



PRACTICE NOTE

Principles for Development Practice in Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Communities

Prepared by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Working Group

1. Purpose and context this practice note

This practice note aims to provide an analysis of how to implement integrated development approaches in Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The intended audience is international development NGOs with programs in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. This practice note offers guidance on good practice, based on past experiences and learnings to date.

International NGOs working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have formed an alliance through the Australian Council for International Development's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Working Group. While different International NGOs bring different emphases to the principles set out below, all agree that the principles encompass a general approach to how they have adapted their international development practice to Indigenous contexts. More broadly, International NGOs are actively working to professionalise development practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities by promoting processes, standards and forums in *Indigenous Development*.

Please note: Indigenous leaders and organisations have considerable ownership and operating experience in *Indigenous Development*. This Practice Note is not intended to represent their views, priorities and directions for development. Rather, it is intended to guide the practice of International NGOs so that they support and strengthen the work of Indigenous leaders and organisations with their efforts in *Indigenous Development*, and to ensure INGOs do not inadvertently displace them by their own activities.

2. Why Indigenous Development?

Historically, programs and services targeting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians have been based on a service delivery model, and largely sector-based and isolated from one another. They typically operate on a deficit model—focusing on presumptions of what is lacking in communities rather than what strengths are present. Attempts to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians to access government services to which they are entitled as citizens have been hampered by the failure to pursue strengths-based and integrated development approaches.

An unintended consequence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs is that as new solutions are rolled out, much good practice is swept away in the aftermath. To justify the latest intervention, each new wave of reform tends to discredit that which preceded it. Many success stories, practical innovations and productive working relationships are lost. There is a tendency for deficits and worst practice, rather than success and best practice, to dominate policy formation.



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There is a propensity in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs for practitioners and organisations to work in relative isolation, hold onto knowledge for individual benefit, duplicate efforts, over-consult with communities, and compete for limited resources. There is a lack of framework, tools, information and networks to guide practice, in what is undoubtedly a highly complex and challenging development context. There is a strong need to professionalise this practice, and to better network practitioners.¹

Through the 1990s, decentralisation occurred on a massive scale to Indigenous communities, but with insufficient corresponding efforts to build capability within local organisations. Community development approaches were variously implemented and trialled during the period.² More in their implementation than design, they often failed to adequately deal with the complexities of the internal politics of 'community' (favouring community egalitarianism over family and private interests) and external politics of 'regional governance' (favouring local organisations over regional organisations).³ This period was characterised by a massive increase in the number of community organisations across what became known as the Indigenous Sector,⁴ but with insufficient corresponding effort to build their governance capacity and operational resources. Commentators have argued how the rhetoric of 'self-determination' allowed the Australian Government to structurally disengage from remote Indigenous communities.⁵

Through the 2000s, the decentralisation pendulum swung in the opposite direction with government adopting a policy-led interventionist approach instead, culminating in the Northern Territory Emergency Response from 2007. Community-based organisations and community development approaches were largely discredited and support for them was withdrawn. A marked mismatch then ensued between government policy and its actual implementation on the ground, including a marked lack of engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community groups.⁶

There is need for a third space (otherwise known as a recognition space⁷ or intercultural practice⁸), that sits between these two extremes; a productive space where Indigenous leaders, government officials, service providers, and development workers can synthesise different knowledge systems and work out

¹ Dillon, M. C. and N. D. Westbury (2007). *Beyond Humbug: Transforming Government Engagement with Australia*. Adelaide, Seaview Press.

² ATSIC (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission). 1994. *Community Based Planning: Principles and Practices*. Canberra: Commonwealth Government.

³ Lea, D. and G. Clark. 1995. *Aurukun and Community Planning 1991-1995: Practice and Policy*. Aurukun, Cape York Peninsula: Manth Thayan Association and ATSIC Peninsula Regional Council.

⁴ Rowse, T. 2005. *The Indigenous Sector*. In *Culture, Economy and Governance in Aboriginal Australia*, edited by D. Austin-Broos and G. Macdonald, 213-229. Sydney: Sydney University Press.

⁵ Dillon and Westbury (2007), above.

⁶ Commonwealth of Australia. 2008. *Northern Territory Emergency Response: Report of the NTER Review Board*. Canberra. Available at www.nterreview.gov.au/report.htm.

⁷ Mantziaris, C. and D. Martin. 1999. *Guide to the Design of Native Title Corporations*. Perth: National Native Title Tribunal.

⁸ Moran, M. 2010. *The Intercultural Practice of Local Governance in an Aboriginal Settlement in Australia*. *Human Organization* 69 (1):65-74.



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innovative solutions to the 'wicked problems' of Indigenous Affairs.⁹ What is needed is a framework of practice which enables local actors to find sustainable community governance and community development outcomes, based on shared understandings between community and stakeholder interests.

3. Supporting Indigenous Development

International NGOs can support *Indigenous Development* by bringing an evidence-based approach to development, based on productive partnerships with community participants and stakeholders, within a quality programming framework.

The principles of International NGOs' support for Indigenous Development build on ACFID's Development Effectiveness Framework, which defines *effectiveness* as 'prompting sustainable change that addresses the causes as well as the symptoms of poverty and marginalisation; that is, it reduces poverty and builds capacity within communities, civil society and government to address their own development priorities.'¹⁰

All development contexts are different. Indigenous communities are typically unique compared to developing communities overseas, in three ways:

1. The number of government departments, Indigenous organisations and private service providers involved in servicing Indigenous communities leaves the institutional landscape very crowded.
2. Many institutions take a welfare, as opposed to a development approach, considering community members as beneficiaries or consumers, rather than as partners in development.
3. 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.¹¹
4. The sheer gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous worldviews, and the resulting marginalisation of Indigenous peoples into a 'fourth world' context.¹²

4. Principles of Indigenous Development Practice

Participation: Unless a shared understanding is reached about what 'development' means, policy and project initiatives will not achieve their desired outcomes. Community participants need the space to bring their preferred aspirations, agenda, development pathways and processes, which encompass but are not totalised by a mainstream economic development narrative. Community participants have to be engaged in problem diagnosis and strategy formulation,

⁹ Australian Public Service Commission. 2007. Tackling Wicked Problems: A Public Policy Perspective. Canberra: Australian Government. <http://www.apsc.gov.au/publications07/wickedproblems.htm> [accessed December 2010].

¹⁰ ACFID (Australian Council for International Development), 2004, *NGO Effectiveness Framework*. http://www.acfid.asn.au/what-we-do/docs_what-we-do/docs_ngo-development-effectiveness/ngo-effectiveness-framework_jun04.pdf [accessed January 2011].

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. Available at: caep.r.anu.edu.au/Publications/WP/2010WP71.php.

¹² Gallagher, E.M. 2010. Lessons from International Development for Aboriginal Australian Poverty Reduction. Masters Thesis, University of New England.



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including decision-making about planning, priority-setting, implementation, evaluation and measures of success.¹³ Participation includes paid employment of community participants in project activities, and implementation arrangements that are administered through local organisations. Indigenous Development conducts participatory methods in a culturally appropriate manner, using language and communication formats that facilitate genuine participation. Adequate time must be allowed to permit the community to process the information, discuss it among themselves, ask questions about what is being proposed, and to genuinely feel that they are able to influence the decision-making process. Projects should not proceed without free and informed prior consent, and community participants should be free to withdraw from the process at any time.

Cross-Cutting Issues: Indigenous Development practice reflects an understanding of different male and female roles within communities and works to bring about greater equality of opportunity across genders. It brings 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 the disabled, and takes special measures to protect children.

Sustainability through Governance: Governance is a critically important construct in Indigenous Development practice. It grounds the process to questions of sustainability: if there is not the governance capacity to implement and sustain the initiative, then what sensible basis is there to proceed? Rather than waiting until the end of the initiative, planning for long-term sustainability begins with the start of project activities. Indigenous Development practice seeks to be a catalyst for change, but where sustainability and responsibility is vested with the organisations and services that will persist beyond the life of the initiative. While it is at times necessary to provide direct support to organisations, until they are in a position to assume responsibility, this must be undertaken in ways that do not lead to dependency on the NGO and its staff. A sophisticated approach to engagement is required 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.¹⁴

Rights-based: As described the ACFID Practice Note 'Human Rights-Based Approaches to Development',¹⁵ Indigenous Development practice draws attention to the discrimination, exclusion and web-like causality of disadvantage as

¹³ Participatory techniques commonly adopted include 'participatory rural appraisal', participatory planning / action research, household surveys, and graphical methods using imagery and mapping.

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ Available from www.acfid.asn.au/resources/practice-notes.



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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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

Intellectual property: Indigenous Development practice respects and preserves 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 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.

Advocacy and Indigenous Voice: Indigenous Development practice works to bring the unique Indigenous voice and contribution to the broader community. If necessary, it builds networks of groups with shared interests and develops their capacity for advocacy and influence. In particular, it seeks to counter the dominant public narrative of failure with positive stories of success.¹⁸ Indigenous Development practice validates Aboriginal worldviews, and by doing so, strengthens Aboriginal identities. Reciprocally, this recognition of Aboriginal worldviews has the potential to transform the identities of non-Aboriginal development practitioners, and of the International NGOs themselves.¹⁹

Strategic Policy Uptake: Indigenous Development practice works to constructively engage with and influence policy and legislative frameworks, at local, regional, state and national levels, by informing their implementation in practice. Thus it develops productive relationships with governments, not just communities. If necessary, it builds networks of groups with shared interests and develops their capacity for advocacy and policy influence. It also works to disseminate results to community and other stakeholders, and the broader NGO community, to build a body of knowledge in what constitutes effective Indigenous Development practice.

Devolution: Indigenous Development needs institutional and political space for it to operate effectively. Flexible funding arrangements are required that permit local needs and processes to be community driven. The development process works towards assisting organisations to develop more own-sourced income. Community

¹⁶ Available from www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/en/drip.html.

¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ ANTaR. 2010. *A Better Way: Success Stories in Community Control in the Northern Territory*. <http://www.antar.org.au/abetterway> [accessed November 2010]; Finlayson, J. 2004. *Success in Aboriginal Communities: A Pilot Study*: Australian Collaboration and the Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. <http://www.australiancollaboration.com.au/research/index.html> [accessed December 2010].

¹⁹ Gallagher, above.



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and other partners are resourced and supported to make their own decisions about the direction of the project. The flexibility and longevity of NGO funding and operations can be usefully applied here, as too can community own-sourced income such as mining royalties.

Flexibility and Incremental change: Indigenous Development practice requires a degree of flexibility to allow for unexpected changes to occur. Communities are dynamic and fluid and unexpected changes and disruptions can occur affecting the flow and rate of achieving outcomes from a well-planned project. Incremental changes in a project is vital for projects to be truly effective, including high quality monitoring and evaluation processes and project reviews/redesigns based on learnings from successes and failures. Indigenous Development recognises that the process in reality is more organic and incremental than linear and predictable. The answers to issues facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are not always clear at the beginning of a project.

Stability and Long Term Engagement: Development situations are usually complex and often require engagement that goes beyond short-term project and program cycles. This is exacerbated in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, due to the rapid change in policies and programs and the constant influx and turnover of government workers arriving in communities. Indigenous Development practice works in ways that allow for long-term engagement in locations, in sectors and with people in pursuit of more effective and sustainable solutions. Projects generally run for at least three years, and often, for six years or more. This permits the necessary stability for trusted relationships to develop with local leaders. It also permits the necessary learnings to develop which can lead to sustainable solutions.

Partnering: In recognising the complex institutional landscape of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, Indigenous Development practice respects all stakeholders and seeks to integrate their diverse interests, with community interests at the forefront. This requires a sophisticated institutional analysis across all levels of stakeholders and nuanced negotiation skills. Key requirements in partnering are respect, equality and mutuality. Indigenous Development practice works to strengthen, rather than displace, existing institutions, be they government, non-government, or community organisations. In particular, Indigenous Development practice does not compete with community and/or representative Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations for limited government funding. Although capacity building is critical to effective partnering, the reality of Indigenous Development practice is that it is largely a two-way learning process recognising the unique voice and contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.²⁰

Productive relationships: At the heart of Indigenous Development practice are relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and trusted outsiders, which are based on respect that both sides have something to contribute and something to learn from each other. Both meet as travellers from their

²⁰ Hutchins, T. and M. Moran. 2010. Not Another Service Provider: Partnering for Sustainability. In Annual Program Review 2010, edited by World Vision Australia, 13-16. Melbourne.



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respective domains. Both must bring expert knowledge to bear on development problems. Strong productive relationships emerge from effective cross-cultural communication, sensitivity to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led development, and a shared understanding of development goals and approaches. To be effective in this capacity, field workers must operate with a high level of professionalism, be networked with other field workers, and receive intensive support and professional development from their employer.

Evidence-based: Using quality programming techniques developed in international development, Indigenous Development practice is based on a sequenced feasibility, design, monitoring and evaluation process, which considers risks, assumptions and indicators of success.²¹ In collaboration with community participants and stakeholders, outcomes and outputs are defined and programmed into a project design which sets out metrics for evaluation.²² This includes seeking out the view of beneficiaries on the *impact* on their lives, beyond the project frame, including unintended impacts.²³ Qualitative and participatory methods are utilised, alongside more quantitative methods. The framework is flexible and adaptive to learnings and innovations that emerge as the project develops. Indigenous Development practice is outcome-focused, but outcomes are not predetermined from afar and 'set in stone' over the project lifetime.

Strengths-based: Indigenous Development practice focuses on strengths and assets of individuals and communities, including cultural strengths, rather than their weaknesses and deficits. In particular, it often builds on the inherent strengths in natural and social/cultural capital found in many Indigenous communities. It is also drawn to the Indigenous leaders, parents and volunteers who are rising up against the odds. Role models and best practice are thus promoted as forces of change.²⁴

Place-based: Indigenous Development practice requires a deep understanding of the local context and history. While development principles may be similar, aspirations and desired processes will differ in keeping with the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, who have different languages, cultures, and perspectives. Communities also have quite remarkably 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 families, and their communities. Indigenous Development practice must effectively adapt the overarching policy frameworks to suit the local context, and then effectively convey these adaptations back to policy-makers and other stakeholders. Due to diversity of Aboriginal and

²¹ Quality programming methods include logical frameworks, baseline surveys, monitoring and evaluation indicators, implementation plans and resources schedules.

²² Participatory evaluation techniques assist community members to identify suitable indicators of success, to collect and analyse information to monitor progress, and to form suitable recommendations and suggestions to further project development.

²³ The 'most significant change' technique uses story telling as means to capture community views of broader impact.

²⁴ The 'sustainable livelihoods' techniques focuses on the range of assets (natural, social, human, financial and physical capital) that communities can draw on, as their basis of recovery or development.



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Torres Strait Islander communities across Australia, it is necessary to be cautious about the generalisation of successes and failings from one location to another.²⁵

Do no harm: When the will of a long disadvantaged community is stirred and assistance is proffered, the let-down occasioned by failure or the premature withdrawal of support can leave people feeling more hopeless than before the process began. Development projects can also adversely affect social cohesion, and even lead to internal conflict. Indigenous Development practice must therefore be very strategic, measured and committed to what it seeks to achieve.

5. Further Work

This is living document and comments are welcome. ACFID members are collaborating to prepare a companion document to this Practice Note, which sets out case studies of practical implementation of these principles. ACFID members are also facilitating a ongoing discussion among their respective Indigenous partners to further refine this Practice Note, and to strengthen Indigenous voice as to what constitutes Indigenous development.

For further information and comments, please contact the [ACFID Policy Team](#).

6. Other sources of advice (in addition to those footnoted)

- Hunt, J. 2005. *Capacity Development in the International Development Context: Implications for Indigenous Australia*. Discussion Paper No. 278/2005. Canberra: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University.
- Kowal, E. 2010. The Stigma of White Privilege: Australian Anti-Racists and Indigenous Improvement. *Cultural Studies* (in press).
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- Lea, T., E. Kowal and G. Cowlshaw. 2006. *Moving Anthropology: Critical Indigenous Studies*. Darwin: CDU Press.
- Oxfam Australia. 2008. Submission to Northern Territory Emergency Response 12 Month Review: Oxfam Australia. www.oxfam.org.au/resources/filestore/originals/OAus-NTEmergencyResponse-0808.pdf?q=oxfam [accessed January 2011].
- Pearson, N. 2009. *Up From the Mission: Selected Writings*. Melbourne: Black Inc.
- World Vision Australia. 2009. *Annual Evaluation Review: Interim Technical Report*: <http://www.worldvision.com.au/learn/ReportsResearchPublications> [accessed January 2011].

²⁵ International NGOs are also involved in a range of activities that are not place-based, including international study tours, advocacy efforts, leadership training workshops, and enabling Indigenous participation in a variety of forums.