



Enterprising Pathways: Workshop report

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Contents

Executive summary	iii
Pathways to Employment project overview.....	1
The Enterprising Pathways workshop	1
Day One: 23 February 2016.....	2
Day Two: 24 February 2016.....	4
Summary of key themes	7
References.....	9

Executive summary

The Pathways Project was one of 12 research projects of the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation (CRC-REP), which is managed by Ninti One Limited. The project began in 2012 and was completed in June 2016. The research project was guided by the following questions:

- How do Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people who reside in (very) remote communities navigate their way into meaningful livelihoods?
- What kinds of work might help to support sustainable livelihood outcomes?
- What kinds of learning could support meaningful livelihood agendas, aspirations and pathways?

This working paper summarises a two-day workshop held at Katherine, Northern Territory, 23–24 February 2016, which brought together 28 key stakeholders committed to contributing to a thriving economic ecosystem in the Roper-Gulf Region with direct benefit for local Aboriginal peoples. The workshop aimed to map out a supportive environment for enterprising pathways and identify key practical steps for its growth.

The themes that came out of the workshop were:

- There is significant existing aspiration for enterprise learning experiences and development opportunities from Aboriginal individuals, families, groups and communities.
- Relationships with each other, with clients and other stakeholders or service providers are of central importance to any enterprise pathway development or engineering process. When core values and the diverse ways of knowing and being of peoples living in the region are not credited, meaningful engagement will always be difficult.
- Maintaining meaningful relationships in environments of change is challenging, whether these changes are in government policy, procurement models, funding, program timeframes or in terms of staff turnover.
- There is value in knowing your space as a service provider, your position and the differences or similarities in what you provide in relation to others.
- Deficit models and disadvantage framings are not effective in achieving desired outcomes in terms of enterprise development or employment pathways. There was emphasis on the need to shift this discourse collaboratively and to celebrate and build on local/regional assets and strengths.
- The good intentions of outsiders can constrain Aboriginal peoples and Aboriginal businesses. This includes culture and identity being interpreted in simplistic and/or in simplified ways by non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, service providers and government agencies.
- In the Roper-Gulf region there is a small amount of support available for entrepreneurs in the early stage of enterprise development, quite a lot available in the establishment phase, but very little in the enterprise growth stage.
- Significant variety, diversity, flexibility, hybridity and innovation exists within current and possible business models. More opportunities are needed for information sharing to support Aboriginal entrepreneurs with capacities to make informed decisions.

Pathways to Employment project overview

The Pathways Project was one of 12 research projects of the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation (CRC-REP), which is managed by Ninti One Limited. The project began in 2012 and was completed in June 2016. The research project was guided by the following questions:

- How do Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people who reside in (very) remote communities navigate their way into meaningful livelihoods?
- What kinds of work might help to support sustainable livelihood outcomes?
- What kinds of learning could support meaningful livelihood agendas, aspirations and pathways?

The project findings have debunked a number of common assumptions which permeate policy and are embedded in most pathways-to-employment initiatives in very remote Aboriginal Australia. These include:

- that there are ‘no real jobs’ in very remote Australia (Guenther & McRae-Williams 2014, McRae-Williams 2014)
- that education and qualifications necessarily lead to jobs (Guenther & McRae-Williams 2014, 2016; McRae-Williams & Guenther 2014)
- that better service provider and employer collaboration or the better linking of training to jobs is the solution (Guenther & McRae-Williams 2015, McRae-Williams et al. 2016).

In the middle of an evident decrease in Aboriginal employment in very remote Australia the project has identified that while lots of time, effort and money are directed at engineering pathways to employment, not many Aboriginal people in very remote Australia are choosing to jump on or follow the road to the end (McRae-Williams & Guenther in press). This highlights the ineffectiveness of current deficit model approaches, which tend to construct local strengths and values as barriers to be overcome or, alternatively, fail to recognise them. The project has recognised a need to reconceptualise what works and the logic of processes and activities for engaging people in the economy and maintaining their participation in the very remote context. Drawing on its findings regarding supporting economic engagement and participation, the Pathways to Employment project hosted a stakeholder event in Katherine, Northern Territory, 23–24 February 2016.

The Enterprising Pathways workshop

This Enterprising Pathways workshop was framed by a place-based (Fleming 2015) perspective aimed at bringing together a group of key stakeholders committed to contributing to a thriving economic ecosystem in the Roper-Gulf Region with direct benefit for local Aboriginal peoples. The purpose of the workshop was to map out a supportive environment for enterprising pathways and identify key practical steps for its growth. Twenty-eight people attended, representing a large range of stakeholders including local, territory and federal government; local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses and entrepreneurs; training providers; enterprise support services; local art centres; and a number of experts with experiences in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander entrepreneurship and enterprise in other regions.

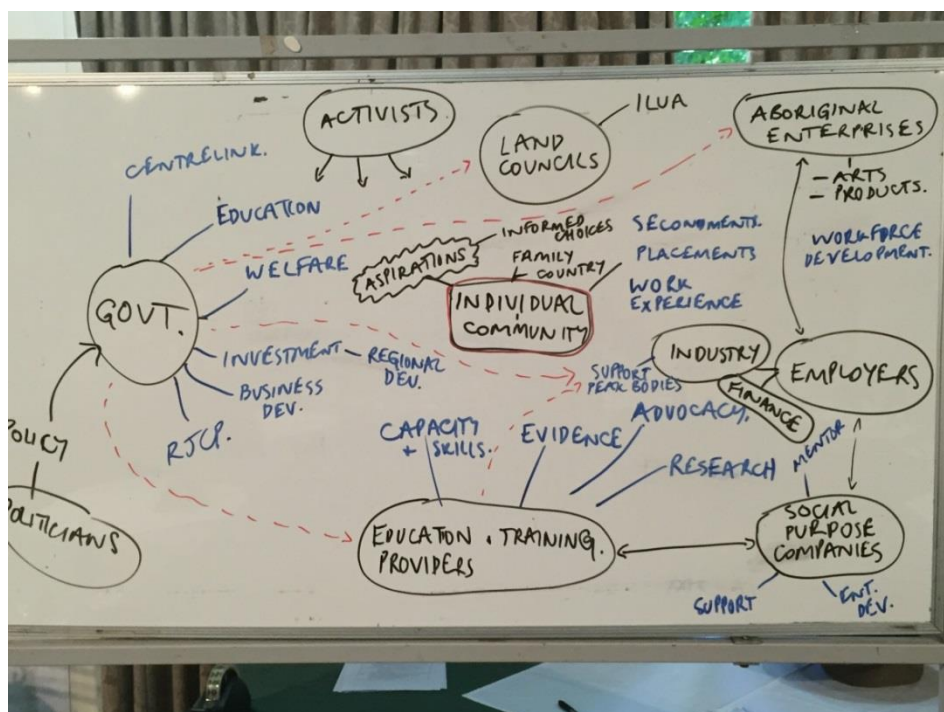
Day One: 23 February 2016

In order for participants to get to know each other, the workshop began with a ‘where do you belong?’ activity. Using butcher’s paper to identify sites of belonging, an intriguing picture of people’s life experiences emerged. Half of the participants identified various places in the Roper Gulf Region as sites of belonging, with nearly all identifying a sense of belonging to one or more places within the Northern Territory. Many places throughout Australia were also highlighted, as were a range of international locations, in a reflection of the different cultural heritages and the mobility of contemporary life. This exercise and the talk that it inspired helped to build some rapport between individuals from diverse backgrounds.

The Principal Research Leader of the Pathways to Employment project, Eva McRae-Williams, then presented on the key findings of the research and emphasised innovative opportunities for supporting economic participation through broadly defined models of enterprise and entrepreneurship. She pointed to the shared vision of improving economic engagement and participation outcomes for Aboriginal peoples living in very remote Australia and highlighted the significant contributions all those in the room could make to the following workshop discussions and outcomes. To finish her presentation, she posed two questions to the group:

- What are the essential elements that really make someone employable (in the very remote context)?
- What can we do as a group to create supportive pathways that recognise and build on these elements?

The group then engaged in active discussion and mapped the local economic ecosystem. This involved identifying the different stakeholders, their roles and the links between them.



The whiteboard map reflected a discussion identifying multiple stakeholders operating in the local environment. This discussion highlighted the different priorities of stakeholders, the various contributions they make in supporting entrepreneurship and enterprise development and the weak or strong links

between stakeholders. When the discussion focused back on the central position given to local individual people and communities, their aspirations and strengths and their ability to make informed choices, many participants expressed concern that the environment may be difficult for local Aboriginal entrepreneurs to effectively navigate.

Participants were conscious that the map did not necessarily reflect local Aboriginal individual family or community aspirations: while individuals and communities are positioned centrally, no paths directly lead from or to them. The picture given is one of isolation from a complex organisational culture, where service providers fund, supply, distribute and deliver goods and services, sometimes competing against and sometimes cooperating with each other. Aboriginal entrepreneurs in the room confirmed difficulties in finding and accessing the right kinds of help and support. One business person highlighted that sometimes the ‘help’ can be firmly shaped by service-provider priorities around meeting their own Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-related targets.

Kali Balint, a Director of Indigenous Consulting Group (ICG), then spoke to workshop participants about his learnings regarding enablers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enterprise and innovative game-changing strategies for moving towards long-term positive economic change for Aboriginal peoples living in very remote Australia. ICG is a specialist business and economic development consultancy firm working with and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians (<http://www.icgaustralia.com.au/icg/>). Balint shared information on the particular approach ICG has adopted for supporting entrepreneurs and enterprise. This approach is fundamentally person-centred or person-based. He also discussed the flexibility inherent in enterprise or business models and provided examples of a range of hybrid business structures. The problems of outsider ‘good intentions’ were warned against as he described the importance of Aboriginal people leading enterprise development and showing other Aboriginal people the pathway emphasised. Balint also spoke about the impacts of personal and family trauma on entrepreneurs and enterprise and encouraged workshop participants to consider emotional resilience in relation to economic resilience. He also emphasised the value of listening as a fundamental characteristic of any person wishing to be an enabler.

A second group activity was then undertaken, which explored the middle space between aspiration and enterprise. Participants were asked to form smaller groups and to think about and identify current assets or strengths supportive of Aboriginal enterprise and entrepreneurial activities in the local region. The facilitator introduced the Livelihood Assets Pentagon (Fisher 2002) as a tool for the group to draw from in their discussions. On butcher’s paper, participants were encouraged to define the assets or strengths on their pentagon and to plot the level of capacity for each asset. Most of the groups formed along particular organisational lines, for example, those who already worked together dominated certain groups. The pentagon diagrams therefore become representative of a particular organisational vision and practice, and discussions within groups took on their own direction. Common enterprise assets the groups identified included drive and passion, cultural foundations for creativity and product innovation, business acumen and practical skills and supportive networks and teams.

Margaret Duncan, a local Aboriginal artist and entrepreneur, then spoke to the group. She introduced herself as coming from the small community of Urupunga and being currently based in Katherine. Margaret is also a Facilitator for and a Board Director of Enterprise Learning Projects (ELP) (<http://www.elp.org.au/>). She shared a powerful story about her journey towards working for herself and having her own business. Being honest in her account of the challenges she faced within her own life and the struggles of many Aboriginal people living in remote Australia, she explained that she got ‘strong in her feelings and wanted to do more in terms of her business’. With regard to the kinds of support that

helped her to get stronger and develop and sustain her business, she emphasised the importance of relationships: ‘You have got to know people, and they have got to know you’. She spoke about people not having the right kinds of access to information and ideas, and that time is needed to establish trust so people feel comfortable asking questions of each other. Duncan emphasised that people do not like to be pushed; rather, it is important to stay and talk with them and let ideas evolve: ‘It’s hard to ask where they want to start; it’s hard to think where to start ... People [non-local] go out [to remote communities] but they haven’t got the interest in them. Sharing, talking, most strong thing. There are remote areas where people are stuck, they need help’. Many participants in the workshop were moved by the experiences and thoughts that Duncan shared with the group.

Day Two: 24 February 2016

The second day began with a card exercise aimed at building shared knowledge across the group regarding different organisational objectives and strengths. This enabled the group to get to know the different organisations represented in the room better and also provided the opportunity to share their own particular organisational insights into the enterprise. The following does not represent all the discussions but highlights some of the key initiatives or roles that were discussed:

- The **Department of Employment** – New Enterprise Incentive Scheme (NEIS) (<https://www.employment.gov.au/self-employment-new-enterprise-incentive-scheme-neis>). It was noted that this is not available in remote areas, and that the assessment criteria or initial assessment testing of individuals may exclude many local people.
- The **Department of Social Services** – not directly offering enterprise support, but has financial counselling capability and resilience hubs as part of their portfolio (<https://www.dss.gov.au/grants/financial-counselling-capability-and-resilience-hubs>). This department can act as a conduit to government for improved funding models across sectors.
- The **Office of Aboriginal Affairs** – Enterprise Development Fund (<https://www.dpmc.gov.au/indigenous-affairs/economic-development/indigenous-enterprise-development-funding>). Their role in stakeholder communication and engagement activities was emphasised.
- The **Northern Territory Department of Business** offers many business support services (<https://nt.gov.au/industry/start-run-and-grow-a-business/business-support-services>). It was emphasised that they are a good point of contact for anyone interested in business, as they facilitate connections and referrals. Business development officers, community champions and mentor roles were highlighted and specific programs discussed, including Indigenous Business Development Program (<https://nt.gov.au/industry/start-run-and-grow-a-business/business-grants-and-funding/indigenous-business-development-program-ibdp>), the Business Enterprise Centre (<http://www.becnt.com.au/>) and the Indigenous Economic Development Forums.
- The **Roper Gulf Regional Council** (<http://ropergulf.nt.gov.au>) does not position enterprise development or support as core activity; however, it offers opportunities in terms of providing and maintaining infrastructure, including roads and postal services, and works as an advocate for increasing mobile phone coverage. They are able to provide accesses to space/buildings through leases and provide grant advice in terms of local government processes.
- **Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education** (<http://www.batchelor.edu.au>) is a dual sector provider of education and training in the region offering Certificate 1 to PhD level

qualifications. Their interest in supporting pathways to enterprise was emphasised and their priorities in designing programs to meet industry needs, connecting research to practice and using current technology such as virtual classrooms were highlighted.

- **Savanna Alliance** (<http://www.savannaalliance.org/about>) is a consortium of diverse Aboriginal businesses. These businesses are member companies and work across a broad range of industry sectors. Working to secure large contracts and commercial opportunities, the alliance identifies, develops and supports training, employment and business opportunities for Aboriginal people in the region. Their ability to operate as an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander business hub, to host grants, to support grant writing and to provide business advice and bookkeeping services was discussed.
- **Many Rivers Microfinance Ltd** (<http://www.manyrivers.org.au>) offers microfinance loans to assist with financial literacy, business plan development, cash flow projections and record- and bookkeeping and provides grant application assistance. The Northern Territory field officers (see <http://www.manyrivers.org.au/nt-operations>) emphasised their focus on individual relationship development, ongoing mentoring and risk assessment support.
- **Enterprise Learning Projects** (<http://www.elp.org.au/>) emphasised their role in the region as building long-term capacity for business development and as providing services such as facilitating networks between government, philanthropy and industry; enterprise project design and facilitation; matching people to enterprise support needs; enterprise exposure tours; facilitating peer-to-peer learning experiences; providing ongoing mentoring and sales and distribution support and finance and investment brokerage.
- **Indigenous Consulting Group** (<http://www.icgaustralia.com.au/icg/>), although not currently operating in the region, highlighted their role as one of assisting people with business plans, not as doing business plans. Also, their focus on facilitating collaborative practice, ongoing business mentoring, marketing design and implementation and joint venture facilitation was highlighted.
- **Ngukurr and Jilkminggan Art Centres** offer spaces for artists to create and invent exciting products and can provide connections to market.
- **Numbulwar School Enterprise Program** (no longer active) involved the engagement of young people with older artists and provided very hands-on enterprise learning experiences.

This activity raised some questions around the roles and priorities of key stakeholders who had been invited but were unable to attend the event. This included representation from the Northern Land Council and from a number of Aboriginal Corporations in the region (whose attendance was anticipated, but representatives could not make it due to important funeral obligations). Some participants felt that this session of sharing organisational information should have occurred earlier in the workshop and felt more comfortable once their position as representatives of a particular organisation had been made evident to the group as a whole.

Following this, **Indu Balachandran**, previously the Social Ventures Australia (SVA) manager for the Indigenous Social Enterprise Fund (ISEF) shared insights and lessons gained from the two-year pilot (see <http://www.socialventures.com.au/sva-quarterly/dos-donts-investing-indigenous-social-enterprises/>). She began by confirming that there is significant aspiration for enterprise development and huge appetite for capital within the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander population, including from those residing in remote and very remote Australia. However, she emphasised, while their ventures were promising, many

enterprises and/or entrepreneurs that approached ISEF were not ready to sufficiently meet the selection criteria for funding. A visual representation like the one below was used to further explain this:



Balachandran, through demonstrating the difficulties in matching the pipeline of enterprise aspiration to the grant criteria for funding opportunity, highlighted problems with fixed loan criteria. She argued for the need for more accommodating opportunities and alternative models for accessing financial capital and pointed to the need for more risk-tolerant and flexible grant structures, more availability of seed funding and more innovation and creativity regarding what it might mean to invest in business beyond simply revenue growth. She also emphasised the central role of relationships for individuals or programs aiming to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander entrepreneurs and enterprises and the need to avoid interfering with governance issues but rather to focus on providing informed advice. Through discussing her experiences with ISEF, Balachandran reflected that some current perceptions around supporting enterprise were actually counter-entrepreneurial.

A group activity followed that aimed to get participants to share their visions for the future and consider how to enact practical actions towards these goals. Participants broke into four groups and were asked to reflect on cards, which had been displayed on a wall, that identified the different organisations and their services from the previous session. The different groups were asked to jot down what they liked about the information shared, what issues it raised for them and what they saw as the key challenges to creating a supportive environment for Aboriginal enterprise. Participants expressed positivity regarding the range of options available, the diversity of resources and the different ways in which people can become involved in business. The key issues arising were perceptions around a lack of coordination between stakeholders, gaps in service provision, overlaps in service provision and competition between providers. Inconsistent government policy and a changing landscape of grants, loans and philanthropic investment were also highlighted. Participants saw the key challenges to be acknowledged and worked on as:

- the development of meaningful relationships requiring time commitment and focused on cross-cultural and intercultural understanding
- the development of user-friendly, clear and creative assessment criteria for funding and support as well as for measuring enterprise or entrepreneurial success
- overcoming infrastructure shortages and issues of access to technology
- overcoming land tenure and land council constraints for the benefit of Aboriginal people
- the need to collaboratively shift away from narratives of deficit.

Professor Michelle Evans then spoke to the group, via internet (Skype) connection. As the program Director for Australia's first Indigenous Business Master Class program (MURRA), Professor Evans shared her insights from this program as well as from the leadership and creative industries work she engages in. The MURRA program was established to skill up Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander entrepreneurs and was a partnership between Melbourne Business School, Kinaway (Victoria's Aboriginal Chamber of Commerce) and Supply Nation (Australia's Indigenous Minority Suppliers organisation). She emphasised the importance of university institutions and cross-institutional relationships in developing

supportive environments for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enterprise, highlighting that it is important to celebrate failure, as risk is the core essence of entrepreneurship. Professor Evans, by using a range of current examples, painted a picture of a very vibrant and flourishing contemporary Aboriginal business environment and emphasised the interest in and potential of Aboriginal business people located in more urban locations networking with and/or supporting entrepreneurs situated further from markets, such as the Roper-Gulf region. Professor Evans brought to the group's attention the elements of leadership fostered within the enterprise space, not simply the ability to gain financially but also in terms of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-definition and empowerment.

For the final activity, participants were asked their opinion regarding the best way to cement workshop learnings into future practical action. Two separate proposals were put forward, both stemming from the key challenges identified earlier. One involved focusing on the development of more meaningful relationships between workshop participants through the sharing of their own personal motivations, beliefs and passions. The aim was for people to feel more connected and known to each other so that after the workshop they would be more likely to engage in shared visions or connected activities. About half the group chose this activity. The other group proposed mapping out the different services and supports identified on the cards into groups: those who can take a cold call, those who have the capacity to respond, those who have certain kinds of resources, those who provide access to finances, those who support sustainability and those who work to change the landscape. Through this activity, it became clear where support and services were plentiful and where there was less available. The difficulty of mapping a journey through the landscape without basing it on a particular individual's or group's aspiration also became evident through this activity.

Summary of key themes

The Enterprising Pathways workshop achieved a high degree of participation across groups with different expectations and experiences. It functioned as a valuable opportunity for those active in the local region to network and provided opportunities to draw from the experiences and knowledges of others operating outside the region. The event worked to give impetus to a collaborative, cross-sector initiative to challenge deficit discourse surrounding Aboriginal peoples and built on an already-evident optimism within the group regarding potential entrepreneurial activities in the region.

The purpose of the workshop was to map out a supportive environment for enterprising pathways and identify key practical steps for their growth. While the workshop ended with no concrete next steps for the group as a whole, it did develop a shared understanding of practical steps required to continue to and better support Aboriginal enterprise and entrepreneurship in the region. With the end of the Pathways to Employment project and it being unable to facilitate a further networking opportunity, it is hoped that participants built valuable relationships during the workshop which will contribute to their abilities to be successful enablers of Aboriginal enterprise into the future.

The key themes to emerge out of the two days of varied and diverse discussion on supporting Aboriginal enterprise and entrepreneurship in the Roper-Gulf region are summarised below:

- Recognition of significant existing aspiration for enterprise learning experiences and development opportunities from Aboriginal individuals, families, groups and communities. Participants were also encouraged by the level of positivity demonstrated by the group in terms of Aboriginal entrepreneurs and enterprise potentials.

- The central importance of relationships with each other, with clients and other stakeholders or service providers. It was acknowledged that when core values and the diverse ways of knowing and being of peoples living in the region are not credited, meaningful engagement will always be difficult. All participants agreed that meaningful relationships are centrally important to any enterprise pathway development or engineering process.
- Challenges of maintaining meaningful relationships in environments of change were identified, whether in government policy, procurement models, funding, program timeframes or in terms of staff turnover.
- The value of knowing your space as a service provider, your position and the differences or similarities in what you provide in relation to others.
- Agreement that deficit models and disadvantage framings are not effective in achieving desired outcomes in terms of enterprise development or employment pathways. There was emphasis on the need to shift this discourse collaboratively and to celebrate and build on local/regional assets and strengths.
- The dangers of the good intentions of outsiders and of Aboriginal peoples and Aboriginal businesses being constrained by good-intentioned generalisations. This included culture and identity being interpreted in simplistic and/or in simplified ways by non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, service providers and government agencies.
- Acknowledgement that in the region there was a small amount of support available for entrepreneurs in the dream and test period of enterprise, quite a lot available in the establish phase, but very little in the enterprise growth stage, including limited financial capital or loan opportunities and restrictive funding criteria models.
- Significant discussion on the variety, diversity, flexibility, hybridity and innovation within existing and possible business models. This was discussed as positive, and emphasis was placed on the need for more opportunities for information sharing to support Aboriginal entrepreneurs with capacities to make informed decisions. It was also acknowledged that there is growing interest in measures of returns on investment going beyond simple financial/maximum profit measures.

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