Women’s Development Project—empowering women in the bush

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The Women’s Development Project (WDP) is a community development initiative that utilises an Indigenous framework to ensure that every component of the initiative is driven by the Jawoyn women from the Katherine east region of the Northern Territory. The WDP is based on the premise that strengthening cultural identity and increasing self-determination will result in positive health outcomes. The WDP works in partnership with the Jawoyn Association Aboriginal Corporation to deliver culture regeneration projects such as: healing and cultural camps; leadership initiatives; maternal and child health programs; and nutrition, medicinal and spiritual wellbeing activities for families. All activities occur under the direction of the Banatjarl Women’s Council—‘STRONGBALA WOMIN GRUP’.

A recent evaluation of the WDP found specifically that the initiative has made significant progress towards this overall goal of increasing self-determination that in turn will enhance positive health outcomes. Furthermore, the evaluation found that the WDP is successfully contributing to a sustainable environment where the Banatjarl Women’s Council and the Jawoyn Association are the lead agencies achieving and maintaining increased self-determination.

The WDP draws on the strong evidence of the social determinants of health (including socio-economic and cultural factors) as the key contributors to the living circumstances, quality of life and in turn the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities. The WDP understands that empowerment strategies, in socially excluded populations, will improve health outcomes and reduce health disparities. The WDP attempts to contribute to the body of evidence that addresses ‘control of destiny’ and ‘empowerment’ at the community level to increase the capacity of the communities to take control of their health and wellbeing and build community norms.

The paper elucidates the challenges and benefits of working on a long-term, capacity building and culturally appropriate initiative from the personal perspectives of two community development workers. It reflects the WDP achievements of working with Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to strengthen the capacity to achieve health outcomes; advocating for better food security through nutrition projects, improving mental wellbeing and providing opportunities for economic development. The public health components, cultural diversity and community development approaches have created a strong foundation enabling knowledge and learnings from the WDP to be discussed with other Indigenous and non-Indigenous community development workers in an attempt to share good practice and encourage other agencies to adopt this approach.