RESEARCH, COLLABORATION AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

– EVOLUTION OF A PARTNERSHIP

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Abstract

The approach that is taken in engaging and communicating with Australian Indigenous communities is extremely important and may play a critical role in determining the success or failure of projects. Outputs need to have direct and quantifiable community benefits and often research is best integrated with other work to ensure these outcomes are delivered. Mutual respect, knowledge of cultural sensitivities, longevity of relationship, community benefit of outputs, ownership of ideas and participatory planning, are all components that will contribute to successful Indigenous community engagement. To incorporate these attributes requires collaboration between agencies and a long term commitment to contributing to real community aspirations. The Charles Darwin University and Northern Land Council are working together to adapt their approach to community engagement so that it integrates the research while still providing meaningful community benefits.

Key words: collaboration, livelihoods, trust, Indigenous, engagement

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Introduction

The way that research work is conducted within Australian Indigenous communities has changed considerably over the last twenty years. There is now a greater focus on research that delivers benefit to the individuals and communities involved, which is more easily able to be achieved when research is integrated with practical work. More recently there has been a greater focus on the sustainability of Indigenous communities, with a push for economic development within them. This paper examines a number of related approaches to economic development that utilise land and land based resources, recognising the relation between land and Indigenous knowledge and its importance for Indigenous people. Work conducted by Charles Darwin University and the Northern Land Council shows that engagement with Indigenous communities is a key element to connecting quality research with outcomes desired by Indigenous communities.

This first part of the paper will look at the background of the status of Indigenous people, their land and economic development in the Northern Territory. It will examine some of the approaches to economic development that have been used or underpin approaches used in the Northern Territory (NT). It will also look at economic development strategies utilising wildlife, examining how these approaches have arisen alongside processes of Indigenous people moving back to their traditional lands. The second part of the paper will look at the relationship between research and Indigenous community engagement, drawing lessons from the experience of researchers in the field. It will demonstrate how new ways of working, based around engagement, have grown out of field experience and are leading institutions to adopt new approaches to supporting Indigenous people to develop land based enterprises.

Background

In the NT of Australia, Aboriginal people now own 44% (approximately 620,000 km²) of the terrestrial land mass under communal title, with up to 10% likely to be added on completion of claims and related processes (Storrs, 2003). The majority of the 66,600 Aboriginal people that live in the NT (ABS, 2006) are living in either remote or extremely remote areas mostly in townships or out-stations which are on marginal lands, have very limited infrastructure and services, with very little employment opportunities or private investment (Altman, 2007). Options for Indigenous people to raise capital and engage in the market economy are few (Taylor, 2003), and consequently many depend substantially on
welfare or welfare-related programs such as the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP). Few other job opportunities exist, with the exception of the production of arts and craft (Koenig et al. 2006).

Many Indigenous-owned lands are relatively structurally intact and rich in natural resources (biological, cultural and mineral) but the ‘income’ or other ‘gains’ from contemporary landuses (such as the equivalent of royalties from mining, or tourism leases) have not always resulted in social benefits for local Indigenous people (Collins, 2000). This is evident from the fact that most Indigenous townships are reliant on government funding and services and Aboriginal people are the most disadvantaged groups in Australia (ABS, 2008). The poor socio-economic status of Indigenous people in the NT is further exacerbated by poor health, low levels of education, and social dysfunction (Burgess et al. 2005; NTG, 2007)

While Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory are becoming progressively richer in terms of land ownership as more cases are processed under the Commonwealth Native Title Act 1993, this does not seem to have translated into benefits for Aboriginal communities. Furthermore money alone does not seem to be the solution to many of the issues facing Aboriginal community dysfunction. An example of this is two decades of uranium royalties to people in the Kakadu area with no obvious benefit to the Aboriginal communities who received this money (Collins, 2000).

There have been many attempts to initiate economic development in Indigenous communities. This long history is characterised by an exceptional level of failure (Dale, 1996), mostly for a variety of geographical and cultural reasons (Young, 1988). Communal land ownership, remoteness, lack of infrastructure, the nature of kinship relationships, the approach to community development and limitations in the way the CDEP has been applied, have all contributed to the low levels of successful economic activity in Aboriginal communities. At a fundamental level, however, economic failure on Aboriginal lands can largely be attributed to the top down approach and an engagement which has not been one of partnership (Young 1988; Gorman et al. 2006a).

Many of the problems facing remote Aboriginal communities are systemic with no quick remedy. Federal and State governments are working together to change the model of service delivery to Aboriginal communities and this, among other reasons, has prompted a greater desire to initiate enterprise. There are a variety of State and Commonwealth initiatives to boost economic development in these remote settings (Northern Territory
National Emergency Response Act 2007; Gunya Australia 2007; Indigenous Business Australia 2007; NTG 2004). However, the level of support that the Commonwealth Government is prepared to offer community-based approaches is limited as many of these programs are run by people who are outsiders to the community with little understanding of the complexities of fostering economic development in remote contexts.

Internationally, there are a number of different community engagement approaches that have been used in Indigenous community development and poverty alleviation. However, the dimensions of poverty are wide and complex and the realities of poverty vary between regions, countries, communities and individuals (Cahn, 2002). One common international approach that has resonances with the approaches of governments in Australia is the Sustainability Livelihood Framework (SLF). The SLF is an operational tool which has been developed to assist work on poverty reduction. This approach focuses on people and their capacity to initiate and sustain positive change (Carney, 1999; Alterelli & Carloni, 2000). Various approaches have stemmed from this framework as international perspectives have changed on poverty, participation and sustainable development (Sen, 1981; Chambers & Conway, 1992; Moser, 1998). The SLF is portrayed as providing a more rounded picture of the complexities of poor communities rather than being based simply on understandings of measures of income, consumption and employment (Brocklesby & Fisher, 2003). SLF and the approaches that stem from it attempt to be more people focused rather attempting to provide needs-based, resource–centred solutions.

In determining what might be suitable enterprise development activities in remote Aboriginal communities the common approach (based on theories underpinning the SLF) has involved looking at the strengths (resource and labour) and the threats (sustainability, markets). However, this has rarely been participatory with enterprise ideas often being trialled in the communities with very little input from the community itself. A lack of ‘real’ community engagement and consideration of cultural factors has often ended up being the downfall of enterprise development initiatives (Young, 1988). Approaches to Indigenous community engagement are however changing and in the Northern Territory there are now many examples of more ‘community-based approaches’ where the local people have been given carriage of ideas and support to drive these community development ideas at the own speed (Ivory, 1999, Gorman et al. 2006a).
Some examples of these activities include small, scale, wildlife-based enterprises that the Aboriginal communities have identified as being something they were interested in developing. These include the domestication of native honey bees for outputs such as honey, wax, pet industry and pollination services. This is being trialed at Aboriginal communities in the Darwin – Daly Aboriginal Land Trust as well as in Arnhem Land. Another example is wild harvest and value adding of native fruit (Terminalia ferdinandiana) for the health and food industries. This is being done at a small scale by a number of NT Indigenous communities with some starting to become involved in value adding by making jams, chutney and cordial to sell locally. In the Kimberley area of Western Australia, wild harvest of T. ferdinandiana is at a much larger scale (in the order of 15 tonnes annually) with an Aboriginal cooperative being established and plans to grow this species in different horticultural production systems to be able to meet market demand (Cunningham et al. 2009). Another wildlife based enterprise that is becoming established is the wild harvest of reptiles for the pet industry. The harvest of northern snake-necked turtles (Chelodina rugosa), and subsequent induction and incubation of eggs for sale of the young to the pet industry has been occurring through Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation at Maningrida (central Arnhem Land) for a number of years and is set to expand and include a much wider diversity of reptiles.

It has long been thought that one of the most promising opportunities for economic activity on Aboriginal lands is utilisation of wildlife (Senate Rural Affairs and Regional Affairs and Transport Reference Committee, 1998; Whitehead et al. 2006) because there is an abundance of resources and that it will utilise existing Aboriginal skills and knowledge. Nevertheless uptake of these opportunities has been poor both for cultural reasons peculiar to Aboriginal people and for reasons specific to remote parts of the Northern Territory (Young 1988, Gorman et al. 2006).

Context

In 1974 Aboriginal self determination was described by the former Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Senator James Cavanagh as a policy to ‘lay the groundwork to enable Aboriginal people to take a real and effective responsibility for their own affairs’ (Young, 1988). One of the most important Acts in progressing Aboriginal self determination was the Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1976 (Commonwealth) which recognised Aboriginal ownership of land before European settlement. This Act was enabled in the Northern Territory through the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976. This Act recognised Traditional
Ownership of land and gave Aboriginal people the opportunity to claim back land if they could prove a continued connection to that land. The formation of Land Councils at the same time as these Acts allowed Aboriginal people a certain amount of institutional support to move from townships back out to their country, commonly known as the *outstation movement*.

Around the same time that the *outstation movement* began so too the Aboriginal Land Councils were set up to help Aboriginal people re-establish themselves on country. In the NT there are four Land Councils, the Northern Land Council, Tiwi Land Council, Central Land Council and Anindilyakwa Land Council. The primary emphasis from the NLC has been on establishing Traditional Owners’ rights to their country.

As more land has been claimed back by the Aboriginal Traditional Owners there has been an increasing interest in generating income from country to sustain Indigenous NRM and be less reliant on government welfare. However, until recently, there has been limited participatory planning with communities to establish the types of enterprise that they are interested in developing. The Caring for Country Unit (CFCU) was established in 1996 to support community based land and sea management programs as part of an overarching mandate to help Aboriginal constituents build sustainable lives on their own lands (NLC, 2006). There are now over 30 ranger groups and over 400 rangers employed to do this job. While the emphasis of these ranger groups has historically been caring for country using two toolboxes (Indigenous and western management techniques), there has been a general shift to include wildlife based economic development opportunities. These range from Payment for Environmental Service type activities (coastal surveillance, disease monitoring, fire abatement etc.) (Gorman & Vemuri, 2009; Muller, 2008; Luckert *et al.* 2007) to commercial harvest of bush food, domestication of native honey bees, commercial harvest of feral animals etc. Business development is fairly new to many of these ranger groups and, in addition to a need for funding support to get started and professional advice on connecting with markets, product development and complying with legislation, there has also been a need to incorporate research to ensure ecological sustainability, measure social and culture impacts, and planning.

It is extremely important for research to be linked with wildlife based enterprise development because it can help provide the empirical data and guidelines that can ensure development is sustainable. The quadruple bottom line approach, which considers ecological,
economic, cultural and social implications of an activity, can help support sustainable practice and these areas are often best achieved through research in conjunction with Traditional Indigenous Knowledge. Generally, wildlife populations can be harvested sustainably if harvesting occurs at the same or a lower rate than at which the population would otherwise increase (Caughley & Sinclair, 1994). This requires knowledge of both the existing population size and its dynamics over time and space (fecundity and mortality). Sustainable development requires quantifiable data about the extent and robustness of resources (taxonomy, population dynamics, and harvest thresholds), economics (feasibility, market demands, value chains) as well as social and cultural implications of these activities. Often research can incorporate Indigenous Ecological Knowledge to provide this information which is integral to the health and longevity of these enterprises.

**Organisational responses**

It is against this background that the Key Centre Tropical Wildlife Management (KCTWM) was started at the Charles Darwin University (then Northern Territory University) in 1999 with three years of funding from the Australian Research Council. The initial proposal to establish the KCTWM came from a diverse range of interests that recognised that existing research and teaching did not deal effectively with the critical issues for sustainable use and conservation of wildlife in northern Australia. The role that Aboriginal people played in managing natural systems and improved application of their knowledge and skills to existing and emerging problems were seen as pivotal issues for the KCTWM (KCTWM, 1999). The KCTWM played an important role in the NT as a bridge between organisations that would not necessarily have worked together. It provided a neutral base that other groups could work through and was facilitated through a careful process of networking and relationship building.

One of the research areas that was identified even before the KCTWM was formed was the question of what type of enterprises Aboriginal people aspired to have operating on their country? This question stemmed from some early informal consultations in east Arnhem Land with Yolngu people at Yirrkala in the mid 1990s. Their discussion about enterprise development identified a desire to base an enterprise on plant products. This idea was developed by the newly formed KCTWM with a successful grant to the Rural Industry Research Development Corporation (RIRDC) resulting in a 3 year project titled *Feasibility of local small scale native plant harvests for Indigenous communities*. The project started off
trying to involve communities and clan groups in east Arnhem Land, particularly the Laynhapuy Homelands Resource Centre. Despite numerous visits to the town and outstations nothing eventuated. Enterprise development ideas (such as cycad harvesting) that were identified as opportunities failed to develop. This was probably because a real long term connection between the researchers and the communities was lacking. Alternatively these ideas may have been too novel and the spiritual connections with certain plants too strong for them to be commercially exploited and leave country. Participatory planning was made difficult given the only benefit to the community was research that may have influenced policy and funding bodies.

One of the challenges confronted in this project was ranking plant products for their commercial potential. This was due to the difficulty in applying standard market based approaches which consider market demand and supply and cost per unit because most tropical plant products do not have established markets. This project devised a subjective ranking system of the commercial potential of plant products (based on cultural, social, ecological and economic criteria). This was only used as a guide (mainly for the researchers’ benefit) to discuss which species particular communities would like to work with (Whitehead et al. 2006, Gorman et al. 2006a).

This study produced some excellent academic outcomes in the form of reports, journal articles, and conference presentations. It was also able to communicate various aspects of Aboriginal aspirations towards enterprise development, Aboriginal values and measures of success of these activities, quantify the feasibility of certain enterprises, and recommend further research and policy changes to progress this type of economic development (Whitehead et al. 2006, Gorman et al. 2006a). However, this project was unable to take these ideas and assist in their implementation into trial businesses and therefore this work did not manage to improve the livelihoods of the people involved in the research.

In this particular instance the research was well intentioned and useful but could not be transitioned into tangible community benefit by itself. It was only recognised at the end of the project that there was no other institution that could take these results and build on them with the community to provide tangible livelihood benefits. This disconnect between research agendas as community expectations is a common problem especially if research does not build on existing cultural knowledge and allow local people to establish their own guidelines for community-based research (Smith, 1999).
It must be noted that this project developed in communities where existing connections and trust already existed. One of the partners in the project, an ethnobotanist with the Parks and Wildlife Service of the Northern Territory, Glenn Wightman, had very strong connections with the Nauiyu Community at Daly River and had worked closely with many Aboriginal people from this area recording knowledge of Aboriginal flora and fauna in the Daly River area (Lindsay et al. 2001). Glenn’s existing relationship with members of the community, specifically the Woman’s Centre, allowed the ‘active’ research to evolve in the form of case studies which were largely driven by the community. Another part of KCTWM’s work depended on an existing relationship with one of the central Arnhem Land ranger groups, the Djelk Rangers and the Bawinanga Aboriginal Resource Centre (BAC). BAC was already actively involved in wildlife based enterprise development and the rangers were involved in Vocational Education and Training (VET) through the Centre for Indigenous Natural Resource Management (now School of Australian Indigenous Knowledge Systems) at the Charles Darwin University.

As a result of these projects the KCTWM realised that the approach needed to be bottom up involving community participation and being driven by people on the community. We needed to have a connection with community to be able to find out what they really wanted. We needed to be able to work out what values Aboriginal people found important and combine these with ecological and market based information (and so fill in the gaps of the chain).

In recent years the concept of university-community engagement has emerged (Commonwealth of Australia, 2003), which provided a framework for the KCTWM to formalise its approach to working in the Indigenous communities of the Top End.

University-community engagement at CDU is framed around the development of partnerships that deliver mutual benefit (Charles Darwin University, 2008). The articulation of community engagement at CDU has allowed the KCTWM to examine its engagement with the view to increasing its focus of delivering benefit to the communities it works in. However how engagement is built, and how mutual benefit is delivered, are still significant issues for Australian Higher Education institutions (Sunderland, Muirhead, Parsons, & Holtom, 2004).

Community engagement has been differentiated from things like community consultation, community service, community participation and community development, focusing on the fact that community engagement is not a service for the community, but a
partnership with it (Wallis, 2006). This means that both the university and the community are required to reconceptualise their relationship, something that is not necessarily quick or easy (Garlick & Pryor, 2002). In the case of Australian Indigenous community engagement literature is scarce, with only a small amount of research documenting its particular nature. Examples of the literature that does exist focuses on the building of trusting relationships, and respecting Indigenous ways of knowing and being (Campbell & Christie, 2008; Christie, 2008; Department of Environment Water Heritage and the Arts, 2008; Department of the Environment and Water Resources, 2004; Sunderland et al. 2004).

Ensuring adequate engagement with Indigenous communities is difficult because there are a range of cultural, language and literacy issues that need to be considered. Engaging Aboriginal townships in the NT requires knowledge of the history of that area and how the people came to live in that town. Many remote towns were originally government outposts or missions and they may now contain clan groups who do not get on and whose traditional lands are not close by. There are certain people within a clan group who make decisions for that group and others whose role it is to manage and look after that their country. Different people have different totems which may restrict their ability to harvest a particular animal or plant. There are cultural taboos which restrict certain family members talking to and working with each other. Ceremonial areas may restrict access to certain genders at different times of year. For these reasons Indigenous engagement should be facilitated by a person who is familiar with the community and their culture and is often best done using participatory techniques which give the community the ability to have ownership of the ideas and to define the boundaries according to their taboos, aspirations and other commitments.

Engagement with Indigenous communities is most effective when there are existing relationships with that community and an established level of trust. An established relationship with Aboriginal people often involves an outsider being ‘adopted’ into a family group so that they fit into the Aboriginal construct. This way the community members have a better understanding of how the outsider fits into the community and who they are connected to. Community participatory planning is an interactive facilitation technique which tries to involve the local people in the process and strives to ensure social outcomes such as ownership, empowerment, community control and autonomy (Moran, 2003). However, the level of community engagement is often determined by the framework used by the
organisation doing the engagement and this will determine the time and effort that can be spent in engaging.

**Lessons from the field**

This type of approach requires a much better understanding of the endogenous drivers within a community and can only be understood through closer interactions with a community often over an extended period. This approach endeavours to take into account many of the issues important to Indigenous communities that may not be included in a ‘top down’ approach. These may relate to decision making protocols, aspirations, cultural taboos etc which may not be mentioned to outsiders who do not have a close connection to the Indigenous community concerned. There are examples where the SLF has been adapted to try and make this approach more applicable to Australian Aboriginal circumstances (LaFlamme, 2008; Davies *et al.*, 2008) but it is the level of engagement that happens within this framework that will ultimately determine whether an appropriate level of engagement with the community has been achieved.

Working closely with an Aboriginal community can be seen as intrusive but is much less likely to be taken that way where a connection already exists and level of trust has been established with participants. Often a researcher will be adopted into a particular family and moiety which will allow the community to understand the researcher’s place within their Aboriginal construct.

**Developing a new approach**

The awareness of the need to ensure that research delivers mutual benefit combined with the inability of university researchers to apply research findings through the RIRDC project was a concern for the KCTWM management board. One solution discussed was for an organisation more suited to supply this service to create a position dedicated to assisting Aboriginal communities progress wildlife based enterprise development. Since the aim of the CFCU of the Northern Land Council is to support Indigenous land and sea management and related enterprise development activities it was thought that it would be the appropriate place for such a position to be situated. However the critical issues for the KCTWM management board was to ensure that there were links between this position and the researchers within the KCTWM. The research objectives of the KCTWM, now School for Environmental Research
(SER), and land management/enterprise development objectives of the CFCU were complementary and the benefits of collaboration were obvious.

In 2004 the CFCU, with SER as a partner, were successful in securing a two year National Landcare Program grant to provide enterprise development support to Aboriginal communities. This funded a Wildlife Enterprise Development Facilitator position and operational funds to help five Indigenous groups progress wildlife based enterprises on their land. This position was filled by someone who had a good understanding of the value of research and who had good connection with staff from the KCTWM. It allowed for further collaboration in projects which had a research element but also delivered livelihood benefits to communities. It allowed for research to be taken up and put into action so that it could have direct benefits in on ground activity.

An example of a CDU project which linked in with the wildlife enterprise development facilitator position at the NLC was a NLP funded project in 2005/6 which looked at documenting the barriers affecting the progress of wildlife based enterprise development in Aboriginal communities. This project aimed to produce academic outputs (reports, seminars, journal papers) which would influence policy, government services and funding directions but also had potential to have a much more direct and applied output which would benefit the CFCU position and the communities they worked with. The CFCU position had close connections with many of the Indigenous ranger groups and Indigenous resource centres and had developed a level of trust which has proved to be important in fostering real involvement through participation. In 2006 the CDU and the NLC were able to have a combined workshop as part of this project resulting in both academic and practical outputs (Gorman et al. 2006a, b c, Gorman et al. 2008).

Current SER and NLC collaborations

SER now has an even closer link with the Caring for Country Unit because the Wildlife Enterprise Development Facilitator position is filled by a SER staff member on secondment.

This secondment has allowed for a better working relationship between the NLC and CDU through developing a better understanding of the different institutional procedures, network of staff, and facilitation of research with direct application. The CDU staff member on secondment will gradually reduce their commitment and hand over to the NLC having
developed close relationships with many of the Indigenous ranger groups, Aboriginal resource centres, NLC staff, NT Government Training departments and a working knowledge of how the NLC operates.

It is hoped that, given further research funding to support the NLC position, there will be further secondments to and from CDU and the NLC. The aim is to allow a pathway for research in general to be included in Caring for Country projects and SER research to be driven more from the ground up. Currently, much of the practical land management work that is happening through the NLC does not have a research component to it and in many cases does not take into account the latest research literature available. Facilitators often do not have research backgrounds and therefore are unaware of the benefits of linking their activities with research programs. This can have a number of implications. Firstly, research and its communication may outline an advance in certain land management procedures and techniques of which local practitioners are unaware. Secondly, the impacts of certain land management activities may not be quantified without research (baseline data) and thus less able to develop a case for ongoing funding support. Thirdly, there are specific Commonwealth funds for research that can tangentially contribute to land management activities. Fourthly, the recording and communication of land management activities through journal articles and books helps promote institutional continuity where there is a large turnover of staff and loss of information. And fifthly, learning research techniques and procedures many open up a whole spectrum of opportunity for practitioners, particularly where those research practitioners are drawn from the community itself (Garnett et al. in press).

Summary

The CDU has had to adapt its approach to ensure that its research works in with the aspirations of the people involved in that research. It was fortunate to be able to do this through connecting with the NLC. Building these links with institutions to allow this level of collaboration takes time and needs to be considered a priority by research managers.

The benefits of a secondment approach are many and there are a number of agencies in addition to the NLC with whom it would be useful for research providers to have similar arrangements. Having knowledge of how different groups operate, and a network of people within these groups, allows for a much easier transition or collaboration between groups.
Ideally the NLC and CDU would have two parallel positions which are interchanged through secondments to allow both positions to develop an understanding of research, connections with communities and knowledge of procedure. This allows better integration of research into community development.

References


