

West Kimberley

West Kimberley Economic Development Agenda: An Indigenous perspective



Background

The West Kimberley is a region determined to harness opportunities and drive enterprise to overcome severe socio-economic challenges that manifest in alarming ways: High unemployment (only 25% of the Indigenous population is genuinely employed); low education attainment (over 80% of Indigenous students fail to complete secondary school); and, poverty-related suicide, lifestyle disease, and violence (resulting in a 30 year gap in life expectancy as compared to the non-Indigenous population).¹

Empowered Communities (EC), an independent initiative comprised of Indigenous leaders from across Australia, aims to empower communities to address challenges such as these. Aarnja, the West Kimberley EC 'backbone' organisation, is responsible for coordinating the 12 Indigenous organisations that have opted-in to the EC to date. To begin with, Aarnja is to support the region's Indigenous leadership to coalesce around a strategy, known as the Development Agenda. This is no easy feat given the vast array of pressing social issues and differing priorities.

Aarnja's first task was to coordinate the region's Indigenous leadership to agree on the Development Agenda, which will ultimately be the basis of Indigenous-led negotiations with government. This then is first step to collaboratively tackling the region's social and economic issues.

Approach

In late 2016 two secondees from the Australian Government were deployed to support Aarnja prepare a report that captured the region's Development Agenda: Martin Graham (Department of Finance/Social Policy), and Katie Welsh (Australian Taxation Office).

Drawing on his experience in policy development and economics, Martin analysed government policies regarding Indigenous Affairs, as well as mechanisms through which funding for it is allocated. Martin contextualized these policies and mechanisms to understand economic realities in the Kimberley so as to be better positioned to inform Aarnja of the region's economic potential.

Appreciative of Martin's contribution, including the mentoring of Aarnja staff, David Wirken (CEO, Aarnja) says: "*Martin worked closely with an Aarnja team member to increase her strategic policy analysis in the complex world of social policy. The work Martin produced was of a very high standard with deep and comprehensive policy thought underpinning it.*"

Joining Martin, Katie Welsh brought specific expertise in user-based design, having recently led the design of the future tax system in Australia. At Aarnja she designed a citizen-based study of exemplary individuals and businesses in the region, to understand local successes and guide solutions built on strengths and capabilities. The study was made possible through guidance by a

¹ See "West Kimberley," Empowered Communities (2017): for more <http://empoweredcommunities.org.au/regions/west-kimberley.aspx>

member of the Aarnja staff with extensive knowledge of the region as well as excellent rapport with the community. Together with Martin, Katie conducted 27 interviews that were then developed into rich case studies for the report. As David Wirken explains: *“These case studies are the real gold in my opinion. They are the stories of people who have triumphed over adversity.”*

The case studies touch upon different approaches and outcomes for real individuals in the region. Such as David and Veronica, who have been running the small but successful Beagle Bay Bakery despite its remote locale; or, the Kooljaman Resort, a unique wilderness camp where culturally appropriate business models are at the forefront of running the enterprise. Positive examples and constructive insights are plentiful in the report. In Katie’s own words: *“I learnt even more than I expected and I am pleased I saw a different side to the Aboriginal story - a story with successful intelligent Aboriginal people determined to make things better for their people.”* The case studies, together with Martin’s economic analyses, provided Aarnja with sound strategic direction through this strength-based approach.

Outcomes

Bringing vital capacity, the secondees have helped Aarnja kick-start an endeavour that promises to add significant value to the Kimberly region’s economic development. *Milimili (Report) on Economic Development in West Kimberley Region: An Aboriginal Focus* was submitted to Aarnja in November 2016, and it represents the first pillar of the EC Development Agenda. As Indigenous leaders discuss and work to deliver employment and economic development outcomes for the region, this report provides the necessary foundation and focal point for Aarnja to bring together the region’s Indigenous organisations, and to then inform debate and discussion with the Australian government and corporate partners.

Following the completion and dissemination of the draft, feedback - including from stakeholders Aarnja had previously been struggling to engage – has been abundant. The report has enabled Indigenous leaders to focus on employment and economic development, which underpins other urgent issues around children in care and suicide that require crisis actions. After all, the right economic strategy will provide the best pathway out of crisis for families and individuals.

The contribution of the Jawun secondees towards this is evident in bringing the report to life. David Wirken emphasises how Indigenous people want to be involved in the planning and execution of programs that aim to bring about economic development to the region: *“What we want to achieve with this report is to say Aboriginal people don’t simply want to be engaged in planning, they want to be the proponents of their own economic development, with their people, on their land, respectful of their diverse cultures.”*

The draft framework is set to serve as a guide for the next five to ten years. With this foundation, Indigenous leadership in the Western Kimberley is better equipped to approach governments and others about future co-design work on specific elements of employment and the development strategy of the region. It also has the potential to shape EC in other regions.

Next Steps

The Milimili Report is still a work in progress but without Martin and Katie’s initial efforts, the discussion and debate on this crucial agenda would still be on the drawing board. The constructive feedback Aarnja has received from the West Kimberly leadership is being given serious consideration. While Aarnja incorporates the rich feedback, the EC leadership is eagerly anticipating a revised report that meets their satisfaction. The finalised Milimili Report, which will serve as the foundation of the region’s Development Agenda, will then likely be the first item from the West Kimberley EC put in front of Minister for Indigenous Affairs Nigel Scullion