

Case Study

Nhulunbuy Rising: How a Town Vision motivated a community in transition



Background

The town of Nhulunbuy, on the Gove Peninsula in North East Arnhem Land, developed largely around a bauxite mine established with government support in the 1960s. Despite strong opposition to the mine from Yolŋu Traditional Owners and elders – who created a Bark Petition and took the matter to court – in 1968 the Gove Agreement was negotiated between the Commonwealth Government and Nabalco, the mining company at the time. The same year, the Nhulunbuy Corporation was established on leased land to provide Nhulunbuy and its residents with municipal services.

Nhulunbuy's population saw intense growth during the 1970's and early 1980's, with the production of alumina as well as bauxite becoming the major employer of local people in the region. The town grew to include multiple grocery stores, a butcher, hospital, and schools.

In 2014 however, the mine suspended alumina production to focus only on bauxite. The immediate impact was loss of jobs, a drop in population, and the appearance of vacant houses and shopfronts. Airlines ceased regular routes to Nhulunbuy, and there was a despondent atmosphere in town.

Nhulunbuy Corporation's CEO at the time was Angela MacMillan, an ex-Jawun secondee from Commonwealth Bank who had worked at Miwatj Aboriginal Health for six weeks in 2014. After her secondment Angela had realised she wanted to understand more, and "*had left a part of herself behind, in Arnhem Land*". Her manager supported her taking a career break and she applied successfully to be CEO of Nhulunbuy Corporation. On arrival, she could see her priority was supporting the community transition from reliance on a mining company to a more diverse economy:

"As people came to grips with the fact that the mining company would no longer be the single major economic driving force of the region, they turned their minds to the future identity of Nhulunbuy. The Nhulunbuy Corporation was only too happy to help facilitate that process."

Beyond economic rebuilding, Angela felt strongly that she could support Nhulunbuy Corporation to rebuild a sense of community in the town, which she remembers as "shattered" when she arrived to take up her position as CEO. Using what she had learned at Miwatj Health, where she created communications and advocacy strategies to support the regionalisation of remote clinics, she committed the Corporation to asserting a positive future direction for the town – and one based on meaningful Yolŋu participation.

Approach

Nhulunbuy Corporation moved into a vacant shopfront in the centre of town, prominently displaying local artwork and landscape photography. The airport and key roads were smartened up to give a 'best foot forward' impression to residents and visitors. And the Corporation embarked on a Town Vision initiative, to strengthen positive identity and direction for the town. This was supported by the NT Government and Rio Tinto, who recruited a CEO and Project Manager and funded consultants, marketing, and other costs.

Nhulunbuy's Town Vision was articulated as, '*A community that is strong, safe and enterprising, where we recognise Yolŋu culture, are committed to our people, celebrate our unique lifestyles, and serve as a regional hub to East Arnhem Region.*' A local Yolŋu clan, Rirritjinju, translated this into Yolŋu Matha language, and both versions were placed in the front entrance of the Nhulunbuy Corporation. To ensure Yolŋu inputs were central, extensive community consultations were held to

shape five 'Future Directions' (strategic pillars) of the vision: Yolŋu Country, Unique Lifestyles, Community Participation, Quality Assets and Services, and Robust Economy. Of these, Angela remembers how the first, Yolŋu country, was emphasised as a key priority for the Town Vision to uphold.

In early 2016 Maria Robbins was appointed Town Vision Project Manager at Nhulunbuy Corporation, to oversee community engagement events, enterprise support, and town revitalisation initiatives. Coming from Telstra, she had extensive experience in corporate change management. Maria was also an ex-Jawun secondee, bringing critical awareness of the value of community inputs. She had worked on communications at Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation, who integrate Yolŋu and Balanda (non-Yolŋu) cultures in a 'Two Way' approach described as "*using both Balanda and Yolŋu values to do our work*". Armed with this understanding and experience, Maria came on board to drive a comprehensive Town Vision implementation plan.

A stakeholder group was formed to oversee the Town Vision program, comprising representatives of: major Yolŋu clans Gumatj and Rirratjingu; the local Member of Parliament; local businesses, clubs and associations; the Town Board; the Northern Territory Government; Rio Tinto Gove operations; Rio Tinto External Affairs; and Nhulunbuy Corporation.

Projects to support Yolŋu engagement and employment were central to the Town Vision program. A Nhulunbuy Business Week was held in October 2016, with Olympic Gold Medallist and businessman Steven Bradbury as keynote speaker ahead of a week of events and workshops to 'support, inspire and grow' the Nhulunbuy business community. There was an employment forum on 'Indigenous Employment in Arnhem Land: Things that work and things that don't', and sessions with advice on record keeping, cashflow management and tax for small businesses. Throughout the week local employers showcased opportunities in sectors from tourism to social services.

A town artwork project proved particularly successful in realising the Town Vision. Maria organised for public rubbish bins to be painted by local organisations and artists, inviting participation. Over 130 people signed up, from 16 organisations. Over ten days they painted 95 panels of local flora and fauna on 19 bins, with Yolŋu, English and scientific labels plus artists' names. The success led to more revitalisation initiatives: benches were painted in Town Vision colours and recycled metal sculptures were made and hung on walls by unemployed men supported by Miwatj Employment & Participation and Laynhapuy Homelands Aboriginal Corporation; mural artwork in the town centre and airport was undertaken by local prisoners; and a proud new directional post was placed in the town centre.

Outcomes

The 2016 Nhulunbuy Business Week was so successful that local organisations agreed to make it an annual event. One of the forums in the 2017 program is themed, 'Indigenous Training & Support – Partner for Progress'.

The bin painting was considered one of the largest Yolŋu participation project ever held in East Arnhem land. Participants spoke of the pride it gave them to see beautiful examples of Yolŋu collaboration, culture and country prominent in a town previously exempt from this, seen as a site of leased land and predominantly Balanda values. Yolŋu artist Fabian Marika said, "*Miwatj, sunrise people, have a songline about seagulls and dolphins. These totems make me feel at home and are part of my belonging, under the water and up in the air*". Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation said the art "*provides a powerful means of promoting respect for our landscape and its flora and fauna, and respect for country and Yolŋu priorities. Yolŋu leaders' vision is that future generations should be able to see country in the same way as their ancestors before them.*"

Several opportunities were born out of the collaboration facilitated by town revitalisation initiatives. A Young Men's Group, facilitated by Laynhapuy Homelands to bring together and support disengaged young men, had been involved in the bin painting. As a result of their hard work and the relationships they formed, they now have work experience placements with Nhulunbuy Corporation and it is hoped this opportunity will be continued for the Group in future.

A new chapter was agreed for the town's revitalisation: in the middle of town, a huge wall was prepared by the local Datjala Work Camp for a community mural of local history and landscapes, with an artist apprentice from the Work Camp engaged to support this.

Cumulatively, these initiatives have had significant impact on the landscape and atmosphere of town, bringing a renewed sense of pride based firmly on the respected place of Yolŋu country and culture in the town and community.

To capitalise on the momentum the Town Vision facilitated, Angela led the development of a community collaboration strategy for the Corporation, one which formalised Welcome to Country protocols, and endorsed future Town Board positions for Yolŋu representatives of Gumatj and Rirritjiŋu clans. These were important changes in a context where Yolŋu consultation had historically been optional, often superficial, and non-accountable.

Angela, who returned to Commonwealth Bank after two and a half years in Nhulunbuy, looks back on her time supporting the Town Vision with a sense of fulfilment. She remembers, *“It wasn’t an easy thing to get up and running. But it was absolutely the right thing to do.”* Both she and Maria consider that their Jawun secondment provided not only the opportunity to contribute to Nhulunbuy’s future direction, but also the foundation to apply the community-led approach that was needed:

“Without the Jawun experience we wouldn’t have done it all, or had the passion and vigour, or been able to really grasp the importance of the aspect of country in the Town Vision.”

Maria continues to dedicate herself to the Nhulunbuy Town Vision and community-led development in North East Arnhem Land. Reflecting on the journey to date, she says,

“This has been an extremely challenging but rewarding project. I’ve been humbled by the overwhelming support from so many community organisations, and feel positive that the positive legacy is something the community can continue to build on.”

Next Steps

With Nhulunbuy Corporation providing the resources and facilitation, Nhulunbuy will continue to unify around a future of positive opportunity. A precedent has been set for increased Yolŋu participation in public life, whether as employees in local businesses or members of the Town Board, and for the central role of Yolŋu values in a unified town.

Jawun will continue to deploy secondees to key partner organisations that support the Town Vision and its principles. These include Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation, Laynhapuy Homelands Aboriginal Corporation, Miwatj Employment & Participation, and Miwatj Health. Jawun will also continue to facilitate the cross-sectoral connections that can be vital in enabling Indigenous-led development; as demonstrated by Angela and Maria, who combined skills and corporate experience with appreciation of the role of community in defining a town’s future direction.

Long-term, the community of Nhulunbuy and the Gove Peninsula need opportunities to participate in a diversified economy developed around local opportunities but also local strengths and values. This will take time, investment, and a commitment to capacity building. But in Nhulunbuy a hopeful new chapter has begun, based on collaboration and country.