

Empowered Communities

Holding a Reform Together: The role of EC Backbone Coordinators



Background

Empowered Communities (EC) has made strong progress since it was launched at Garma Festival in 2013 and submitted to government in early 2015. Members of the EC National Leaders Group continue to advance the reform within their own regions, and to further cement the government's support at national level. In each of the seven regions a 'Backbone' organisation coordinates the regional EC agenda, and their share of the 50 opt-in organisations that now exist. They work to deliver a regional version of the [Empowered Communities: Empowered Peoples Design Report](#), which sets out a vision for Indigenous empowerment and Indigenous-led development.

EC Backbone coordinators play a key and complex role. They coordinate, convene, and 'lead from behind' to enable reform. Two have been ex-Jawun secondees, each motivated by unique reasons.

Approach

David Wirken held government policy roles for the Departments of Human Services, FaHCSIA and PM&C. After acting as business manager for the National Partnership Agreement for Remote Service Delivery (NPARSD) in the APY Lands, working closely with communities, he became an advisor to the Coordinator General for Remote Service Delivery in Canberra. Through this, David came to believe that government services could never 'close the gap' without a fundamental shift securing Indigenous people's engagement in decisions affecting their lives.

Then in 2015 David became the first long-term Empowered Communities secondee in West Kimberley, based at Kimberley Land Council supporting Indigenous leaders develop the EC Design Report. After a six month secondment, he applied to be the founding Coordinator of Aarnja, tasked with establishing a new Kimberley Aboriginal regional organisation to fulfil the EC Backbone role.

Elected by local Indigenous leaders based on their confidence in his understanding of EC and its approach, David facilitated opt-in organisations and leaders to progress the region's First Priorities, children and young people. The Kimberley Aboriginal Young Leaders Committee was formed to create a strategy to 'foster generational change' with young people and elders. To reduce the overrepresentation of children in state care, the Kimberley Aboriginal Children in Care Committee was established with a membership of strong and influential parents, carers and family leaders who would review Child Protection legislation, policy and service delivery through an Indigenous lens.

David's ability to enable rather than direct was well regarded by Indigenous leaders, as was his ability to present an Indigenous message to government in a way that speaks to 'both worlds'. Marty Sibosado, elder and EC leader says, *"David's ability to influence the EC agenda has been as important as any of the EC Leaders to date. His understanding of the government's approach and his ability to influence their thinking is incredibly valuable."* This perhaps stems from the emphasis David places on listening. *"When you're a non-Aboriginal person working with or for Aboriginal people you*

have remember you have two ears and one mouth and you should use them in that ratio,” is the advice he suggests for others seeking to enable Indigenous-led development.

In early 2017, David decided to step down as CEO of Aarnja while providing the chance for his senior manager, a Kimberley Indigenous woman, to step into the role. He continues to support Aarnja as Company Secretary and Strategic Policy Advisor, and is also supporting EC development nationally.

Meanwhile in the NPY Lands, another EC Backbone Coordinator had taken up the role after a Jawun secondment. Peter Riley left a senior wealth management role at Westpac to be the first ‘official’ secondee in NPY Lands, tasked with working alongside the EC Regional Coordination in helping Indigenous leaders envisage a regional version of the Empowered Communities reform agenda. He also wanted to explore working in Aboriginal affairs for very personal reasons. His family’s Aboriginality was an unspoken family secret until the 1970s, a painful legacy of the Aboriginal Protection Board and assimilation policy, and Peter had long sought a constructive way to contribute.

Three months supporting Indigenous leaders in Central Australia to craft their chapter of the Design Report turned into Peter’s appointment as Regional Coordinator of Empowered Communities. He oversaw a lengthy process of consultations with communities right across the tri-state region, communities whose voices were needed to shape the story of Empowered Communities in the region. Under the tutelage of Indigenous leaders and in particular NPY Women’s Council CEO Andrea Mason, Peter also found his own story to share with communities whose inputs he valued so highly:

“It’s been a very profound experience. It brings to life the principles of the EC design, which is about grassroots engagement, as hard and as slow as that can be. It’s about genuine conversations with people, treating them with legitimacy and respect. Personally, I feel incredibly grateful and privileged to be able to go into communities and talk to people, hear their stories, learn about their lives, and be part of them exploring EC and what that means.

I’m loving that all the skills and experiences I developed in 30 years in the corporate world are applicable, in a very different way. I feel like what I bring is an ability to bridge different parts of the model. But in that process I’m learning so much about Aboriginal life, about Aboriginal culture, about Australia. It’s the most amazing learning experience I’ve ever been through.”

Andrea Mason values Peter’s contribution highly:

“Peter’s knowledge and experience, gained from years working in the corporate sector, has helped to establish and consolidate EC’s governance model in the NPY region. Importantly, he has helped activate a greater level of collaboration in the EC leadership group. This is no small achievement given the reform performance of many of the EC member organisations in our region. He has done this by exercising patience, insight and by being a trusted adviser.”

Outcomes

In the West Kimberley, a ‘Gaps Report’ was prepared for the Minister for Child Protection and Family Services, and a series of joint forums held to advance Indigenous-led solutions in response. Aarnja is partnering with the Department on a formal review of children in care legislation across the Kimberley.

EC in NPY Lands continues to seek full and meaningful consultation with 26 communities across 350,000 square kilometres and three states, to build the strongest possible foundation for Indigenous-led change. This change is likely to focus on strong and safe communities, family care and jobs.

Next Steps

With the EC journey ongoing, David and Peter demonstrate unique pathways by which individuals committed to Indigenous-led development can enable a ‘new way of working’. Supporting Indigenous leaders, they have found ways for the vision laid out in the EC Design Report to be brought to life, policy and practice. Backbone leaders and staff, secondees working on Empowered Communities, and Indigenous leaders and people all continue to dedicate energy to making the most of what Andrea Mason describes as “*a chance for real change*” – and it is an exciting space to watch.