

Case Study – enabling Indigenous-led reform



Cedric Cox from East Kimberley Job Pathways; Divina D'Anna and Jeri Sein from Aarnja; youth at La Perouse

Empowered Communities in three regions in 2017

East Kimberley

In the East Kimberley, strong Indigenous leadership and existing welfare reform initiatives—notably transitional housing and the cashless debit card—were the backdrop to Empowered Communities. Coordinated by backbone organisation Binarri-Binyja Yarrowoo Aboriginal Corporation, 12 opt-in organisations have worked with communities to agree on employment and education as first priorities.

In line with first priorities, low rates of employment and job readiness are being tackled through a '100 Jobs' project in Kununurra and Wyndham. An Empowered Communities and Western Australian Government partnership for coordination of a \$200m North West Aboriginal Housing fund will provide access to housing, accompanied by 'wraparound' services that support health, education, employment and ultimately a pathway off welfare. Binarri-Binyja Yarrowoo Aboriginal Corporation is synthesising regional priorities around housing, employment, education and community safety in a development agenda for the East Kimberley. Based on strong evidence, this will be used to support decision-making with government on funding and programming.

Empowered Communities leader (and CEO of Kununurra Waringarri Aboriginal Corporation) Desmond Hill is excited by the collaboration achieved:

"It's been the best collaboration we've had here to date, and we want to use the success of that to encourage de-siloing in government too. If we can do it, anyone can do it."

West Kimberley

The West Kimberley's Indigenous leaders, known for their ability to harness opportunities and enterprise to tackle social challenges, set up Empowered Communities backbone organisation Aarnja to facilitate a reform agenda. 'Community first' priorities of children and young people were agreed, and 12 organisations have opted in.

A Kimberley Aboriginal Young Leaders program was created in 2016, supported by a series of Jawun secondees, to provide peer-to-peer life skills and other support to enable young people to make positive choices. To date, 17 participants have developed their leadership capabilities and confidence through the program.

In late 2016, Children in Care and Aarnja collaborations began with the Western Australian Government. This included a Kimberley Aboriginal Children in Care Committee, which has developed innovative policy proposals to address drastic overrepresentation of Kimberley Aboriginal children in state care (99% of children in Western Australian state care in the West Kimberley are Indigenous, which is 54% of the child population).⁴⁵ A Kimberley Aboriginal Youth Suicide Prevention Forum in May 2017 was attended by local leaders (including past and present participants of Jawun's Emerging Leaders). Both the children in care committee and the suicide prevention forum showcased the improved collaboration across local organisations and with government, heralded as a success of the strengthening Empowered Communities agenda in West Kimberley.

Then, in mid-2017, a Dampier Peninsula Road Working Group was created to focus on how the \$65 million road upgrade project would protect culture, lifestyle and country, and bring economic

opportunities to improve the quality of life of Indigenous communities connected by the road to Broome. An extension of reform thinking in the region, this community–government collaboration benefits from the convening role of Empowered Communities and is a vehicle for its priority to foster generational change.

The vital importance of the West Kimberley’s focus on children and young people is explained by June Oscar AO, former CEO of Jawun partner organisation Marninwarntikura Fitzroy Women’s Resource Centre, and now Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner:

“Our children are our future, our community has always known this and our ancestors have always known this. We have to surround our children with the world they want to live in and deserve to live in. That is their fundamental human right. These organisations and businesses we establish must have children front and centre in all our policy and business decisions. We should hold ourselves accountable to our decisions being the best for our children”

Inner Sydney

In Inner Sydney the communities of Redfern and La Perouse have built strong collaboration through the Jawun partnership since 2012. With Empowered Communities, this has developed further.

By 2015, first priorities around aged care and early childhood were agreed, and the following year, Inner Sydney Empowered Communities was established as the backbone organisation to deliver reform programming. Funding was secured for a feasibility study for the first Aboriginal-controlled aged care centre in the Sydney Basin; family mentoring and early childhood education and school readiness initiatives were established; and a Keeping Them Home regional strategy was developed to strengthen support for parents and the restoration of children to families. To date, eight community organisations have opted in.

In a breakthrough in April 2017, Empowered Communities leaders presented a development agenda (‘pathway of empowerment’) to government. This was the next step after the early wins of first priority programming brought community and government together. It provides a new set of guidelines for government, government-funded and corporate agencies to do business with the region in a departure from the ‘deficit approach’ of Closing the Gap.

To operationalise the Pathway of Empowerment, a joint decision-making mechanism is being applied by Inner Sydney Empowered Communities and government. A radical innovation, this formally enlists community assessment and Inner Sydney Empowered Communities’ board approval in decisions around organisations and contracts in Indigenous communities, to ensure that investments align with the region’s Indigenous-led development agenda.

Inner Sydney Empowered Communities co-chair and community leader Chris Ingrey says he and other parents in his community apply the principles of the model to their own families, in particular creating intergenerational wealth through reinvestment of human capital and opportunity:

“I think of this Pathway of Empowerment model as I raise my children”

Shane Phillips, Inner Sydney Empowered Communities co-chair and Chris’s counterpart in Redfern, agrees that the vision and collaboration being fostered by Empowered Communities is transformative, and reaches into the next generation:

“I have seen the Redfern Aboriginal community make so much progress through Inner Sydney Empowered Communities, by working together with La Perouse and getting the right things happening in our communities. Together we can build safe, strong, grassroots communities capable of growing and supporting aspirations, providing opportunities, and creating success for our future generations”