



Effective Development Practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities February 2014

Prepared by ACFID's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Program Working Group¹

Background and Purpose of the Practice Note

This Practice Note aims to set out good practice principles for international non-government organisations (INGOs) and other interested parties engaging in development initiatives in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (A&TSI)² communities throughout Australia³.

An initial Practice Note was developed by ACFID's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Program Working Group (Working Group) in 2011, based primarily on the knowledge, experiences and learnings to date of INGOs working with A&TSI communities.

This revised Practice Note⁴ further builds on the knowledge, experience, and learnings⁵ of a range of INGOs, as well as A&TSI Australians and A&TSI organisations currently working in Indigenous development in Australia and on relevant and recent literature⁶. It aligns with the principles for effective development practice set out under the ACFID Code of Conduct⁷ and with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples⁸. Implementation of the Practice Note is supported by a companion document through the provision of case studies, tools and resources. It should be considered as a set of principles, rather than detailed operational guidelines, although it includes examples of how such principles could be put into practice.

Introduction

The Practice Note recognises that A&TSI people and organisations have considerable ownership of, and operating experience in, Indigenous development. Many A&TSI organisations have long ascribed to community development principles and approaches in their work⁹. In response to feedback received regarding the original Practice Note, input has been sought from a range of A&TSI organisations and leaders including INGO partner organisations, to incorporate this experience. The revised document also includes

¹ The Working Group was established in 2007 to build a community of practice amongst ACFID members that also work with A&TSI organisations and communities.

² Throughout this Practice Note, wherever possible, the term Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or A&TSI is used rather than 'Indigenous'. Where Indigenous is used it refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

³ It is recognised that every community is different, and there is no set formula when engaging in development initiatives within A&TSI Australia. However, this Practice Note seeks to distil a common set of principles to guide development practitioners and other interested parties.

⁴ The Practice Note acknowledges that different States and Territories operate under very different legislative and cultural frameworks all of which potentially have major impact on Indigenous Development.

⁵ This includes learnings from both successes and failures, as it is acknowledged that not all work in A&TSI Australia has been effective.

⁶ The Practice Note does not propose to represent the opinions of all A&TSI organisations. Rather it is intended to reflect the views of the A&TSI people who provided input into the revision of this Practice Note.

⁷ The ACFID Code of Conduct is a voluntary, self-regulatory sector code of good development practice that aims to improve international development outcomes. It includes program principles, such as obligations for effectiveness in aid and development activities, human rights, and working with partner agencies. <http://www.acfid.asn.au/code-of-conduct/files/code-of-conduct>

⁸ The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf

⁹ Refer for example 'Principles for a partnership-centred approach for NGOs working with Aboriginal organisations and communities in the Northern Territory' at <http://apont.org.au/attachments/article/72/210313%20-%20Principles%20for%20NGOs%20-%20Final.pdf>

evidence from recent development literature and INGO project evaluations¹⁰, and seeks to guide the practice of INGOs as they partner with A&TSI organisations to support and strengthen development efforts in A&TSI communities. The Practice Note recognises that Indigenous development practice needs to occur in a culturally secure and competent manner and as effectively and sustainably as possible. INGOs are most effective when they work in genuine partnership with local organisations, when they support rather than displace A&TSI organisational capacity and control, and when they commit to building capacity where appropriate.

What is Indigenous development?

It is acknowledged that the concept of Indigenous development may be interpreted and understood in different ways depending on who is defining the term, as well as the context in which the practice is operating. However, there are some key terms and approaches that are generally agreed as being fundamental to Indigenous development practice.

For the purpose of this Practice Note, Indigenous development is understood as a process where A&TSI communities and organisations have control of development activities through active participation and decision making throughout all stages of a project. It is recognised that A&TSI communities and organisations have the solutions and the right to make decisions and that they might just need resources to deliver. It is further understood that Indigenous development practice must be appropriate to the cultural context and to the needs of A&TSI people. And finally it is recognised that Indigenous development is not a 'one size fits all' approach.

Learnings between the international development sector and Indigenous development in Australia

Some key players have sought to learn from, and adapt, international development approaches to Indigenous development practice¹¹. Of course, these learnings can be reciprocal with lessons from Indigenous development offering useful advice to international development practice.

While the international development experience can offer some constructive lessons for the Australian context, and various aspects can potentially be adapted domestically, the Practice Note understands that not all development contexts are the same and Indigenous contexts in Australia are unique in a number of ways including¹²:

1. The entire colonial experience of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations, whereby 'outsiders' working in communities have been involved as both regulators/enforcers and as facilitators/development workers;
2. The sheer gap between A&TSI and non-Indigenous worldviews, and the resulting marginalisation of Indigenous peoples into a 'fourth world' context¹³;
3. The history of dispossession and settler dominance has in many communities, reduced motivation, confidence and a sense of control of A&TSI lives;¹⁴

¹⁰ Eight project evaluations of INGOs work with A&TSI partners in Australia were analysed to determine the common elements of successful Indigenous Development practice.

¹¹ Hunt, J. 2010. Partnerships for Indigenous Development: International Development NGOs, Aboriginal Organisations and Communities. Working Paper No. 71/2010. Canberra: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University. <http://caepr.anu.edu.au/Publications/WP/2010WP71.php> and CGRIS (Coordinator General for Remote Indigenous Services). 2011. Six Monthly Report: April 2011 – September 2011. Canberra: Australian Government, Office of the Coordinator General of Remote Indigenous Services.

¹² It is acknowledged that there may be other unique differences that are not commented on here. These are some of the key issues mentioned by stakeholders and addressed in the literature.

¹³ Fourth World refers to the world of Indigenous peoples who have been colonised and find themselves living within nation states.

¹⁴ Campbell, D. and Hunt, J. 2012. Achieving broad benefit from Indigenous land use agreements: Community development in central Australia. Community Development Journal and http://www.clc.org.au/files/pdf/The_CLCs_Community_Development_framework.pdf

4. The heterogeneous nature of most A&TSI communities which involves complex and often conflicting social and power dynamics and internal relationships. This can make it difficult to agree on common goals and to gain community-wide participation in a project¹⁵. Leaders in A&TSI communities are often overcommitted and can be constantly in demand by various organisations;
5. The number of government departments, Indigenous organisations and private service providers involved in servicing Indigenous communities leaves the institutional landscape very crowded;
6. Many institutions take a welfare, as opposed to a development approach, considering community members as beneficiaries or consumers, rather than as partners in development; and
7. Particular governance and decision-making processes that A&TSI communities utilise which can vary from community to community and require an INGO to fully understand and appreciate.

It is recognised that a genuine partnership between an A&TSI organisation and an INGO can bring mutual benefits. For example, A&TSI organisations can support INGOs to improve their cultural competency while INGOs may be able to support the capacity of A&TSI organisations in areas such as monitoring and evaluation and organisational governance¹⁶.

“If applied with respect, in line with what the community wants and with cultural competence, then the international experience can provide a lot of guidance.”¹⁷

INGOs can support Indigenous development by bringing an evidence-based approach to development, based on findings from project evaluations of work undertaken in A&TSI communities¹⁸ and productive partnerships with community participants and stakeholders, within a quality programming framework. Within this context, INGOs recognise the experience and expertise of A&TSI people and organisations.

Principles of Indigenous development practice¹⁹

The following key principles are brought together based on experiences and learnings of INGOs working in Indigenous development in Australia, from interviews with representatives from a range of A&TSI organisations around Australia, development literature, and from a limited number of INGO evaluations. They are written in line with the ACFID Code of Conduct and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

1. Partnerships and productive relationships

Develop quality partnerships based on trust, respect, honesty, equality and mutuality

This principle links to the ACFID Code of Conduct program principle of “relationships with partners” (B.2).

Successful Indigenous development practice is built on quality partnerships which, by nature, take time to develop. Positive, trusting and transparent personal relationships form the basis of such partnerships. Quality partnerships support joint development of program goals and of practice methodologies backed up by a genuine collaborative approach. Further, genuine partnerships seek to strengthen, rather than displace, A&TSI organisational capacity and control, recognise existing local capacity, and involve a commitment to working together to redress power inequalities. A mutually agreed exit strategy is important in the development of equal relationships.

¹⁵ Campbell and Hunt, 2012.

¹⁶ Mick Gooda, 2013. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Social Justice Report http://www.google.com.au/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&ved=0CDAQFjAB&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.humanrights.gov.au%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2Fdocument%2Fpublication%2Fsocial_justice_native_title_report_2013.doc&ei=v6_tUsjvL86WkwXE6YHYCg&usq=AFOjCNEFj21fb8ni5LX-c92REqqZdztuvA

¹⁷ Mick Gooda, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner

¹⁸ Most INGOs ensure that their work with A&TSI communities and organisations is undertaken either mid-way and/or at the conclusion of a project.

¹⁹ The Practice Note acknowledges that INGOs, despite all of their good intentions and potential cultural competency, are outsiders, as are non-Indigenous people who work for A&TSI organisations. This makes the development of trust and of fully understanding community dynamics, as vitally important.

Although capacity building is critical to effective partnering, Indigenous development practice also includes a two-way learning process between both parties to share learnings and expertise in order to build a body of knowledge regarding what constitutes effective Indigenous development practice. This can also include the dissemination of results and learnings to community and other stakeholders, and the broader NGO community. Transparency of a partnership where respective partner's roles are clearly outlined is also an important aspect of partnerships.

Ideas from experience for putting this into practice:

- Take time to establish a meaningful, long-term relationship and stay when you visit and 'yarn'. Don't fly in and fly out. Provide a level of security in the partnership.
- Show a willingness to support development practices that A&TSI organisations have developed.
- Where possible, partner with local organisations that have identified a need in the community, that are working towards responding to that, and are having some degree of success.
- Train and support local people in community development and other relevant skills to ensure that project sustainability.
- Inequalities can be ameliorated if an INGO is prepared to listen to, and understand, a local organisation's perspective, if there is the space and time for mutual learning, and a desire to progress together towards mutually agreed goals.
- Develop a mutually agreed exit strategy.

2. Participation

Ensure community participation throughout all stages of a project

This principle links to the ACFID Code of Conduct program principle of "accountability to primary stakeholders" (B.1.1).

Local participation through all stages²⁰ of a project is required for effective Indigenous development. Complete participation acknowledges the importance of self-determination and supports the process of empowerment. A commitment to self-determination actively puts the community in control of the development initiative thus increasing a sense of project ownership. It supports local identification of needs, priorities and accountabilities, sustains engagement, ensures a program that is culturally sensitive and utilises and enhances local governance structures for decision-making.

Space and time for community decision-making is important for genuine participation and appropriate support and resources can encourage effective development. Community participation and ownership will succeed best when a development agenda is determined by the community. Effective Indigenous development will ensure that a community has consented to a project before proceeding and will provide the space for community participants to withdraw from the process at any time.

Ideas from experience for putting this into practice:

- Start small, build trust and ensure shared identity and values.
- Listen and talk to a wide range of community members. Listen *and* hear.
- Enable people to determine their own solutions – no pre-set agenda.
- Ask advice before entering a community, find a cultural navigator in order to identify and speak with the right people. Maintain high visibility in the community.
- Communicate through graphic illustrations and other mechanisms to ensure information is readily accessible.

²⁰ This includes supporting community control in all aspects of the project from needs identification, early decisions and project design and implementation to development of data collection tools and analysis and interpretation of evaluation findings.

3. Cultural Competency²¹

Develop a proficient level of cultural competency amongst practitioners and their organisations

Effective Indigenous development practice requires a proficient level of cultural competency. Put simply, cultural competency can refer to the ability to apply a sound level of knowledge, understanding, sensitivity and appreciation of culture in a practical and appropriate manner²².

Cultural competency extends beyond individual awareness of cultural differences to incorporate systems-level change. It is important for cultural competency to be developed over time through a process that works to build the capacity of the entire organisation, and in partnership with A&TSI communities²³.

Ideas from experience for putting this into practice:

- Build teams involving A&TSI staff.
- Be willing to provide non-Indigenous staff and INGOs with cultural awareness and cultural competency training and make organisational changes where appropriate.
- Understand that there are different worldviews and ways of operating and that these might vary from community to community.

4. Place-based

Thoroughly understand the local context and history

This principle links to the ACFID Code of Conduct program principle of “quality approach” (B.1.2).

Effective Indigenous development requires a deep understanding of and respect for – and the cultural competency to respond to – A&TSI cultural knowledge, history, lived experience, contemporary social dynamics and the diversity of A&TSI. Community aspirations and development processes will differ in keeping with the diversity of A&TSI people, who have different languages, cultures and perspectives.

Communities also have different histories, in terms of both their internal community dynamics and external interaction with non-Indigenous peoples. Indigenous development practice recognises the diversity of individuals and groups within each community, and understands that individuals have different aspirations for themselves, their family, and their communities. Due to the diversity of A&TSI communities across Australia, it is not always possible to generalise the successes and failings from one location to another.

Ideas from experience for putting this into practice:

- Identify and work with community brokers.
- Spend time learning about and understanding the history, lived experience, contemporary social dynamics and the diversity of A&TSI communities.
- Spend time getting to know local people and understand the complexities of community decision-making.

5. Long-term engagement

Commit for the long-term

Development situations are usually complex and often require engagement that goes beyond short-term project and program cycles. Effective projects generally run for at least three years, and often, for six years

²¹ A number of cultural competency framework documents exist to guide mainstream service providers in working with A&TSI peoples. The leading competency framework documents include: The VACCA Aboriginal Cultural Competence Framework developed for the Victorian Department of Human Services; The SNAICC Working and Walking Together resource and the VACCA Building Respectful Partnerships resource (Burton, 2012).

²² Queensland Council of Social Service VOICE, ‘Developing a Culturally Competent Organisation’, Queensland Council of Social Service at <http://www.communitydoor.org.au/documents/VOICE/pplusingservice/topicguide/DevelCulturallyCompetentOrg.rtf> (viewed 20 January, 2014)

²³ Social Justice Report, Chapter 4: Cultural safety and security: Tools to address lateral violence at <http://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/chapter-4-cultural-safety-and-security-tools-address-lateral-violence-social-justice#Heading428> (viewed at 1 February 2014)

or more. This permits the necessary stability for trusted relationships to develop with local leaders. It also allows time to support the capacity development of local staff and organisations and provides for any changes that need to be made, which can lead to sustainable solutions. Long-term engagement can be exacerbated in Indigenous development, due to changes in government policies and programs, the constant influx of government workers arriving in communities, and the turnover of both government and INGO staff. Decreases in INGO funding capacity can also impact on a previously agreed long-term commitment.

Ideas from experience for putting this into practice:

- Ensure a time frame that will provide adequate training and support and hence sustainability.
- Develop long-term relationships that ensure some security in the partnership.
- Work alongside the community to establish mutually agreed structures of support for the long-term – i.e. beyond the five year time-frame.
- Be clear about length of commitment as early as possible and communicate this effectively.

6. Do no harm

Ensure an intervention that does no harm and builds capacity

Indigenous development practice is most effective when an INGO ensures that they have the capacity to deliver effective and sustainable outcomes and is aware of the impact that their presence will have on the community.

Effective Indigenous development practice needs to be strategic, measured and committed as to what it seeks to achieve to ensure it does not leave people feeling more disempowered than before the process began. Ideally, an INGO will work with existing organisations and the community to determine how it can add value. Where mutually agreed, this may require the INGO to support the community to develop new skills and thus increase capacity. Projects that include a high level of skills transfer leave the community with a self-determining resource and, as such, are more likely to be sustainable and successful.

Ideas from experience for putting this into practice:

- Ask 'what good are we going to do?' 'How can we do no harm *and* add value?'
- Establish regular partner and community feedback mechanisms.

7. Flexibility

Support project and funding flexibility and longevity of funding

Indigenous development practice requires a healthy degree of project and funding flexibility to enable community driven responses and to adapt to new learnings as well as to social and political changes. Community and other partners need to be adequately resourced and supported to make their own decisions about the direction of the project. The Practice Note acknowledges that INGOs may be part of the unexpected changes especially where they experience high staff turn-over, changes in organisational direction or loss of funding capacity.

Inbuilt adaptability in project design and openness to innovation is important as the answers to issues facing A&TSI communities are not always clear at the beginning of a project. Indigenous development recognises that the process, in reality, is more organic and incremental than linear and predictable.

The development process works towards assisting organisations to develop more own-sourced income. The flexibility and longevity of INGO funding and operations can be usefully applied here, as too can community own-sourced income such as mining royalties.

Ideas from experience for putting this into practice:

- Use a design approach that allows for unexpected changes or learnings. The log-frame approach may not always suit the Indigenous development context.

8. Strength-based

Build on community strengths and assets

This principle links to the ACFID Code of Conduct program principle of “accountability to primary stakeholders” (B.1.1).

Indigenous development practice is most effective when it focuses on the natural and social/capital strengths and assets found in many A&TSI communities rather than on weaknesses and deficits. This includes recognising and building on the assets, capacity and cultural strengths of existing local organisations and of community decision-making processes and governance structures. Strengths and assets which develop leadership in the next generation can be an effective strategy.

Ideas from experience for putting this into practice:

- Work with what is already successful.
- Determine what is in the community rather than trying to force an agenda.

9. Rights-based approach

Ensure that Indigenous development activities are consistent with respecting and protecting the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

This principle links to the ACFID Code of Conduct program principle of “human rights” (B.3.).

As described in the ACFID Practice Note ‘Human Rights-Based Approaches to Development’²⁴, Indigenous development practice draws attention to the discrimination, exclusion and web-like causality of disadvantage as underpinning obstacles to development. Indigenous development operates within the framework of the ‘United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples’. Article 29 sets out that Indigenous people have the right to determine priorities and strategies for their own development.²⁵ Effective development practice works towards the realisation of human rights, including capacity building for both ‘duty bearers’ to meet their legal obligations and ‘rights holders’ to claim their rights.²⁶

Ideas from experience for putting this into practice:

- Have an awareness of, and support, human rights when working with A&TSI communities.
- Commit to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

10. Cross-cutting issues

Commit to addressing cross-cutting issues (gender, disability, child protection, and environment)

This principle links to the ACFID Code of Conduct program principles of “addressing gender” (B.1.4), “rights of vulnerable and marginalised people” (B.3.2), “working with people with a disability” (B.3.3), “environmental sustainability” (B.1.6) and “protection of children” (B.3.4).

Good practice in Indigenous development reflects an understanding of different male and female roles within communities and works to bring about greater equality of opportunity across genders. It seeks to bring high quality gender practices to the unique cultural, historical and development context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander settings, where the roles of men and women are culturally derived, complex and rapidly changing. Programs are implemented with an informed understanding of their impact on the environment, and how natural and cultural values of ‘country’ are inseparably intertwined and central to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lives and identity. Indigenous development positively supports and includes people with a disability, and takes special measures to uphold the rights of children.

²⁴ Available from <http://www.acfid.asn.au/resources-publications/publications/practice-notes/human-rights-based-approaches-to-development>

²⁵ Available from <http://undesadspd.org/IndigenousPeoples/DeclarationontheRightsofIndigenousPeoples.aspx>

²⁶ The ‘active citizenship’ technique is a process whereby community members are equipped to hold service providers accountable while also reinforcing the important role the community themselves need to play to ensure that services, agencies and organisations can fulfil their responsibilities.

Ideas from experience for putting this into practice:

- Work with partner organisations to develop and commit to gender, disability, child protection, and environment policies where these do not already exist.
- Ensure that gender, disability, child protection, and environment form part of all project design and monitoring plans.

11. Governance Structures

Work with, support and respect existing governance structures

Governance is an important construct in Indigenous development practice. Planning for long-term sustainability is important from the beginning of a project and requires a sophisticated approach to engagement across all levels of governance (including family group, local, regional and state/territory), as the sustainability of local organisations is largely vested in its support networks.²⁷ Respecting and working with existing community governance structures as opposed to replacing what is there is critical when building trust and sustainability. Successful and sustainable initiatives rely amongst other things on robust A&TSI organisations with skilled A&TSI staff undertaking quality intercultural work in the longer-term.

Ideas from experience for putting this into practice:

- Support capacity building of relevant governance structures. Ensure there is adequate time and resources put aside for this purpose.
- Develop an awareness and understanding of existing governance structures and work with these.

12. Advocacy and A&TSI Voice

Respect the right of A&TSI people and organisations to advocate on their own behalf

This principle links to the ACFID Code of Conduct program principle of “speaking from evidence” (B.4.1).

Advocacy in Indigenous development practice works to bring the unique A&TSI voice and contribution to the broader community including through campaigns, media and/or by engaging constructively at the policy and legislative level. This can best be achieved when A&TSI organisations advocate on their own behalf, an approach that can support empowerment and ensure the ongoing voice of A&TSI people. Where required or preferred, and/or as a means of strengthening the message, INGOs and A&TSI organisations will collaborate to advocate on particular issues of relevance to A&TSI people. This is particularly applicable to those INGOs which have the resources and networks to reach the Australian public at large and government representatives.

Ideas from experience for putting this into practice:

- Resource and support capacity development in advocacy where required.

13. Intellectual property

Respect, preserve and acknowledge the intellectual and cultural property rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

This principle links to the ACFID Code of Conduct program principle of “portrayal of local people” (C.1.3).

Indigenous development practice respects, preserves and acknowledges the intellectual and cultural property rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including the unique voice and contribution that people bring to projects. Indigenous cultural and intellectual property rights are part of the heritage that exists in the cultural practices, resources and knowledge systems of Indigenous peoples. Indigenous

²⁷ Hunt, J., D. Smith, S. Garling and W. Sanders. 2008. *Contested Governance: Culture, Power and Institutions in Indigenous Australia*. Canberra, CAEPR Research Monograph No.29: ANU E Press; Martin, D. 2003. *Rethinking the Design of Indigenous Organisations: The Need for Strategic Engagement*. Discussion Paper 248/2003. Canberra: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University; Sanders, W. 2004. *Thinking about Indigenous Community Governance*. Discussion Paper No. 262. Canberra: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research.

development recognises that intellectual property is not static and extends to things that may be created based on that heritage. Detailed protocols are required for the taking and reproduction of images as well as the recording of stories and knowledge.

Ideas from experience for putting this into practice:

- Understand and commit to the protocols required for taking and reproducing images, stories and knowledge.
- Where required, develop a culturally appropriate method for receiving written or verbal agreement to take and reproduce images, stories and knowledge.

Further work

This is a living document and comments are always welcome. ACFID members collaborated to prepare a companion document to this Practice Note, which sets out case studies of practical implementation of these principles as well as suggested tools and resources. ACFID members are also facilitating an ongoing discussion amongst their respective A&TSI partners and other interested players to further refine this Practice Note, and to continue to strengthen the A&TSI voice as to what constitutes Indigenous development.

Other sources of advice (in addition to those footnoted)

APONT, 2012. *Principles for a Partnership Centred Approach for NGOs Working with Aboriginal Organisations and Communities in the Northern Territory* at <http://apont.org.au/attachments/article/72/210313%20-20Principles%20for%20NGOs%20-%20Final.pdf> (viewed 4 November, 2013)

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