Abstract

Research is as yet an underutilized opportunity for engaging Aboriginal communities in mutually beneficial relationships. Effective engagement of Aboriginal communities is critical to achieve relevance and adoption of development research. The Aboriginal Research Practitioners’ Network (ARPnet) was established as a mechanism to increase the engagement of Aboriginal communities in north Australia in research and development. ARPnet addresses some of the elements of the current critique of research in Aboriginal communities and provides engagement through much needed short term employment. This paper presents some of the experiences of the network and highlights some of the critical challenges for sustaining this model of engagement into the future.

Key words: Aboriginal, community, engagement, research, network.

Introduction
There is wide acknowledgement that effective engagement between researchers and communities is crucial to achieve relevance and application of research results (Reynolds et al. 2007). With the shift in engagement discourse moving beyond consultation and the participation of communities to wider questions of social justice, inclusion and sustainability, new and more robust models of engagement are needed (Cornwall 2003). Walsh (1995:103) advocates for turning the tables on current interactions to allow opinions and actions of communities to gain credibility and strength. Rather than adopt an ‘add the community and stir approach’, what is required is a reconfiguration of the rules of interaction between researchers and communities (see Cornwall 2003:1337). Ross and Nursey-Bray (undated:1) argue that engaging with Aboriginal communities must “go beyond the superficial” to ensure effective engagement.

Advocacy for greater, more meaningful engagement between outsiders and Aboriginal communities in northern Australia has grown in recent years. In Australia, the terms engagement and participation are sometimes used interchangeably and are rarely defined. The term engagement has been widely reviewed in the literature (Rowe and Frewer 2005). The absence of clear and consistent definition means there are variable interpretations and applications of the concept. An added complication in north Australia is that generally the debate over engagement with Aboriginal communities is sometimes confused with the debate over the need to integrate Indigenous knowledge in research. The focus of this paper is the involvement of individuals drawn from remote Aboriginal communities in development research.

Conceptions of engagement are challenged everyday in different situations involving communities and outsiders. While The National Aboriginal Education Committee (1985) has stated that research should be conducted substantially by Aboriginal people, very few models exist to guide policy and practice. Similarly, the North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance (NAILSMA) in its Forum Report (2004) strongly advocates for greater control and active participation by Aboriginal people in research yet offers little guidance on how that can be achieved. The report states that traditional owners want to train to be researchers and conduct research on their country. Foster et al., (2006) also finds that the Tangentyere council has shifted its approach from simply commissioning research to taking charge of the research. Recently, the Australian Government reiterated its commitment to enhancing support for Aboriginal researchers and research (Senator Carr 2008). The Australian Government acknowledges that involving Aboriginal researchers will strengthen the diversity of Australia’s research capacity and capabilities and lead to new knowledge, discoveries and applications. While there is widespread acknowledgement of the need to involve Aboriginal
communities as deliverers of research, the level and type of engagement being demanded, has not been easy to achieve.

The question of who should be conducting research in Aboriginal communities is a pertinent one. McAvoy et al., (2000) addresses this question in relation to Hispanic, African American and Indian American communities and concludes that real issues involved in such settings may best be resolved by engaging locally recruited co-researchers. Further they find that the involvement of local researchers may help reduce the resistance stemming from negative histories of research (McAvoy et al., 2000:486). Aboriginal people have been involved in research in many capacities in north Australia, but their roles in research delivery have so far been limited (Henry et al., 2002). The idea that research should involve local Aboriginal communities affected by it has been promoted in many areas of research (Smith 1997; Henry et al., 2002) and is becoming a very strong and persistent advocacy in northern Australia (NAILSMA 2004; Garnett et al., 2009). Henry et al., (2002) finds achieving the level of engagement advocated for has been slow. While there are many examples and efforts to achieve good engagement, the persistent question has been the extent to which existing efforts address the demands from communities to reposition research and development delivery.

Advocacy to increase Aboriginal people’s engagement in research has been growing in the Northern Territory (NT) over the last decade. Much of this advocacy has come from the education and health sectors and is known as the Indigenous Research Reform Agenda (Henry et al., 2002; Brands and Gooda 2006). Advocates of this agenda are fighting for a repositioning of Aboriginal people within the construction of research (Henry, et al., 2002:4; Umulliko 2004). The issue of who controls the research process and the use of research results are some of the critical questions facing research establishment in northern Australia. Lachapelle and McCool (2005) suggest the use of the concept of ownership as crucial in understanding relationships between outsiders and communities. They define ownership as “ownership in process” (whose voice is heard); “ownership in outcome” (whose voice is codified) and the “ownership distribution” (who is affected by the results). Hence ownership is the collective definition, sharing and addressing of problem situations by communities and researchers collaborating together. Lachapelle and McCool (2005: 282) note that the success in such collaborations is not about sharing only the research products, rather it involves learning, relationship building, interest interpretation and social and political acceptability. Involving communities in research produces demonstrable results, yet the nature of involvement in northern Australia is still limited and can be developed further. The Aboriginal Research Practitioners Network (ARPnet) provides a model of how engagement can start to address some of the key elements of research.
to enable a balanced shift in ownership. While, ARPnet provides a mechanism through which research be conducted substantially by Aboriginal people, persistent questions remain about how communities characterized by low numeracy and literacy living in remote areas can engage in research delivery? This also raises important questions about the extent to which agencies are willing trust and invest in this model of engagement.

**The Aboriginal Research Practitioner’s Network (ARPnet).**

ARPnet is one of the many models that have evolved to strengthen the involvement of Aboriginal communities in research activities in northern Australia. ARPnet was formed in 2007 with funding from the NT Research and Innovation Fund (Sithole and Hunter-Xenie 2007). The main objective of ARPnet is to create a loosely coordinated regional network of Aboriginal people in the top end who are interested, committed and have capacity to participate in a broad range of research projects using participatory approaches.

ARPnet consists of 20 Aboriginal men and women drawn from top end Aboriginal communities in the NT. The network is developed following recommendations from members of the Aboriginal Land and Sea Management Review Team (ALSMART) (see Saegenschnitter & Hunter-Xenie 2006) which was created in 2005 to assist in a project to evaluate community based Aboriginal natural resources management projects in the top end (Sithole et al., 2007b). Membership of ARPnet is voluntary after basic training in participatory approaches, but participation is fluid with varying levels of involvement by members over time (Sithole and Williams 2006; Sithole et al., 2007a; Sithole et al., 2008). Members determine their level of involvement and work towards achieving some level of complementarily between their other obligations on country and research activities as they come up.

The establishment of ARPnet resulted from several consultative meetings between researchers and Aboriginal people who were interested to get involved. These ideas were then used as the basis to develop and prepare a strategic plan which currently defines the framework for the ARPnet operations (Sithole and Hunter-Xenie 2007).

ARPnet members have experience as research assistants, liaison officers, translators and interviewees, or been in the presence of researchers. Many of the members have been involved in research through partnerships with researchers in government, universities and private sector and have acquired skills through these interactions shown in figure 1.
Figure 1. The range of skills that existing and potential members of ARPnet members have in undertaking different kinds of research.

Though there is a wealth of combined experience among members the network, it has identified a need for adjunct research fellows. These are non-Aboriginal people identified by the network to work in a supportive and facilitatory role. Currently, there are two adjunct members. One of the members is the trainer and mentor of members in the group and the other provides logistic and training support. The coordinator of the network is a conventionally trained scientist working for Charles Darwin University.

Members of ARPnet who are employed to undertake research activities, are employed on a casual basis and paid a daily rate for their participation through Charles Darwin University. ARPnet has adopted the rates set by the Desert Knowledge Co-operative Research Centre (see DKCRC 2007) as an interim measure while an assessment of rates is underway. Aboriginal Research practitioners are paid AU$245.00 per day excluding meals and accommodation as well as work travel expenses. On one of the projects funding was set aside to pay for services from practitioners for periods ranging between eight to ten weeks. The percentage of the total budget spent on the Aboriginal researchers for salaries was more than 50% of the total project budget excluding additional expenditure on travel, accommodation and other expenses. As well as the salaries, each practitioner is provided with work clothes and requisite equipment for the job.
However, the nature of consultancy contracts or tenders presents challenges for ARPnet in relation to existing job network arrangements and welfare payments. The rates paid by the project are determined to some extent by the welfare payments to members. For example, support from Job Networks may be restricted, as the employment outcomes are not full-time or periods of part-time employment are insufficient to meet regulatory requirements. Prospects for further and continuous employment are also often uncertain and can not be guaranteed as ARPnet mainly relies on a very uncertain funding environment.

The value of ARPnet members to research projects has been underlined particularly due to their presence in remote locations that are rarely easily accessible to mainstream researchers and most are multi-lingual. ARPnet members understand the local context and histories and bring meaning and underline nuances in the data in ways that external researchers cannot. All the members are connected through various networks across large geographical areas in the NT. Employing network members substantially reduces the cost of research delivery in remote locations for longitudinal studies and continuity is better assured. Membership is open to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who meet the criteria.

Under ARPnet, Aboriginal research practitioners have received training in participatory approaches and regularly receive additional and targeted training specific to client and project needs. Most of the training has been funded by the NT Department of Education and Training (DET). Over time these research practitioners have developed strong competences in three key areas:

- Undertaking participatory or community driven evaluations:
- Participatory community visioning and planning activities:
- Collaborating as researchers on research projects in remote areas.

Research practitioners are supported by experienced researchers and receive regular and consistent mentoring and support. Through each project ARPnet recognises and actively cultivates good relationships with other key stakeholders.

The network has created mechanisms for interacting or collaborating with mainstream research agencies and individuals. Outcomes from these interactions have been varied and instructive to the network members in a number of areas affecting their operations:

1. How to develop effective and strategic partnerships
2. How to address numerous administrative challenges related to Indigenous employment policy and support.

3. Steps towards establishing proof of concept

4. Managing members’ high expectations.

ARPnet is hosted by the School for Environmental Research (SER) at Charles Darwin University (CDU) through a host agreement signed in November 2007. SER is has been very supportive of ARPnet and has shown itself to be highly adaptable in adjusting to the often unusual accounting and administrative needs required by the members. SER employs the members under casual employment arrangements for the duration of the project. While employed by CDU the members are accorded the same conditions as other staff of the university under the similar arrangements. For example, they get authority to drive CDU vehicles and follow the administrative rigors required when working within a university system.

The Nature of Engagement through ARPnet

One of the key objectives of ARPnet has been to demonstrate that engaging Aboriginal researchers not only makes sense but is good value for money. Engaging in a number of projects as proof of concept is absolutely critical to the group. The main focus during delivery has been to assure the clients and the partners of the benefits of participatory approaches; of the value of engaging Aboriginal researchers; and consistency in quality and timeliness of our delivery on projects. Ongoing engagement before, during and at the end of the project has been the cornerstone of the ARPnet model.

ARPnet has provided members taking part in project work, with focused pre-project training funded through the Flexible Response Funding provided by DET (see Sithole et al., 2008). DET has already provided funding to the group, approximately AU$31 000 in total, through the participatory training workshops. The support from DET has been consistent and continues to underline the importance of supporting new and innovative ideas of engaging Aboriginal people in remote areas in northern Australia. Each project is preceded by ten days of training with concentrated interactive learning methods being used including, role playing, simulation and practical activities where members identify the overall objective of the project work, develop appropriate questions for use in data collection activities and become familiar with a range of participatory research methods. Approximately three kilometres of butchers’ paper is used during the training programs with much repetition until all the members are conversant with the methods and understand the task and their role clearly. Members are
assessed for competency at the end of training. This training focuses on elements of the project, planning for the project and assigns roles and responsibilities in the project. In the field, the research group receives support from adjunct research officers, but leadership and direction of field activities is supervised by nominated members. The availability of continuous mentorship support is one of the cornerstones of ARPnet. Generally this aspect of the project raises the costs of delivery by ARPnet (e.g. by approximately 14% on one project) and has been difficult to finance though it is critical in getting all members of the ARPnet research team familiar, comfortable and conversant with the issues in the project. This pre-project training phase also ensures team building and identification of needs for support while undertaking the project and introduces the team to the contractor.

Current projects for ARPnet have included both collaborative projects with researchers drawn from different agencies including universities and government departments. The key areas for engagement have been in Indigenous affairs where the group has participated in projects to monitor and evaluate current and ongoing activities in remote areas (Garnett and Sithole 2007; Sithole et al., 2007a). Members of ARPnet have been part of the research group involved in data collection and analysis for monitoring and some have participated in policy discussions and feedback activities in relation to their work (e.g. Indigenous Environmental Service Provision Policy Forum, 2007). Since completing this monitoring study ARPnet has been included in several tenders for other monitoring projects though none have been successful to date.

While many ARPnet members recognise the need to work in partnership with other stakeholders or researchers, most of the interactions are affected by the historical relationships between individuals and particular researchers or agencies. Some collaborators are viewed with suspicion and raise the levels of anxiety among the members. Some stakeholders are discounted as “gamon” and the members are reluctant to work with them even when good opportunities arise. Since ARPnet started there have been two occasions when projects have been passed over because of bad experiences in the past. ARPnet as a group sanctions which partners are good and which are not. Though there is no clear formal process, members discuss openly their past experiences and then the discussions form the basis for either an individual or collective decision to participate. However, these attitudes towards particular stakeholders tend to be individual rather than communal. Since ARPnet’s inception, 2 opportunities have arisen where the group has refused to engage on account of the bad experiences suffered in the past.

ARPnet has also been invited to participate in projects to undertake surveys on different issues pertaining to Aboriginal affairs. One of the projects undertaken in collaboration with Charles Darwin University was the ‘Impact of health professional mobility on remote Indigenous
communities’. There is a proposal to undertake projects for a government agency which is still under discussion. Though there have been numerous approaches, this is an area where the group has failed to raise funding.

One of the growing areas for ARPnet involvement is the area of visioning and participatory planning. In 2007, ARPnet was invited to undertake a visioning and planning activity with one of the top end Aboriginal communities (Sithole et al 2007a). This activity was successfully conducted and established the basis for new ideas for collaborations between ARPnet and the indigenous affairs agencies and resulted in a request by one of the regional Governments for the development of a community development framework. Since undertaking this activity ARPnet has been involved in discussions for at least 4 separate projects with the same agency. The head of the monitoring agency held meetings with ARPnet to discuss future collaborations.

Though prospects for project have been good, the group has achieved very little success for raising funds or tendering project. This year the group has been involved in at least four proposals/tenders for work that have not materialised. This failure to raise funds for projects has had a demoralising effect on group members and affected the way consultations are conducted. The original agreement was that project ideas be discussed and suctioned by all members, however as there has been little success, core group members are directly involved while the rest are informed but do not get directly involved in all the negotiations.

ARPnet as an Engagement Model in Research

The increased number of requests and meetings to find out about ARPnet as well as discuss possible opportunities is indication that recognition of the model is growing. The actual impact of the model is difficult to measure as the network is in its infancy and has only engaged in a few projects. Secondly, there has been little comparison made to date with other models. However, we can discuss the impact that ARPnet has had through analysis of the changing perceptions of members who represent a good cross-section of Aboriginal society.

It is important to start by defining the meanings of the ARPnet. Aboriginal people want the network to target Indigenous Australians though they do not discount the involvement by other races as adjuncts. The term research focuses the area of interest though there is no limit over what subject areas the group can be involved in. Members rejected the term researcher to define their role and agreed to be called “research practitioners” as they wanted to make a distinction between what they do, and conventionally trained researchers. The term practitioner was adopted as members felt they wanted their work to be applied and mean something to the
people who are involved. Therefore “research practitioners” defines both the domain or target of ARPnet’s operations and the approach, process and outcome of research. ARPnet members have been very keen to ensure that a clear distinction is made between them and the mainstream researchers. Members are interested in research but for various reasons, including personal and social circumstance, they have not been able to engage as much as they would like to. The most important characteristic of this group is that they are enthusiastic, available and ready to try this new role. The attitudes of ARPnet members towards research can be characterised into four broad categories. The first category consists of people who have been exposed to research and are curious or want to get involved. Most of the ARPnet members fall into this category. Some of the selected statements made by people holding this view are listed below:

- “I want to do it, I will do it myself, I have been learning about land management, there is so much more that I could do, I give it a go.” (Interview, 04 - 2005)
- “Sometime I look at them mob doing their research and I think one way is not good, it must be both ways together, that’s what I want to see.” (Workshop, 01 - 2006)
- “I am tired of being a research assistant, I want to do more.” (Interview, 08 - 2006)

An important characteristic of this group is that though the majority have been exposed to research they have little understanding of the process, function and outcome of research. Few in the group were fully conversant with the research process. This has improved through the training in participatory approaches. Some people in this category are often bewildered by the demands placed on them by researchers and feel overwhelmed or confused by the process.

The second category are members who are clearly disillusioned by their experiences with researchers and believe research does not benefit communities. Generally their sentiments are anti-research and they express a high concern about the need to protect Intellectual Property for Aboriginal people. Some of the members in this category see themselves as researchers on account of their wide experience. This group constitutes a fifth of the network. Generally members in this category are strong willed and have much influence on other members. They also hold very strong views about different types of research or collaborators and are more selective. Statements characteristic to this group include the following:

- “Researchers are too much humbug, we don’t get to do any work, too many coming, all the time. Who sent you and what is this for? We have been
researched to death! You mob want to come and talk, talk but it doesn’t help us much. We get nothing out of this, we never see anything, just humbug!” (Interview, 06 - 2005)

- “Some(outside researchers) you are happy and you like them but you not sure what they are doing, no one really explains about this ‘research’ thing my dear. Yeah I have worked with them mob, many times but only helping like. I work with different mob, but never feel I was like them mob.” (Interview 07 - 2006)

The anti-research feeling is not entirely unjustified and there are examples of bad research practice or collaboration. Generally, the conduct of research is largely conventional and adoption and application of participatory approaches is partial or in its early stages (Walsh and Mitchell 2002).

The third category of members can be characterised as opportunistic, exploiting the benefits of the network without really committing or believing in it. Within this group we have found people that are not sure or aware of what the project is about, what the research is about and most have not seen or read any of the related documents. Some do not attend all the training and make little effort even when appointed on the projects. The members in this category are not focused; they don’t follow correct research protocols or follow through with tasks and they are often absent from the job without excuse. Though there are few members in this category, their lack of commitment affects the morale of the other members. In any given project where there is a team of six there will be at least a member who falls into this category. ARPnet has put in place processes to address this lack of commitment. Using a simple ranking survey style questionnaire, project members undertake review of the overall project, the work that was done, how it was done and any opportunities to improve the future research work undertaken by ARPnet members. Members also assess themselves and each other’s performance and discuss some of the key issues.

The final group comprises members who have received formal training and have received formal qualifications and work as researchers as part of the mainstream research delivery system. There are two members in the network who fall into this category. However, this group often has limited time available to work on the network. Breaking into the mainstream research delivery has not been easy in spite of the upwelling of commitment, advocacy and goodwill existing among the research establishment. Reluctance to actively engage with ARPnet has primarily been driven by two factors. The first is the unwillingness to believe that community based Aboriginal people can do more than assist on projects because of their limited numeracy and
literacy skills. The second factor is ignorance of participatory action research and related methodologies. ARPnet demonstrates that academic qualifications do not always fully define the quality of research.

Generally, members of ARPnet want to have stronger roles in the research projects that they participate in as shown in the statement below:

“We have assisted in projects that we have very little interest in. Researchers do research in our presence, we don’t often know much about what they do or why they do it. Some scientists just say they work with Aboriginal people when they mean that they consult us about issues and sometimes they notify us that they are here, but they talk to the white fellows.” (Interview 07 - 2006)

There is clear recognition that capacities will need to be improved and that becoming a provider of a research requires skill and experience.

- “I want to learn, learn, I want to do these things myself for my people.” (Workshop, 07 - 2006)
- “This is very useful for us, make me think how I can use this when I get back.” (Workshop 07 - 2006)

Opinions of the members of ARPnet have shifted from the early skepticism and uncertainty. Some of the members have made the following comments;

- “Over the past year I have gained a number of skills from being involved in research through the Evaluation. The most valid, I think, is the knowledge that I have gained in being able to engage and interact with other people, both indigenous and non-indigenous, on a professional level. The opportunities that I have been given through this work have given me a sense of pride and achievement, which is reflected by my peers, both academically and socially.” (Interview 08 - 2006)
- “Learning about the methodologies for how to go and effectively work with people in varied situations has also been a valuable experience.” (Interview 08 - 2006)
- “The network of people I have met through this work has made Darwin seem a bit smaller, but in a good way, I believe I would now have no problem working with
other agencies around Darwin, which until a year ago were inaccessible to me.”

(Interview 08 - 2006)

In some instances ARPnet members acknowledge that they do not always know what they want out of collaboration.

Recently, an ARPnet member was asked to develop a plan for his ranger group and he made the following response;

“'Its funny, I knew for the first time what they were talking about and what to do. I will get the boys organised and get started on that. I might just need some help with writing if you mob can help, that will be good, yeah I think we can do it, we don’t need Balanda§ for that.” (Member feedback, 08 - 2008)

Members have been able to use some of the skills developed through ARPnet to undertake projects in their own areas.

- “I feel more supported when I am doing projects with ARPnet.” (ARPnet member Feedback, 09 - 2008)

Implementation of appropriately supported training with continuing support and mentoring was effectively undertaken with the visioning and planning report undertaken by ARPnet in late 2007.

Members feel they have benefited from ARPnet and have started to recruit family and community members. Several of the members have expressed an interest and want to enrol in literacy and numeracy programs. Some have put their names down for computer training while some have enrolled to complete courses in natural resource management. Some of the everyday skills like conversing in English are improving while note taking and record keeping are becoming important aspects of life skills being developed. There are still some key areas that need to be addressed like conflict and time management. This is a positive impact.

External Perceptions Towards ARPnet

Getting external support for ARPnet has not been easy. Even when opportunities have arisen much time has been spent by adjunct ARPnet and ARPnet members describing and promoting the model. At least 80% of the time has been spent describing the critical elements of the model which are:

§ Word used, within Arnhem Land, to describe a person who is not Indigenous
• All members are Aboriginal and includes men and women
• The group works in gender balanced teams
• Extended periods are spent in the communities
• Pre-project focused training is a critical feature
• Participatory approaches are used
• Adjunct members support the group in logistics management, data analysis and report compilation.
• Members speak local languages and have extensive networks

As well as understand how ARPnet works agencies have been keen to understand the performance of participatory approaches vis a vis conventional methodologies. For example, a recent discussions with the head of a monitoring division of a Government agency demonstrated the low level of understanding within government staff of the participatory methodology and how communities can be an effective agents to apply them (personal communication, 28 July 2009) ARPnet has thus become the basis for discussing application and adoption of participatory approaches in north Australia.

In one of the projects conducted with the Australian Government a comparison was made of ARPnet and another community focused research organisation. ARPnet was able to meet and exceed the targets set by the contractor and proved that in conflict situations, Aboriginal researchers have more traction than compared to non-Aboriginal researchers and that participatory approaches are very versatile.

One of the most important elements of the discussion about investing in ARPnet relates to the cost of the model. The model and process used by ARPnet in research projects has additional costs that current conventional research consultancy concerns do not have. These costs include i) the costs of ensuring gender balance which means the size of the team is large; ii) the costs of pre-project training and planning; iii) the costs of liability and insurance; iv) overhead costs from host institutions; v)and transport and logistics costs related to working with Aboriginal people. On the projects that we have worked on, costs of logistics have exceeded estimates. Attempts at streamlining the budgets in comparison with other tenders have generally undercut the model and placed tensions on the members in relation to confidence and commitment to the project. Generally, members have felt that attempts at cutting back on
budgets undervalue their contribution and the model itself. In most of the projects where ARPnet was the best suited to do the job, the anticipated success has not been achieved due to costs.

The limited investment in ARPnet is seen by members as a rejection of Aboriginal people and the approach they are advocating. Adjunct members of the network see the limited success as normal for an idea and concept that is clearly new in Aboriginal affairs in Australia. Members are elated when ARPnet is invited to projects but become disappointed when these discussions fail to produce working agreements. Further, members generally view the transaction costs for developing and getting projects as very high.

**Defining Engagement**

Many of the comments cited in the forgoing sections underline the need for stronger and more meaningful engagement between researchers and communities. However, definitions of engagement are varied in various situations where communities interact with researchers. Finding some common understanding of levels of engagement desired by members of the network was crucial to define the identity and modus operandi of the network. At an inaugural workshop for ARPnet, a visioning excise with members of the group resulted in a ladder of engagement based on Arnstein’s model (1969). This visioning exercise and subsequent conversations have led to the development of an aspirational engagement ladder for the group (figure 2).

---

Figure 2. Ladder of Aboriginal engagement in research
There are four rungs to the ladder, which use the language used by members to define different aspirational targets. The ladder maps out a trajectory of engagement from a situation where Aboriginal people have no say in research to one where the Aboriginal people have greater control and are in charge. Different sizes of the rungs in the ladder reflect the number of interactions that are perceived to be situated in different engagement circumstances. Many members of ARPnet conceive the majority of relationships over research to be dominated by the two bottom rungs of the ladder. While many researchers and collaborators profess equitable relationships with the Aboriginal people, local perceptions tend to differ and indicate that real equity has not yet been achieved.

While the members have identified full control over research at the top rung of the ladder they acknowledge that achieving this would be very difficult. One of the key concerns identified in the need to shift engagement to the top rungs of the pyramid was a candid acknowledgement by the members of the need to strengthen individual capabilities and increase essential skills in key areas to run the network effectively. Further, they identified other reasons which limit the scope for engagement by ARPnet including the following:

- ARPnet tries to address gender, age and other factors when identifying researchers
- The cost of ARPnet engagement with the result that in some situations, more than one researcher is provided.

- Conflict between members

- Remote locations of the member’s make accessibility a big issue adding to the travel costs in the budget.

- Limited numeracy and literacy while not an impediment to data collection can limit substantially the capacity for analysis and report writing.

- Some of the issues relate to cultural responsibilities which take some of the members away from the projects for long and often unpredictable periods hence the need to stretch out execution periods in projects.

- Low level of life skills provides some challenges and in some cases creates situations requiring constant and astute but culturally acceptable management by an external person in a position of trust.

The need for good governance in the network and consistence in high performance on projects were also identified as key targets to ensure the viability of the network. Members have identified a need for Aboriginal researchers to also develop appropriate protocols to guide their work in communities. Current protocols define how non-Aboriginal people engage in communities. These protocols could cover how members approach communities; undertake research away from one’s home base; how to deal with “humbug”; conflict resolutions; how one communicates across gender; race and other issues. One of the big challenges for Aboriginal research practitioners has been ‘jealousing from countryman’ in the locations where research is undertaken. Male members have found it hard to work away from their partners and consequently, periods of field work need to be short to accommodate family situations and concerns.

ARPnet is hosted by a conventional science institution. However, getting recognition for members within formal settings of science has not been easy. Members have been wary of the interactions with other scientists fearing that they are not taken seriously because of the approaches they apply and also because of their limited academic background. Thus even when there is an appearance of ease, comments made by ARPnet members acknowledge the persistent discomfort when working with the existing establishment as highlighted in some of these comments;
“On a slightly negative point, at times I have felt like I was under the magnifying glass from other workers, outside the project group, which may be due to their own inexperience’s of working with aboriginal people, or their own stereotypes of blackfellas being poor workers or untrustworthy. A bit rough, but it has been felt by others as well as me.” (Interview 08 - 2006)

“I didn’t like the way they (the researcher) order you about as if you know nothing, there is no respect.” (Interview 08 - 2006)

“Sometimes I worry about what others think about us. I am not too comfortable yet with them, that’s why sometimes I just run.” (Interview 08 - 2006)

The lessons from these comments demonstrate the need to create socio culturally appropriate spaces where Aboriginal people feel at ease. Generally, ARPnet has operated in relation to relationships fostered through individuals within agencies. These individuals have acted as champions and promoted the ARPnet model. So that even though ARPnet signed a memorandum of understanding with SER, the institutional relationship is regarded as secondary to the personal relationships that have been brokered with specific individuals in SER. The presence of one of the founder members of ARPnet at SER goes a long way towards making this arrangement viable.

An achievable goal and target in the ladder is to work in equal partnership. In this relationship Aboriginal people get responsibilities in project, competitive rates of remunerations which recognise and value their contributions and they share in the recognition and participation in all feedback activities and outputs. This focuses on the nature and quality of relationships required to achieve equity. So far most of the collaborations have failed to recognise and value Aboriginal contributions in these processes primarily because Aboriginal people “lack the paper work” and certificates recognised by the research fraternity.

Achieving control over research where communities say “us mob are in charge” is a big challenge for many reasons. One of the key reasons is the low numeracy and literacy levels of the communities which force a continuing dependency on adjunct fellows and outsiders in the network in roles of coordination, administration, analysis and marketing. Assumption of these roles by community based researchers presents many challenges due to, among other issues, remoteness and communications. Generally, members of the network regard the project proposal stages of the projects as “humbug” or a nuisance as there are high transaction costs with no guaranteed projects. One of the strategies engaged in the network to ensure continuity and
succession is to involve young people, however, getting consistent participation and commitment from young people is not easy.

Is Research a Real Opportunity for Engagement?

The tremendous amount of research being carried out in and on Aboriginal land presents an unexplored avenue and opportunity for Aboriginal people to gain employment through project work and to make valuable contributions to research. Research is an opportunity that Aboriginal people are yet to fully utilise. There is growing world experience and approaches that make it possible for Aboriginal people to become researchers or research practitioners (Garnett et al., 2009). Whitehead (2002) argues that Aboriginal people are best placed to deliver services within their own communities. Yet, in northern Australia the adoption of such a model is limited and reliant on champions in a few organisations. However, there are two related challenges. The first is to convince mainstream researchers that partnerships with communities through ARPnet adds value to research process and the research results. Whitehead (2002) identifies monitoring and evaluation as one of the key areas where Aboriginal people should be employed to perform a service. This is one of the key areas for ARPnet expertise. The second challenge is to convince the government and related organisations that this is indeed a viable employment opportunity and an important engagement model that they can invest in. Experiences so far indicate that while agencies are excited about ARPnet few are ready to invest. The hesitancy can be attributed to a number of factors including cost and the limited availability of evidence of good performance and delivery. ARPnet is a model of engagement which needs to be further developed and supported as there is high local commitment to engage and the opportunities are there.

The ambivalent feelings of ARPnet members about research reflect wider attitudes among Aboriginal communities and underline the need to develop new and innovative ways of engagement that more directly address grassroots demands. Populist literature is full of typologies of participation which can be used as a barometer of how much and in what form working together means (Arnestein 1969; Chambers 1995). ARPnet ladder provides a target for engagement which is difficult to achieve but can be a definitive vision to work towards. Experiences demonstrate that achieving full control over engagement in research is ambitious and unattainable under current conditions. Pretty and Vodouhe (1997) suggest that the challenge is to enshrine new ways of learning for researchers and Indigenous people so that the focus is less on what we learn and more on how we learn and with whom we learn. This they suggest implies a whole new professionalism, with new values, methods and behavior. This would redefine ownership of research in Aboriginal people and achieve the reconfiguration advocated
for by the advocates of the Indigenous reform Agenda (Henry et al., 2002). However, Howitt and Sutchet-Pearson (2003) find that the ideal for collaborative research remains difficult to operationalize because of the capacity for organizations to facilitate or even value equitable collaboration, respect alternative frames that might contextualize and value research differently in different cultural settings.

There is a need to find ways of doing research that more explicitly identify how local people will be included and benefit, thus ensuring real engagement of Aboriginal people. Many of the existing approaches continue to operate as if Aboriginal collaborators are assistants rather than ‘co–researchers’ hence following what Cornwall (2003) would call the “add and stir” in the community approach. ARPnet challenges the construction of partnerships between capable Aboriginal people and mainstream researchers. Whitmore (1998) working among the Mexican farmers writes about a need to “rebuild this house” as a challenge to look at and find ways of increasing levels of participation and empowerment among local people. ARPnet demonstrates how such a house could be built, though there are acknowledged weaknesses to the structure that can be strengthened in time. Similarly Sjorberg (1975) observes researchers need to formulate research orientations that emphasise the development of alternative structural arrangements that transcend some of the difficulties inherent in the present day social order. However, most recognise the newness of this role and have identified needs for skills that would make them competent and powerful participants in the process. The commitment demonstrated by members suggests that they are determined to explore and utilise the research as an opportunity for engagement.

**Conclusion**

Research is an important but still undervalued opportunity to achieve multiple outcomes in engagement with Aboriginal communities in northern Australia. While ARPnet demonstrates the presence of a high degree of local commitment to engage in research, the network needs support to demonstrate proof of concept adequately to gain confidence of the sceptics. ARPnet is reliant on a scatter of champions in various agencies who continue to push for greater and more meaningful engagement with Aboriginal people. However, achieving equity or control over engagement remains very difficult to achieve.

Though projects have been limited, members of ARPnet have been paid real wages and they have been involved in the execution of projects. However, valuation of Aboriginal contribution still remains problematic as formats and reporting protocols within institutions constrain current participation levels making real ownership of the research process problematic.
Trying to sustain the momentum and enthusiasm of the members in an uncertain funding environment remains a big challenge. ARPnet demonstrates that the type of engagement described here is feasible, but its achievement is determined to a large degree by prevailing research and institutional context controlling research funding. Currently there is no established national framework for working with Aboriginal research practitioners. ARPnet is a model whose time has come and needs more than a scatter of champions to make it a viable and significant part of the research framework.

References


Brands, J & Gooda, M 2006, ‘Putting the users of research in the driver’s seat: the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health’s new approach to research development’, Australian Aboriginal Studies, number 2, pp. 27-36.


Ross H. And Nursey-Bray M. Undated. Engaging with communities in natural resources management: Advice for agencies. School of Natural and Rural systems Management, University of Queensland and James Cook University.


Whitehead P.J. 2002. Inquiry into capacity building in indigenous communities. A submission to the House of Representatives standing committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Affairs.