Women’s Development Project—empowering women in the bush

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Introduction
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. This paper elucidates the challenges and benefits of working on a long term, capacity building and culturally appropriate initiative.

The WDP has been managed by a culturally diverse team, with Indigenous and non-Indigenous members, who have established and maintained long term working relationships with remote women. Collectively the team and community members have worked together to advocate for better food security, build capacity, improve wellbeing and provide opportunities for economic development. The community development approach is inherent in all aspects of this project and has created a strong foundation upon which the achievements are based. This paper reflects upon the learnings gained throughout the implementation process and is an attempt to share the elements of good practice to encourage other agencies to adopt this approach.

Background
The Fred Hollows Foundation (The Foundation) began working with communities in the Jawoyn region east of Katherine in 1999 and at that time focused on four communities; Bulman, Wugularr, Barunga and Manyallaluk. The women’s centres have always been intrinsically linked to The Foundation’s nutrition and governance projects as many of the social services in remote communities are provide by these local hubs; meals for the aged and children, laundry services, child and maternal health programs, crèches, art and craft activities and local advocacy initiatives. In 2007 The Foundation documented views of the Jawoyn women regarding the operation of their women’s centres and recorded the women’s vision for the future in the report titled ‘We want our women’s centres to be strong’.¹ The WDP began in 2008 and the 13 recommendations outlined in the report drove the project between 2008 and 2012. The overall goal of the WDP was ‘increasing the self determination of women in the Jawoyn region’ and the key objectives that were developed to address the goal included:

- increased networking and communication opportunities
- increased capacity of communities to manage and govern
- increased opportunities for livelihoods
- improved and mutually beneficial partnerships that build and share knowledge.

Outcomes
As the WDP has strived to reach these objectives, the women have achieved many varied outcomes. Different networking opportunities such as the annual women’s forums and study tours have allowed for the development of working relationships across the communities. These initiatives have contributed to the women’s networking capabilities and resulted in increased shared learning. There has been reported improvements to the quality of meals and food safety practices in the women’s centres, and in individual homes, following the development and distribution of the ‘Kukumbat gudwan daga – Really cooking good food’ cookbook.² The WDP has supported training in nutrition, cooking, hygiene, food safety as well as planning and organisation, tangible skills that can be utilised in other areas of community life. Income generation opportunities and increased engagement of women involved in the arts and crafts projects was evident with the development of an arts and crafts manual.
titled ‘Mibala Wei – Arts and crafts our way’. There have also been examples of improved governance practices in the women’s centres following training sponsored by the WDP and subsequently strengthened by learnings that were shared between the women.

However, the single most important impact has been the establishment of the Banatjarl Women’s Council and the election of office bearers. Capacity and self esteem enhancement that led to regular women’s committee meetings and the election of Banatjarl Women’s Council membership, has ultimately given the Jawoyn women a united voice. This formalises the role of the women’s centres in speaking up for their community and taking control of issues that affect women in the region.

Familiarity and trust developed between the women across communities throughout the WDP’s implementation has provided the basis for working together and enabling a strong voice for women and families. Membership of the women’s council is drawn from more than 10 different communities and the primary focus has been the establishment of the Banatjarl Family Resource and Healing Centre. The Banatjarl Women’s Council is the basic structure needed to fulfil the goal of sustainable increases in self determination.

The WDP has worked in partnership with the Jawoyn Association Aboriginal Corporation to deliver cultural 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. The women have also identified good practice elements for organisations that wish to work with and implement projects with the Council. This demonstrates a strong voice developing among the women and the confidence to speak out about how they wish to engage with stakeholders.

**Community development approach**

The role of The Foundation in this process was to develop a system that could support the Women’s Council to achieve realistic outcomes and continue to build the capacity of the women. The design and implementation approach used by WDP draws on the learnings of community development specialists and practitioners. Janet Hunt’s 2010 CAEPR working paper no 71: “Partnerships for Indigenous Development - International NGOs, Aboriginal Organisations and Communities” and Ellen Mary Gallagher’s 2010 unpublished thesis “Lessons from International Development for Aboriginal Australian Poverty Reduction” both highlight Bottom-Up approaches. The chosen methodology for the design and implementation of the WDP is aligned with that of Bottom-Up approaches and embedded in the community development paradigm.

**Control as a social determinant of health**

The WDP draws on the strong evidence that the social determinants of health (including socio-economic and cultural factors) are the key contributors to the living circumstances, quality of life and, in turn, the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities. There has been increasing recognition of the importance of control and empowerment as determinants of health and wellbeing. Lack of control causes stress and anxiety and is a strong predictor of morbidity and mortality. Central to health improvement is enabling people to increase control over their health. The Commission on Social Determinants of Health highlighted cultural loss, social exclusion and lack of consent and control as key impacts on Indigenous populations resulting from colonisation and ongoing discriminatory government policies. Restoring Indigenous peoples ‘control’ over their lives through self determination policies and strengthening cultural identity, provide important strategies for reversing these disempowering effects.

The WDP is based on the emerging evidence that empowerment strategies in socially excluded populations will improve health and reduce health disparities, with outcomes at the psychological, organisational, community and population levels. The WDP attempts to contribute to the body of evidence that addresses ‘control of destiny’ and ‘empowerment’ at the community level to increase the
Evaluation results

A recent evaluation of the WDP found specifically that the project has made significant progress towards the overall goal of increasing self determination that in turn will enhance positive health outcomes. The WDP has made a contribution towards increasing the control the women have over their lives. Most significantly, there has been a change in the women’s belief that they are capable of not only instigating beneficial changes in their women’s centres, but also in other aspects of their own lives. Through collective achievements such as driving the culturally appropriate governance processes at their elections, utilising communication tools to maintain important social networks, implementing new ways of operating their women’s centres and participating in civic engagement activities, the women have increased their mechanisms of self determination.

Although it was beyond the scope of the evaluation to demonstrate that this increase in control has had an impact on health and wellbeing, it was concluded that the WDP is demonstrating outcomes that indicate the women have been empowered and have an increased capacity to take control at the community level. The evidence gathered showed that the WDP is achieving best practice through the community development approach and is working towards achieving the objectives. However, the project’s greater success is captured in the stories of the women who value the respect, opportunities and support offered by WDP and who in turn offer their own learnings to The Foundation. Furthermore, the evaluation found that the WDP is successfully contributing to a sustainable environment where the Banatjarl Women’s Council is the lead agency achieving and maintaining increased self determination.

Contextual challenges

With remote Aboriginal communities already considered to be disadvantaged, the impact of recent political changes has made it difficult for the women to feel part of society. The political context in which the WDP operates stretches far beyond the impact of the local Aboriginal partner organisations. Throughout the duration of the project there were been monumental shifts in the political landscape. These shifts include, but are not limited to, changes in the structure of local government, the framework underpinning access to the welfare payment system, the Community Development Employment Program, Department of Education and Work Relations work agreements and the Australian Government’s Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER).

The women’s centres in the Jawoyn region were directly impacted by the NTER. Not only were women connected to the women’s centres personally affected by the measures in the NT Emergency Response Act 2007 but the structure and function of the women’s centres drastically changed. Following the NTER the women’s centres received Commonwealth funding not only to provide meals to aged care residents in the community but also to provide lunch for every school age child. In most cases this represented a 200% increase in meal production and changed the focus, employment conditions, availability of human resources, management structures and reporting requirements for women’s centres.

Major local government shire reform was also introduced in July 2008 and represented the biggest ever historical change in local government in the Northern Territory. This reform changed the structural, managerial and reporting requirements of the women’s centres as they came under direct management of the local shire. Hence, the major and constant change that contextualises the WDP has been extreme and pronounced.

Benefits of a community development approach

Due to the many external pressures, demands and political changes that impact on the women’s centres and all the participating women, different levels of support and input were anticipated to be required at
different times. The ‘rolling design’ process flexibly responded and adapted to the priorities of each women’s centre, as it aims to place the women in the driving seat.

The Foundation’s WDP staff members have many years experience in working with Indigenous women in remote areas of the Northern Territory. As a result, a long term approach providing sustained engagement that develops at an appropriate pace, was deemed to be the most relevant to the context of the four women’s centres. Highly developed skills in project management and participatory planning and monitoring were essential to the ‘rolling design’ methodology as well as trust and rapport between team members and the communities.

The WDP team consisted of members with strong skills in: program management; community development, particularly with Indigenous women in remote areas; human rights advocacy; governance processes; and cross cultural communication. Additionally, staff possessed established relationships with the women and communities in the Jawoyn region. This synergy of skills and understanding of cultural considerations underpinned a strong team.

**Good practice**

Australian international development agencies, such as The Foundation, have long been committed to the continued improvement and learning of their development practices. The Foundation is a signatory to the ‘Code of Conduct’ put forward by the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID). The latest version defines standards of good practice and represents the commitment of Australian international agencies to conduct their work with integrity and accountability.\(^{19}\) The commonalities of development effectiveness approaches linked to successful outcomes were developed into a document termed the ‘NGO Effectiveness Framework’ (NGO EF).\(^{20}\) The common qualities underpinning the work of the NGO international development sector as outlined in the NGO EF are:

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<tr>
<th>Quality</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<td>1. High quality relationships</td>
<td>Based on trust, mutuality and the acceptance of difference. The purpose of high quality relationships is to increase the process of ownership and control.</td>
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<td>2. Long term engagement</td>
<td>Due to the complex context in which NGOs work, long term engagement is required to understand the environment and build the trust essential for more effective and sustainable solutions.</td>
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<td>3. Learning</td>
<td>NGOs commit to ongoing reflection for the purpose of continued improvement.</td>
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<td>4. Adaptation</td>
<td>Due to the ever changing context in which NGOs work, they seek to adapt to information and try to respond to changing circumstances.</td>
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<td>5. Working together</td>
<td>In many situations NGOs are able to increase the impact of their activities by sharing information and resources and working together.</td>
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<td>6. Risk Taking</td>
<td>NGOs appear more open to working in situations where the outcomes are less certain, in order to meet the needs of highly marginalised populations.</td>
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<td>7. Quality of staff</td>
<td>The skills and experience of people employed by Australian NGOs are extremely high and contributes to the effectiveness of NGO outcomes.</td>
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In 2012 the evaluator reviewing the project was successfully able to map the WDP process results against a good practice international development effectiveness framework and found that there was evidence of many common qualities, such as working with integrity and accountability underpinning the project.\(^{21}\) The evaluator found that the WDP partners and other stakeholders acknowledged and valued the strong and respectful relationships built with The Foundation’s staff. The evaluation found that there were high quality relationships developed based on trust and respect and that the staff had strong consultation and communication skills. The staff applied culturally appropriate approaches, ensured the women had ownership over the project, worked together as a team to achieve the outcomes through a long term engagement process and frequently adapted learnings using a ‘rolling design’ process.
The mutual trust and respect evident in the WDP has contributed to the formation of a strong and honest relationship between the WDP staff and the women from the four communities. (The Women’s Development Project Evaluation Report, April 2012)

**Recommendations**

The evaluation made a number of recommendations related to the WDP to progress the project into the future. The recommendations listed below represent the issues that relate to The Foundation’s approach. They are shared in this paper as a means by which the WDP learnings can be widely disseminated.

- ‘Community development’ approach to be adopted by The Foundation as a blueprint for working with remote Aboriginal communities. The approach could be documented by adding the ideas in this report regarding ‘good practice’ to existing guidelines and procedures.
- The Banatjarl Women’s Council work together with The Foundation to develop a ‘code’ for working with remote Aboriginal communities and promote the code as the basis of future partnerships with either government or non-government stakeholders.
- In refining its ‘community development’ approach, The Foundation should incorporate the learnings about the importance of regular and formalised reflection in program implementation and review.
- The Foundation develops a strong and considered transition strategy from its current level of financial and in-kind support to ensure that the positive outcomes from the WDP are sustained.

**Conclusion**

The long term engagement between the women of the bush and the WDP has been an important element to being able to develop and support both individual women and the women’s centres. The evaluation report showed that by working alongside the women using a community development approach, not only built their capacity, but enhanced their self empowerment and self determination. The women’s vision to assist their people, who are affected by the social determinants of health, and work towards improving their health, became the overarching priority for the project.

Intercultural communication was essential to build trust and rapport and was a key factor that enabled the women to work effectively and be able to mutually transfer skills and knowledge. Understanding the women’s needs and what they are capable of was the key to building self empowerment. The community development approach has demonstrated that this is an appropriate model to work towards increasing self determination.

With many barriers and contextual factors to be overcome and through the ongoing process of finding solutions to keep moving forward, the WDP built upon a foundation of trust with a recognition of the cultural influences that were required to be upheld. An important part of working with the women was to build on the strengths that were already in place. From the patient and generous spirit of the women, came the voices of Jawoyn people and their close language groups, adjusting and developing their program to support the strong motivated women of the Banatjarl Women’s Council. The WDP enhanced their capacity by maintaining cultural integrity, good governance and enabling self empowerment. The Banatjarl Women’s Council is well placed to continue to strengthen this self determination.
References


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