

Case Study

Supporting Empowered Communities in the NPY Lands



Background

The Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (NPY) Lands span the central desert region of South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory, covering 350,000 square kilometres and encompassing 26 remote communities and homelands. The region has an overall population of approximately 6,000 Anangu and Yarnangu (Aboriginal people), more than half of whom are aged 24 years or under.

NPY Women's Council began as a voice for women in the tri-state central desert region in 1980. It is now a major service provider, maintaining a strong and vocal advocacy and lobbying role, as well as direct support for members on issues such as substance abuse, domestic and family violence, child protection and other safety issues, and the needs and aspirations of young people delivered through a holistic, family-focused approach to case management and empowerment.

NPY Women's Council is one of the founding members of Empowered Communities (EC). EC represents Indigenous leaders and organisations from eight regions around Australia who are committed to working together on a series of joint principles for Indigenous reform. Established in 2013, the EC reform movement has required a range of skills at different stages of the research, consultation and establishment phases.

Since June 2014, NPY Women's Council has hosted five three-month EC secondees from Westpac and four six-week secondees from Westpac and Commonwealth Bank. The secondees' skills ranged from project management, stakeholder engagement and business development through to legal services, change management and administration.

Approach

In 2014, an EC taskforce was established. One of the initial priorities for the taskforce was to submit a design report to the Australian Government with recommendations on a range of national policy reforms aimed at achieving the same level of wellbeing, life opportunities and choices for Indigenous people as for non-Indigenous Australians. Led by Andrea Mason, CEO of NPY Women's Council, and Bianca Janovic, NPY EC Regional Coordinator, NPY Women's Council engaged with Aboriginal leaders, communities and organisations to develop the NPY chapter in the EC design report.

Importantly, NPY Women's Council also had to establish a structure for EC locally and this became the focus for secondees. Participation in the EC reform movement is on an opt-in basis for Indigenous organisations, so in late 2014 Westpac secondee Peter Riley assisted in developing an early draft of an 'opt-in agreement'. Peter's outstanding project and stakeholder management experience helped him to establish solid working relationships with all potential EC partner organisations. Peter went on to apply for a career break from Westpac and took up the position of EC Regional Coordinator when Bianca returned to Herbert Smith Freehills in January 2015.

In early 2015, NPY Indigenous leaders agreed to form an interim Regional Steering Committee (iRSC) to progress the work of EC. Jawun secondee Sara McDonald, a Senior Relationship Manager from Westpac, was deployed to assist with the establishment of the iRSC, including managing the logistics to get this important group of stakeholders together. The first iRSC meetings occurred in April 2015 and workshopped key EC concepts, including:

- first priorities agreements (i.e. regional agreements to focus immediate action on high-priority goals such as child welfare and education, employment and safe communities)
- the regional agenda (i.e. a reform agenda specifically targeted to meet the social, economic and cultural development needs of the region)
- high-level implementation plan (i.e. the process of ensuring EC reforms happen 'on the ground').

In mid-2015, Westpac Implementation Manager Heather McKenzie was deployed for three months to support the iRSC and update the record of EC engagement activities with regional organisations, communities and individuals. Heather was also tasked with developing and testing the EC opt-in application process for future EC iRSC participants.

During a similar period, two six-week secondees were also engaged on key pieces of EC work. Justin Moses, from Westpac, undertook an analysis of possible models for the backbone organisation (or Secretariat) in the NPY region, making comparisons with other regions and presenting the value, costs and impacts of each option. Commonwealth Bank's Zomi Frankcom investigated regional data to be used as a baseline for planning, management and evaluation. It became obvious that a structured and consistent approach to data was necessary and that obtaining the right data would require significant effort and pose some challenges. Subsequently it was proposed that a data analyst position be included in the Secretariat's function.

CBA legal officer Sam Croucher, deployed in mid-2015, sought to refine the opt-in agreement to ensure that the application process to opt in to EC in the NPY region was as straightforward as possible. His work resulted in a Secretariat rule book, and an enhanced iRSC Charter to provide an active ongoing framework for governance and self-review.

Two additional secondees – Carl Jensen from Westpac and Adam Malski from CBA – helped continue the momentum on EC in late 2015. Their work included scoping the logistics and costs for community discussion forums (one of the NPY region's first priorities), and working on the organisation design, structure and implementation plan for the Secretariat.

Outcomes

As a result of the work of multiple skilled secondees over the past 18 months, the following progress has been made on EC in the NPY Lands:

- Establishment of the iRSC and its terms of reference
- Development of an opt-in agreement and opt-in application
- Scoping of data collection requirements for long-term evaluation of the EC model
- Identification of the necessary process for developing regional first priorities
- Costings for planned community discussion forums to define the first priorities
- Outline of future structure of Regional Steering Committee and associated rule book
- Outline of organisational design, structure and implementation plan for the establishment of the EC Secretariat

Next Steps

In December 2015, the Prime Minister responded formally to the EC design report and expressed government's support and interest. While the NPY region awaits substantive communication from the Australian Government in regards to next steps, the next EC secondee will scope current federally funded employment services and programs across the NPY Lands. In line with the region's first priorities, the EC team will seek to work with these employment service providers in a manner that complements existing employment / income generating activities in the region, particularly focusing on those supported by local EC partners.