

# What works in effective Indigenous community-managed programs and organisations

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Many Indigenous<sup>1</sup> organisations in urban, rural and remote areas are successfully managing a broad range of programs and services for their communities. This paper reviews available literature on Indigenous community-managed programs and organisations and summarises what is working in successful community-managed programs. It also considers some literature about the use of community development approaches and how they support successful Indigenous community-managed programs. This paper is intended for practitioners and policy-makers working with Indigenous communities to manage their own programs and organisations.

## KEY MESSAGES

- Many Indigenous organisations in urban, rural and remote areas are successfully managing a broad range of programs and services for their communities.
- The following factors are common to successful community-managed programs and organisations:
  - the community has ownership of and control over decision-making;
  - culture is central to the program, including an understanding of local context, history and community leaders;
  - local Indigenous staff work on the program or in the organisation;
  - good corporate governance exists;
  - Indigenous staff are working on programs and existing capacity is harnessed;
  - trusting relationships with partners are established;
  - flexibility in implementation timelines.
- Barriers to successful community programs and organisation include a range of factors that are external (e.g., lack of long-term commitment from external funding agencies) and internal to Indigenous organisations (e.g., human capital and capacity that underwrites economic development and significant social and health problems that are impacting the social and cultural capital of Indigenous communities).
- Currently, there is a lack of evaluation data to determine the extent to which community development practices are more effective than other practices in delivering successful Indigenous-managed programs or comparing community management against programs where communities are not given responsibility for management. This indicates the need for long-term data and research in these areas.

## Background

Since the 1970s, Indigenous communities have played leading roles in building community-controlled services in areas such as local government, health, housing, community and welfare services (Sanders, 2002; Tsey, McCalman, Bainbridge, & Brown, 2012). The growth in government support for Indigenous organisations to manage programs and services continues, and it includes numerous local community and national representative bodies across the country. Sanders (2002) described the emergence of these organisations as an “Indigenous organisational sector” and that it has been “crucial to the involvement of Indigenous Australians—as Indigenous Australians—in public policy” (p. 5). In particular, this sector can be “seen as providing some order and stability to the articulation of Indigenous interests” (p. 8) and is now an “integral element of the processes of Australian government” (p. 9).

<sup>1</sup> “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander” and “Indigenous” are used interchangeably in the literature to refer to Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people.

There is no available evidence specifically on the numbers of Indigenous people involved in community-run programs or organisations or where these are located. However, several studies have highlighted that many organised Indigenous community activities occur within urban locations (Behrendt, cited in Pitts & Mundine, 2011; Hunter, 2013). In the related area of Indigenous commercial enterprises, Foley (2013) highlighted that Indigenous businesses are more prevalent in urban areas with a higher Indigenous population. It should also be noted that, while Indigenous Australians are relatively more likely to live in remote parts of the country than the non-Indigenous population, there is also a steady trend in the population to become more urbanised and live in regional centres and major cities (Biddle, 2012).

While it is difficult to quantify what level of importance Indigenous people place on community-organised activities, available evidence from the 2008 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey provides some insights into the level of Indigenous people's involvement in community-oriented activities and their cultural attachment. According to the survey, in 2008 (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2009):

- 73% of Indigenous people aged 4–14 and 63% of those aged 15 and over were involved in cultural events, ceremonies or organisations in the past 12 months.
- 92% of Indigenous people aged 15 and over and 94% of those aged 4–14 had participated in some type of sporting, social or community activity.
- 31% of Indigenous people aged 4–14 spent at least one day a week with an Elder or Indigenous leader.
- 25% of Indigenous people aged 15 and over felt they were able to have their say within community on important issues all or most of the time.

While not inclusive of all Indigenous community-managed programs, the growth in registered Indigenous corporations (registered under the Corporations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) Act 2006) providing services for their communities might indicate the breadth of organisations directly providing or supporting programs and services. In 2012–13, 2,488 corporations—owned and controlled by Indigenous people—were registered with the Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations (ORIC, 2013b), with the majority of the top 500 corporations operating in the health and community services and employment and training sectors (ORIC, 2013a).

## Introduction

This paper reviews the available literature about both “community-managed programs” and “community-managed organisations”. Community-managed programs are understood as programs where an Indigenous community has decision-making control and responsibility for the implementation of the program. This understanding doesn't preclude other program management arrangements (for example, non-Indigenous partners, facilitators or funding bodies), provided the program is primarily under the ownership and responsibility of the Indigenous community. Examples of Indigenous community-managed organisations include those incorporated under the Corporations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) Act 2006, which require a minimum number of Indigenous members to be established (section 29(5)). However, this paper doesn't analyse factors underpinning programs where there is shared governance between government and an Indigenous community or organisation.

An understanding of the factors that facilitate successful Indigenous community-managed programs is important for informing future programs and organisations (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies [AIATSIS], 2007). However, defining successful Indigenous community-managed programs is difficult and complex, and the factors that lead to success can mean quite different things to Indigenous and non-Indigenous people (AIATSIS, 2007). Defining success for Indigenous community-managed programs is even more problematic because well-designed evaluations assessing the effectiveness of community-managed projects are rare (Tsey et al., 2012). Accordingly, this paper reviews the available evidence that is contained largely in small-scale

internal evaluations, case studies and program descriptions and draws out some of the principles and practices that show promise.

For the research, various search terms (for example, combinations of “Indigenous” or “Aboriginal” and “community-managed programs”, “community development”, “success factors”, “empowerment”, “bottom-up”, and “participatory”) and research databases containing peer-reviewed articles (AIFS Library catalogue; all of the EBSCO and Informit databases and collections) were used. General online resources from government or Indigenous community organisations were also used. While the original search was useful, greater success resulted from using snowballing techniques and conducting searches on independent and government organisations’ in-house publications. In particular, this approach yielded studies relating to the specific topics of successful Indigenous community-led programs in Australia. Following this process, approximately 40 studies were analysed for this paper, including formal and informal program evaluations, case studies, program descriptions and critiques and literature reviews.

There was a lack of rigorous evaluations of Indigenous community-managed programs. This problem was emphasised in topics as broad as Indigenous entrepreneurship (Furneaux & Brown, 2008), Indigenous corporate governance (Dodson & Smith, 2003) and community development interventions to improve Indigenous health and wellbeing (Campbell, Pyett, McCarthy, Whiteside, & Tsey, 2004).

## Critical factors in successful Indigenous community-managed programs

Indigenous communities and organisations are involved in, and manage, a broad range of programs, services and businesses (including, for example, those developed through partnerships with external organisations and funding arrangements with government) (AIATSIS, 2007).

Most of the studies examined for this paper explained the success factors of one or two successful community-managed programs. Collectively, the studies’ findings allow a broad list of success factors to be established; this list can then serve as a guide for policy-makers and practitioners. In many cases, while the findings were program specific, it is reasonable to consider the findings as applicable to working with Indigenous communities in general as they appeared across different programs.

Only one major study, published by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) in 2007, compiled several case studies and distilled the key strategies that underpin successful Indigenous-managed organisations and programs. That report, *Organising for Success: Policy Report. Successful Strategies in Indigenous Organisations*, outlines the reasons for success in Indigenous organisations, rather than focusing on failure (AIATSIS, 2007).

Some of the factors that support effective Indigenous community-managed programs include:

- facilitating community ownership and control;
- embedding culture;
- employing local Indigenous staff;
- harnessing existing community capacity and its leaders;
- implementing good governance;
- establishing trusting partnerships;
- keeping the implementation timelines flexible; and
- using community development approaches.

Each of these will be explored further in the sections below.



## Community ownership and control

Across the variety of programs reviewed as part of this report, almost without exception, successful programs were those in which the community defined its own needs and then designed and controlled the response (Campbell, Pyett, & McCarthy, 2007; Hoffmann et al., 2012; Smith, Grundy, & Nelson, 2010; Tsey & Every, 2000).

Community ownership is considered important because it ensures authority and autonomy over all aspects of the project; builds the commitment and enthusiasm of all people involved in the program, including collaborators (Hoffmann et al., 2012); and contributes to building community capacity so that communities can address their own needs (Couzos, Lea, Murray, & Culbong, 2005; Smith et al., 2010). In the case of a men's suicide prevention program in Yarrabah (south of Cairns), full community ownership was considered potentially slow and emotionally difficult; but the pace stemmed "from an understanding that lasting solutions could only be found within the community itself" (Campbell et al., 2004, p. 175). In this program, the men determined the operational plan and carried out its implementation, which led to the men's empowerment and leadership development (Tsey, Patterson, Whiteside, Baird, & Baird, 2002).

Evidence from qualitative studies suggests that community ownership and control can be embedded in community-managed programs in various ways. These include, but are not limited to:

- *local Indigenous management bodies*: Several successful programs have established Indigenous management bodies (e.g., committees, advisory bodies) where the members (often leaders in the community) were either totally or majority Indigenous community members. These bodies were responsible for any major decisions relating to a program or intervention and were successful at acting as conduits for community perspectives, liaising with government agencies (Campbell et al., 2004), retaining internal community consensus on implementation (Smith et al., 2010), and setting strategic directions over projects (Couzos et al., 2005).
- *formal agreement with partner organisations*: Written agreements have been used by several Indigenous organisations to provide clarity and to prevent misunderstandings with partner organisations (see Couzos et al., 2005; Hoffmann et al., 2012). These documents have been used to clearly establish the Indigenous organisation's strategic vision and any mutual agreements over particular matters (e.g., intellectual property issues or project governance).

## Embedding culture

Making Indigenous culture central to an organisation or program was highlighted as critical to success (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation Development Team [ATSIHFDT], 2009; Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care [SNAICC], 2012). For Indigenous healing programs addressing intergenerational trauma, there is a need to have programs that are "built around positive cultural perceptions, [and] around children seeing themselves immersed in their own culture in a contemporary context" (SNAICC, 2012, p. 8). In particular, SNAICC argued that local community controlled organisations are central to maintaining local culture as they are "rooted in their community, cultures and country", and so provide "culture" in a way that large national or statewide organisations cannot (2012, p. 9). An important aspect of embedding culture is prioritising the Indigenous worldview—that is, one that is relationally and holistically based on community and family obligations rather than the individual (ATSIHFDT, 2009; SNAICC, 2012). In practice, it is apparent that successful Indigenous-managed programs enshrine and support culture and the associated idea of cultural safety—that is, an environment defined as "spiritually, socially and emotionally safe ... where there is no assault challenge or denial of ... identity" (Williams quoted in Bin-Sallik, 2003, p. 21).

One study highlighted the importance of cultural safety to the success of an Indigenous-managed aged care program at Yuendumu (see Box 1: Smith et al., 2010). In the case of the Yuendumu Old People's Program, cultural safety means providing services that recognise "local culture as being the starting point for the design of service provision, rather than being a factor in design that needs to be accommodated to a mainstream culture" (Smith et al., 2010, p. 4).

### Box 1: Yuendumu Old People's Program

Since it started in 2000, the Mampu Maninja-kurlangu Jarlu Patu-ku Aboriginal Corporation has been running the Yuendumu Old People's Program. This program provides community-based aged care services for elderly Walpiri people in the remote Northern Territory community of Yuendumu. Services include meals on wheels, social and health support, short-term housing and personal care. The service uses a family model of care that is based on principles of cultural comfort and community control. This means the service is designed by local people and is provided "from within Walpiri cultural practices rather than Walpiri needs being accommodated within another cultural construct" (Smith et al. 2010, p. 4). In practice, this means the service is delivered by local people (who speak Walpiri) according to local kinship and cultural protocols (e.g., respecting specific kinship responsibilities and avoidance relationships). This model, which makes culture a central consideration, is considered to be the main factor for the very high community acceptance of the service.

Source: Smith et al. (2010)

## Employing local Indigenous staff

Employment and ongoing support for local Indigenous staff is considered a factor in the success of several programs (Campbell et al., 2007; Smith, 2004). In the Child Growth Project at the remote community of Gapuwiyak, the employment of local Yolngu staff familiar with the community's issues was considered a critical ingredient to communicating the program in appropriate language and in a way that matched their local social and cultural values. The local Indigenous staff also played an important leadership role for community members (Smith, 2004). Tsey, Harvey, Gibson, and Pearson (2009) highlighted an example where having Indigenous facilitators working in a family wellbeing program were critical to its success given their Indigenous life experience and emphasis on values that resonate with Indigenous belief systems (Tsey et al., 2009). The AIATSIS study also stressed the importance of staff development to ongoing Indigenous organisational success and that "skilled, competent staff are crucial building blocks for a strong organisation" (AIATSIS, 2007, p. 18).

## Harnessing existing community capacity and its leaders

Harnessing existing community capacity is reported to be important to supporting some programs. Campbell et al. (2007) outlined the example of a Walpiri program addressing the problems of petrol sniffing. Its success was partly attributed to the community members having been empowered by a previous family counselling program that equipped these people to keep dealing with the problems (Campbell & Stojanovski, 2001).

Central to a community's capacity is the importance of Indigenous leadership. An evaluation of several community development projects indicated many of the positive developments of the projects were "in no small part due to the key Indigenous leaders involved" (Burchill, Higgins, Ramsamy, & Taylor, 2006, p. 58). In particular, having strong Indigenous leaders associated with projects also satisfied several other success factors such as trust and flexibility (Burchill et al., 2006). The AIATSIS report also highlighted the success that Indigenous organisations have had as a result of strong leadership. In particular, the report found strong organisations had chief executive officers who were outward looking and encouraged connections with partners and other influential stakeholders. Examples include encouraging connections with their Indigenous communities and clients, participating in advocacy forums during government policy inquiries, and having relationships with industry associations, government, non-government organisations and local mainstream services (AIATSIS, 2007).

## Implementing good governance

Successful Indigenous organisations and programs are underpinned by good governance and take steps to avoid poor governance (AIATSIS, 2007). Dodson and Smith highlighted that "building good

governance is identified as the key ingredient—the foundation stone—for building sustainable development in communities” (2003, p. v). Good governance refers to Indigenous organisations and communities “having the structures, processes and institutional capacity in place to be able to exercise ... jurisdiction through sound decision-making, representation and accountability” (Dodson & Smith, 2003, p. 2). Dodson and Smith (2003) outlined several ingredients underpinning good governance. They include:

- stable organisational structure;
- capable and effective institutions;
- clear rules for roles, responsibilities and decision-making;
- separation of powers;
- dispute resolution processes;
- sound financial and administrative management systems;
- effective and realistic development strategies; and
- a strong cultural fit with the local community.

One important aspect of good governance in Indigenous communities is achieving a legitimate cultural fit (AIATSIS, 2007; Dodson & Smith, 2003; ORIC, 2010; Reconciliation Australia, 2008). While complex in practice, a cultural fit in the context of governance involves a balance between organisational governance standards and community traditions and values (ORIC, 2010). Dodson and Smith highlighted that “problems arise for many Indigenous governing bodies when they lose sight of the fact that their ongoing legitimacy is often grounded, at the local level, in culturally-based values [and] priorities” (2003, p. 19). Accordingly, given the context-specific nature of good governance, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to governance of Indigenous community organisations and programs (AIATSIS, 2007; Dodson & Smith, 2003).

The potential benefits of good governance include enhanced organisational stability in Indigenous communities, fair representation of all constituents, less dependency on the quality of people employed, more effective conflict resolution, better planning for the future and creating an environment more conducive to sustained socio-economic development (Dodson & Smith, 2003). The National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO) is good example of an Indigenous organisation that has successful governance arrangements for a complex membership. With 150 member organisations (who must meet strict requirements to be Indigenous controlled health services), NACCHO has a 16-member board that has clear rules for how it works with its Chief Executive Officer, members and affiliates (NACCHO, 2012; for more information see <[www.naccho.org.au/about-us/governance6/](http://www.naccho.org.au/about-us/governance6/)>).

## Establishing trusting partnerships

A key success factor underpinning effective Indigenous-managed programs is having strong, trusting relationships with partner organisations (Burchill et al., 2006; Campbell et al., 2007; Hoffmann et al., 2012; Hunt, 2010; Department of Social Services [DSS], 2012). It is common for programs in Indigenous communities to be run in partnership or shared governance and funding arrangements with government or another organisation where success is contingent on strong, trusting relationships. Throughout the research, it is acknowledged that building trusting relationships takes time (Burchill et al., 2006; Campbell et al., 2004) and programs thrive when there are strong personal relationships between key players in partner organisations and when regular face-to-face visits and phone calls are used to stay in touch (Hunt, 2010).

Numerous government and non-government publications outline how to engage with Indigenous communities when implementing programs. The New South Wales Department of Premier and Cabinet’s Aboriginal engagement strategies (NSW PC, 2011) is a useful summary of all the publicly available government and non-government Indigenous engagement publications. A recent partnership model between SNAICC and the NSW government is expanded on in Box 2.

### Box 2: New Capacity building partnership model for Aboriginal Child and Family services

Led by the Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat (NSW) and the NSW Department of Family and Community Services, this new approach aims to build the capacity of new and existing NSW Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) to deliver out-of-home care services.

The ultimate objective is that all Aboriginal children in out-of-home care will be supported by an Aboriginal agency with a culturally tailored service. The model involves a partnership between an unaccredited ACCO and an accredited service with the aim of supporting the accreditation of the unaccredited ACCO and the transfer of all of the clients to the ACCO once it is accredited. The accredited service in the partnership has an auspice role while also building the capacity of the unaccredited ACCO.

The model involves a 4-stage process of transitioning (establishment, governance, service development and agency support) and is supported by an external Aboriginal partnerships facilitator. The model serves as a good example of how to increase community management of programs and services.

Source: SNAICC & AbSec (2013)

The following is a short summary of key actions that several publications have included for improving collaboration and engagement with Indigenous communities (see also Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs [FaHCSIA], 2011; Stewart, Lohoar, & Higgins, 2011). Key ways to facilitate trusting relationships are to:

- employ Indigenous staff to manage Indigenous-specific services;
- provide feedback on actions taken or not taken and provide good information to support engagement;
- show genuine interest and respect—do not be judgmental and respect that there is a diversity of views;
- allow time for reflection and decision-making;
- involve Indigenous people at all stages of a project—planning, implementing and evaluation stages;
- work with existing Indigenous leaders and organisational structures established in the community;
- establish conflict resolution processes at the start of each meeting;
- make engagement accessible—use interpreters (if needed), speak in language, use clear and concise language;
- be clear on how a partner organisation, in particular government, makes decisions;
- focus on community strengths rather than deficits;
- allow proper handovers and transition time for new staff working with a community;
- seek feedback from both Indigenous peak bodies and community members; and
- be flexible in funding and implementation timelines, which would allow more responsive approaches to address an issue.

The AIATSIS (2007) report also outlined that Indigenous organisations that have been successful in building relationships with partners have:

- been strategic in establishing and nurturing partnerships, and have considered where they can contribute to achieving their objectives;
- adopted a robust negotiating style so that contracts are realistic for their organisation;
- insisted on maintaining their cultural identity while engaging in partnerships; and
- formed beneficial relationships with local government agencies, businesses and other community groups.

The Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation (Dhimurru) is a key example of an Indigenous organisation being proactive in forming strong collaborations with external partners in its natural resource management programs (see Box 3).



### Box 3: Dhimurru Land Management Aboriginal Corporation

Dhimurru Land Management Aboriginal Corporation (Dhimurru) is an Indigenous not-for-profit community-based organisation that is committed to sustainable management of traditional lands (near Nhulunbuy in the Northern Territory). It is based on Yolngu control and a community-based approach to planning (see <[www.dhimurru.com.au](http://www.dhimurru.com.au)>). Dhimurru provides a range of land and cultural management services, including on-ground works, surveys and research and land management planning. It has a successful history of engaging collaborators and pioneering ways of delivering services through partnerships, conducting research and incorporating Western science-based practice with traditional practices.

Some of the examples of Dhimurru's successful partnerships, many of which have been publicly recognised, include:

- declaring and managing the Dhimurru Indigenous Protected Area over land and sea areas on behalf of Yolngu traditional owners in collaboration with more than 30 partner agencies;
- research in to and collection of marine debris: this included collaboration with the World Wildlife Fund, NT Fisheries and Conservation Volunteers Australia; it is one of longest running surveys of debris in Australia;
- implementing the Carpentaria Ghost Net program: this included collection of dumped fishing nets (called 'ghost nets') and working with the Australian Fisheries Management Authority, Australian Customs and Border Protection Service and others to collect the waste; and
- invasive ant management: this included partnering with the CSIRO and many other organisations to eradicate pest ant populations using an adaptive management approach.

Some of the key factors behind Dhimurru's success include:

- embedded partners in organisational structure as partner organisations are not seen as external and are included in Dhimurru's internal management framework and program planning;
- inclusive decision-making which involves a high level of inclusion in Dhimurru decision-making and internal business, with inclusion of key partner staff in general Dhimurru business and group emails—allowing collaborators to be involved in Dhimurru business beyond their projects, allowing Dhimurru access to external advice it may not have received otherwise, and reinforcing mutual respect and trust;
- annual mediation workshop which is facilitated by an external consultant and including all Dhimurru staff and collaborators, this workshop allows for all people to be involved in an open review of a program;
- a clear commitment to a both-ways approach and respecting external partners;
- Yolngu control, empowerment and project ownership;
- respect for Yolngu values;
- strong governance and leadership; and
- not overcommitting to too many collaborations.

Source: Dhimurru (2012, 2014); Hoffmann et al. (2012); Marika & Roeger (2012).

## Keeping flexibility in implementation timelines

Another important success factor highlighted in the research, particularly for external organisations partnering with Indigenous communities, is the need for flexibility in implementation deadlines (Hunt, 2010). Given the level and extent of disadvantage in some communities, and the fact that responses to social problems require significant time and resources, strict adherence to short-term implementation timelines is problematic (Hunt, 2010; Smith, 2004). In the case of the Yolngu's Child Growth Project, short and inadequate timelines led to frustration with the project and the government agency they were working with (Smith, 2004). In cases of partnerships between Indigenous communities and external organisations, "long-term commitments are required to establish and maintain collaborations" (Hoffmann et al., 2012, p. 49).

## Using community development approaches

It is clear that there are similarities between the factors underpinning successful community-managed programs and the practices of community development. Community development practices have been internationally recognised by the United Nations (Kenny, 2011) and the World Bank and are now part of mainstream development practices (Mansuri & Rao, 2004). Community development practices are premised on bottom-up development—that is, people who are affected by decisions about their future should be empowered to control or influence those decisions. It has a strong commitment to practices that ensure local people participate and own the decisions that affect their community: the aim is to enable “self-mobilisation and ownership” within communities (Kenny, 2011, p. 188). Community development also rejects a deficit view of “problem” communities (Kenny, 2011).

Often, it is the case that successful Indigenous community-managed programs (whether based on community development models or not) mirror the key community development principles of bottom-up development, empowerment, community ownership and decision-making, and prioritise Indigenous people’s strong connection to land, family and culture.

Community development approaches have been applied in Indigenous communities with varied success. Given the diversity of Indigenous communities and experiences in Australia, Hunt (2010) argued that participatory community development strategies commonly used overseas are not generally considered appropriate to Indigenous Australian communities and that recognising and adjusting practices to local differences is essential. The Central Land Council (CLC, 2009) argued that there is a great need for a specific approach to Indigenous community development. An example of one group that CLC represents is included at Box 4.

Effective community development programs in Indigenous communities are underpinned by:

- acknowledgement of the strong family and cultural ties within Indigenous communities (Hunt, 2010; Kenny, 2011);
- acknowledgement of how Indigenous communities identify in relation to land and heritage, and how this is a central aspect of their culture (Kenny, 2011);
- empowerment of the community in a culturally appropriate way based on local knowledge and perspective (Higgins, 2010);

### Box 4: A community-managed program using a community development approach

The Walpiri Education and Training Trust uses Indigenous royalties to support education and training programs in the Central Australian communities of Yuendumu, Lajamanu, Willowra and Nyirripi. The program is about providing learning opportunities for all Walpiri from early childhood to adulthood and involves a series of initiatives, in particular to strengthen early childhood development. The Central Land Council (CLC) has a long-standing relationship with these communities, acts as their agent and is also responsible for overseeing the project. The CLC’s Community Development Unit has partnered with World Vision Australia (WVA, an international non-government organisation) as a project manager, to use a community development approach to set up training and support for workers, parents and carers in communities; improve the capacity of child care centres to deliver early childhood development programs and to increase community capacity to govern them.

Key outcomes of the program include development of a community-based training model to provide local training to women involved in the child care program; improved relations with funding bodies and stakeholders and emerging signs of long-term outcomes, including some children being identified by teachers as being better prepared for school. Some of the success factors include strong relationships, communication and respect between WVA, CLC and communities and a high level of Indigenous control—WVA and CLC are committed to Walpiri people making the key decisions, running things and developing capacity.

Source: Hunt (2012); Kelly (2011)

- genuine and trusting relationships between local people and support agencies (Burchill et al., 2006; Kenny, 2011; Walsh & Mitchell, 2002);
- control by local Indigenous people of the planning, design and implementation of a project (Hunt, 2010; Smith, 2004; Walsh & Mitchell, 2002);
- sustainable implementation and adequate funding (Campbell et al., 2004; Higgins, 2010);
- adoption of a solutions-focused and strengths/assets-based approach to generating change (Hunt, 2012; Tsey et al., 2004);
- a flexible approach to implementing and achieving short-term outcomes (Burchill et al., 2006; Hunt, 2010; Smith, 2004);
- acknowledgement of, and then attempts to rectify, the power inequalities that exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in a community development process (CLC, 2009; Smith, 2004);
- access to appropriate information (Walsh & Mitchell, 2002);
- acceptance by decision-makers of each other's goals and responsibilities (Walsh & Mitchell, 2002);
- access to technical support in financial and corporation management (Walsh & Mitchell, 2002); and
- use of participatory planning approaches in Indigenous communities (Walsh & Mitchell, 2002).

## Barriers to successful Indigenous community management

Numerous studies indicate a range of barriers to Indigenous communities being able to successfully manage their own programs and services. Dodson and Smith (2003) provided a good summary of the numerous research findings about the internal and external factors that prevent Indigenous communities from developing.

External factors include:

- government policies and services being poorly coordinated and delivered inefficiently, involving stop-start funding and/or numerous agencies, leading to unworkable or externally imposed and onerous reporting requirements (see Hoffmann et al., 2012); and
- a lack of long-term commitment from external agencies to establish and maintain collaborations (see Hoffmann et al., 2012).

Internal factors include:

- Indigenous community organisations lacking the human capital and capacity that underwrites economic development (e.g., lack of financial management and business skills, financial and overall literacy);
- substantial infrastructure gaps in Indigenous communities;
- significant social and health problems that are destroying social and cultural capital of Indigenous communities;
- programs that lack whole-of-community planning (despite being burdened with imposed planning processes);
- community politics undermining the stability of governing bodies; and
- Indigenous organisations having difficulties securing and retaining experienced professional staff, impacting on leadership and decision-making.

## Conclusion

This paper indicates many Indigenous organisations are successfully managing programs and services for their communities. Those that have been successful have generally been underpinned by good corporate governance, had a commitment to prioritising cultural values, employed

Indigenous people, had strong leadership and harnessed existing capacity, and built strong, long-term relationships with partners.

Indigenous control of the planning, design and implementation of programs is a critical factor to success. It is something that any successful program should uphold as a primary operating principle. There is a lack of rigorous evaluations of Indigenous community-managed programs and organisations. In particular, there was no evidence comparing community management against programs where communities are not given responsibility for management, nor studies documenting the transition from a government-led program to one managed by the community. Accordingly, this indicates the need for long-term data and research in these areas.

## Further reading

The table below contains a list of selected research and evaluations that were the key pieces of evidence used in this paper.

Title	Year	Author
Evaluating Aboriginal empowerment programs: The case of family wellbeing	2000	Tsey, K., & Every, A.
Indigenous men taking their rightful place in society? A preliminary analysis of a participatory action research process with Yarrabah men's health group	2002	Tsey, K., Patterson, D., Whiteside, M., Baird, L., Baird, B.
Beyond bandaids: Exploring the underlying social determinants of Aboriginal health	2004	Campbell D., Pyett P., McCarthy L., Whiteside M., & Tsey, K.
Community development interventions to improve Aboriginal health: Building an evidence base	2007	Campbell, D., Pyett, P., & McCarthy, L.
Organising for success: Policy report. Successful strategies in Indigenous organisations	2007	Australian Institute of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS)
Partnerships for Indigenous development: International development NGOs, Aboriginal organisations and communities	2010	Hunt, J.
Achieving highly successful multiple agency collaborations in a cross-cultural environment: Experiences and lessons from Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation and partners	2012	Hoffmann, B.D., Roeger, S., Wise, P., Dermer, J., Yunupingu, B., Lacey, D., et al.
Improving Indigenous community governance through strengthening Indigenous and government organisational capacity	2012	Tsey, K., McCalman, J., Bainbridge, R., & Brown, C.

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