/files/pdf/Translating_Aboriginal_Land_Rights_Into_Development_Outcomes.pdf</p>
<p>Dianne Hawgood Empowered Communities</p> <p>David Wirken Aarnja Aboriginal Regional Body</p>	<p>Development of the Empowered Communities initiative</p> <p>Empowered Communities is an Indigenous reform agenda developed with extensive national community consultation over several years and summarised in a 2015 proposal to government. Dianne outlined the current state of the <i>Empowered Communities initiative</i> www.empoweredcommunities.org.au. Aarnja is the backbone organisation for Empowered Communities across the West and Central Kimberley and its CEO David Wirken spoke about the importance of quality partnerships between stakeholders supporting community led initiatives.</p>

THEMES

A number of themes emerged from presentations and group conversations throughout the forum. Some of the most significant of these themes are briefly captured here.

MODELS FOR ENGAGING WITH REMOTE COMMUNITIES

Governments in Australia have generally utilised service delivery models to deliver social services. They typically provide a simple, transactional approach characterised by short service timeframes, clear deliverables and effective targeting of individual recipients.

There is a growing recognition, however, of the shortcomings of service delivery models as a means of addressing complex social problems, particularly in the context of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Where service delivery models fail, some common contributing factors include:

- lack of alignment between services and community needs/priorities
- service providers not well integrated into the community being supported
- lack of coordination between services
- failure to address systemic or community wide issues.

A range of alternative and related approaches have been considered for supporting remote communities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities more generally. Place-based and collective impact models typically refer to approaches that improve coordination of support services, reducing inefficiency and better addressing systemic issues. Whilst such approaches have merit, the emphasis of speakers at this forum was on two other related approaches, which build social capital and devolve decision making power.

At its simplest, **Community Development** refers to a process where community members come together to take collective action and generate solutions to common problems and in doing so develop social capital and resilience. Such projects can often empower community members who individually have the least autonomy and influence.

Community development projects in Australia are mostly initiated by charitable and community organisations that are more comfortable than governments with the long timeframes and qualitative outcomes of these projects. Forum speakers including Lynda Edwards (*Centacare*), David Wirken (Aarnja) and Peter Johnson and Sue Davenport (Kanyirninpa Jukurrpa) gave powerful examples of the social change that can be achieved through well formulated community development projects.

There is also an extensive, diverse and rich international community development tradition which a range of forum participants observed could be applied to Australian contexts. International NGOs, ACFID and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade are well-positioned to facilitate dialogue and exchange between international community development actors, indigenous peoples and the Indigenous Australian context. Staff from the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet advised that their Department is also examining the applicability of community development principles and international development programming and funding frameworks to its work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

Community Led Decision Making and **Subsidiarity** are examples of approaches for devolving decision making to communities, and hence empowering them to have greater autonomy and control of their own futures. Subsidiarity is the principle that social and political issues should be dealt with at the local level most consistent with their resolution. Whilst the term originated in the Catholic Church, it is equally applicable to other contexts such as government decision making and implies and promotes community led decision making. The statement on subsidiarity jointly made by Caritas and a suite of Indigenous and other organisations observes that:

Subsidiarity compels us to realise that the people closest to, and most affected by, the issues are the ones best placed to address them, with the help of the Government...

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities throughout Australia continue to strongly advocate for greater autonomy with respect to decisions affecting their communities, and discussion at this forum emphasised how critical the impetus for change is to achieve sustainable long term impact for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. There are many initiatives and coalitions supporting this move towards self-determination including:

- Redfern Statement
- Family Matters Campaign
- Empowered Communities initiative
- NSW OCHRE Plan including Local Decision Making and Connected Communities
- Work of the Kimberley Institute in Western Australia.
- Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory Partnership Principles for NGOs
- The work of many communities and NGOs partnering together to support community led projects.

Communities need to be supported to have the skills, resources, governance structures and longevity of funding that are precursors to successful transitions towards community led decision making. All of the sessions at the forum reinforced the principle and importance of community led decision making in different contexts.

The New Zealand government commissioned a useful literature review regarding the efficacy of government sponsored community development and place based initiatives.

FLEXIBLE PROJECT DESIGN AND ACTION LEARNING

Flexible design and action learning refers to developmental approaches that encompass the evolution of project design through project implementation, potentially ending with outcomes not readily foreseeable at project commencement. A closely related concept is Participatory Action Research, which is an iterative, emergent approach to designing projects which include a research objective. Typically these approaches are used to accommodate situations of imperfect knowledge, where early outcomes inform later project stages.

The forum illustrated how successful projects can encompass flexible and action learning design processes and in doing so value local knowledge and participants aspirations and experiences of a program. The Martu leadership program is highly significant and successful by the standards of both the community and external evaluators. Yet no one at the start of that program would have entirely predicted the path of its evolution. The project was led by the community, progressed at the pace dictated by the community, was focused on doing as distinct from planning, and adopted a design characterised by following the energy or resonance in what community members were saying. As speakers from Kanyirninpa Jukurrpa (KJ) illustrated, flexible project design processes do not imply a lack of rigour or of accountability, as this was a key element of KJ's partnership with NGO World Vision Australia. The project involved rigorous action learning processes and informal and formal routines of critical reflection, which supported more effective project implementation and achievement of outcomes.

When you find the resonance in a project, things work well

The Martu leadership program provides another important lesson: Culture informs Method. 'Mainstream' interpretations of culture tend to be limited to the outward markings of what differentiates one 'culture' from another. Whilst these are important, deeper engagement can reveal that even basic values and world views can differ markedly between communities. In fact, the cultural divide between some remote Aboriginal communities and mainstream Australia is much wider than the divide between aid worker and participant community in most international aid projects. The design of the Martu leadership program is profoundly influenced by the specifics of Martu culture that at best will only be partially understood by external community development professionals, even where they have a long history of working with that community.

These issues present challenges for prospective funders of any remote community projects. How do you evaluate the relative merits of projects if you don't know the intended outputs? What performance measures can one use? How do you assess and ensure project rigour, structure and planning? The forum prompted much discussion on questions like these and provided signposts for some of the answers which are highlighted through this report. Some other learnings from the forum included:

- Build relationships and consult with communities well before discussing the specifics of any project funding. Identify existing community resources (including people) and resolve how to support them. Adopt a place-based approach, considering not just individual projects but the breadth of activities in a community and how they work together. It may be warranted to fund the design process not just from the start of any project or service.
- Develop multiple personal connections with community organisations to support resilience to staffing changes within either organisation.
- If it appears difficult to specify performance indicators for an emergently designed project, perhaps there needs to be a focus on broader outcomes (eg development of social capital and community engagement) as distinct from specific quantitative outputs.
- Reconsider how success is being defined and accountability back to community maintained. For example, consider the applicability of using report cards on community perceptions of the value of a project as a performance indicator.
- Take a two-way learning approach; both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people need to learn more, shift thinking and collaborate.

DEVELOPMENTAL ASSESSMENT, MONITORING AND EVALUATION TOOLS

There was considerable interest among forum participants regarding how governments might evaluate and monitor community led or community development projects. There was seen to be a need to develop new evaluation and funding allocation tools for projects that adopt an emergent design.

There is also perceived to be a tension between the need to justify government spending on programs by collecting standardised quantitative data/indicators (eg Closing the gap indicators) and the need to incorporate the viewpoints of 'service-recipients' or those people benefiting from a program. Internal community driven measures may be harder to define quantitatively or to compare between projects but are important to community led projects. This tension is exacerbated by criticism that has recently been levelled at government regarding the small number of programs within Indigenous Affairs that have been evaluated.

Another thread to discussion was the importance of rewarding transparency; documenting failures and learning from them as well as from successes. The importance of evaluating processes as well as outcomes was discussed, as well as the need to be accountable to people on the ground with reports tailored to community stakeholders and community based measures of project success.

Some forum participants spoke of working with the evaluation community on a long-term strategy for Indigenous people to take leadership in evaluation of projects affecting their communities and telling more powerful stories of project reach and impact.

EXTENDED PROJECT TIME FRAMES

There was wide support for longer term project timeframes and the need to secure project continuity that extends well beyond the span of political cycles. One element of this was the need to inform community and political debate so that successful initiatives are protected from the corrosive effects of frequent and sometimes contradictory policy changes. This may require the establishment of funding agreements that, subject to satisfactory performance, commit governments for at least five years and potentially longer.

SYSTEMIC CHANGE

There were panel and table discussions that canvassed some of the key aspects needing to change within Australian policy frameworks to enable an Indigenous community development approach, including:

- Bipartisan support & political will for long term policy directives (10+ years is needed).
- Involving Indigenous people and peak organisations in determining new Government policy directives, to bring greater focus to individual and community transformation rather than transactional policies and programs.
- Government funding allocation mechanisms, accountability and evaluation tools that can accommodate and support long term and flexible community led development programming.
- Internal alignment of Government efforts from central offices through to regions.
- Increased awareness and learning more about community development practice (both within government and within the sector).
- Embedding development practice frameworks and tools into policy directives and capacity building initiatives.

Some discussion on how this might be achieved:

- Using UN Sustainable Development Goals as a lever for a whole of government approach and embedding a development approach into policy.
- Engaging whole of government, not just the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (given the majority of government funds for Indigenous Australians is administered by other departments outside of the Indigenous Advancement Strategy).
- Supporting national campaigns and initiatives calling for or demonstrating effective development.
- Encouraging NGOs & service delivery agencies to not compete with Indigenous organisations.
- Community of Practices to draw in and disseminate more stories of how systems are administering large amounts of funding but still allowing flexible design processes that are community led, and how community led processes are achieving impacts.
- Promoting Reconciliation actions.

COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Throughout the forum there were numerous conversations about building an ongoing dialogue around development issues between government, NGOs and communities. A number of suggestions were made during the forum, including:

- Are there opportunities to collaborate with the Commonwealth government and facilitate more learning events? For example, regional forums that include PM&C regional networks and relevant PM&C Canberra based staff together with local Aboriginal organisational and community representatives and NGO representatives.
- What role can ACFID and ACFID members play to promote the efficacy of the community development approach?

The ACFID Community of Practice will give further consideration as to how it can support ongoing learning and collaboration throughout 2017 and longer term.



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ORGANISING COMMITTEE

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FURTHER INFORMATION

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

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LOCATION OF PROJECTS FROM WHICH EACH SPEAKER CAME FROM



