

Indigenous entrepreneurship: Closing the gap on local terms

Martin Brueckner, m.brueckner@curtin.edu.au

Cecil Arthur Pearson, c.perason@curtin.edu.au

Samir Chatterjee, s.chatterjee@curtin.edu.au

Curtin University, Australia

Gareth Wise, castlesaburac@yahoo.com

Dudunggura Environmental Services, Australia

Bundak Marika

Yirrkala Dhanbul Aboriginal Corporation, Australia

Abstract

Australian federal government policy over the last ten years has renewed the focus on closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, targeting chiefly improvements in health and economic participation among Indigenous people. Thus far, however, the results have been mixed, in part because of the endurance of Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage in Australia which cannot be expected to be undone within a matter of years. Failure to deliver better policy outcomes, however, can also be seen as a function of an inflexible policy design, which aims at the mainstreaming of Indigenous communities on non-Indigenous terms, whilst militating against the potential for Indigenous entrepreneurial activities especially in rural and remote regions.

Against this policy background, this paper reports on local entrepreneurial activities by local Yolngu clans in East Arnhem Land in the Northern Territories (NT). In particular, attention is directed to local for-profit and not-for-profit activities by members of the Gumatj clan south of the regional centre of Nhulunbuy and the Rirratjingu operations in the town Yirrkala respectively. The paper describes how the ventures run by the Gumatj and Rirratjingu clans offer pathways for the creation of income, employment and social capital within the respective local communities whilst also being axiomatic in the protection of cultural vitality and integrity. The findings point to the need for more flexible approaches to policy design and delivery, enabling the establishment and growth of Indigenous business activities outside the economic mainstream targeted by federal government policy. As such, the authors echo calls in the literature for policy support for what has been described as the ‘hybrid economy’, which allows for participation in both economic and cultural activities both of which are crucial for Indigenous future well-being as they are for any cultural group.

Introduction

Since white settlement Indigenous Australians have suffered socio-economic disadvantage under the rule of their white colonisers (Attwood, 1989), and to this day rate as the most economically, socially and culturally disadvantaged population segment in Australian society (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2009). Despite the end of 140 years of so-called protection under the ‘missionary project’ in the 1970s which marked the advent of Indigenous self-determination under the Whitlam Labor government (Markus, 1994) and self-governance in the 1990s (Fletcher, 1994), Indigenous disadvantage still proves pervasive. The last decade saw renewed political interest in ‘closing the gap’ between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

Under the Howard Coalition government this goal was pursued under the banner of ‘practical reconciliation’ to reduce Indigenous material disadvantage (Altman, 2004), a policy focus that was maintained by the Rudd Labor government from 2007 onwards.

Closing the gap is a political attempt at achieving statistical equality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in areas such as health, life expectancy, employment and education. While the need for equality is beyond dispute, the closing the gap policy framework is criticized, however, for being neither new nor promising. This is because similar policy initiatives were attempted already under previous governments in the late 1980s (see the Hawke government’s Aboriginal Employment Development Policy) and because policy frameworks such as this have commonly failed to address the causes of Indigenous disadvantage in the past (Altman, 2009; Pholi, Black, and Richards, 2009). One key objective of the closing the gap framework is to halve the Indigenous employment gap within 10 years by way of fostering Indigenous participation in the formal economy. While this approach is purported to afford Indigenous Australians with a choice between mainstream work and welfare, the uptake of mainstream work may not only necessitate migration from home communities it may also run counter to Indigenous cultures, goals and aspirations (Peterson, 2005). Furthermore, especially in remote parts of Australia where Indigenous communities have adapted strategies to blend market engagements with customary practices with the assistance from the now dismantled Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) the current push for normalization under the closing the gap framework has the potential to disrupt local efforts to build economically sustainable and culturally germane livelihoods. Notwithstanding the support of some Indigenous leaders (e.g., Pearson, 2000) for a push towards economic mainstreaming, such attempts are criticized by others for homogenizing cultural diversity through the creation of economic sameness, leaving little room for alternative approaches to Indigenous economic participation (Altman, 2009; Altman and Hinkson, 2010). Statistical equality is thus seen to come at the expense of cultural difference.

Against this policy background and the larger debate about achieving Indigenous equality in Australia this paper reports on two examples of Indigenous entrepreneurship in East Arnhem Land in the Northern Territories, which offer insights into alternative pathways to Indigenous economic participation. The ventures described here are the entrepreneurial activities of two Yulgnu clans operating near the mining town of Nuhlnunbuy which provide opportunities to local community members for economic engagement on Indigenous terms, blending semi-formal employment with customary practices and local traditions. Both cases are treated here as exemplars of what is described as hybrid economy models (Altman, 2007), which overcome the economy-culture dichotomy. The Indigenous entrepreneurship examples lend support to calls for more flexible policy delivery to achieve Indigenous equality and offer prompts for more targeted policy support.

Indigenous Disadvantage and Political Responses

Overall, statistics on disadvantage in Australia compare poorly to the OECD average in light of widening gaps in income, wealth and opportunity (Leigh, 2007; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2009a; UNICEF, 2007), affecting particularly the country’s youth (Boese and Scutella, 2006; UNICEF, 2007), its seniors (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2009b) as well as people with disabilities (The Physical Disability Council of Australia, 2003) and ethnic minorities (Dawkins, Gregg, and Scutella, 2002). Above all, however, Indigenous Australians rate as the most disadvantaged population group in Australia (Foley, 2003) due to a long history of discrimination, dispossession and ‘protection’, which led to the subjugation as well as social and economic exclusion of Indigenous people (Markus, 1994). While the 1970s saw a policy shift toward self-determination and subsequently reconciliation, Indigenous Australians still face socio-economic disadvantage and discrimination, a situation reflected starkly in the national statistics (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2009).

Indigenous people only make up only 2.5 per cent of the country’s population, yet as a population group they are overrepresented in the country’s welfare statistics (see Australian Bureau of Statistics and Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2008; New South Wales Department of Education and Training and Charles Sturt University, 2009; Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2009). In expounding, Indigenous Australians have a lower life expectancy, dying 10 to 12 years earlier when compared to the rest of the country. They earn just over half the country’s average weekly income, are three times more likely to be unemployed and twice as likely not to complete high school compared to non-Indigenous Australians. Indigenous adults are also twice as likely to suffer from psychological distress and are more than twice as likely to be hospitalized as other Australians. Indigenous people are also overrepresented in the national crime and prison statistics, being 17 times more likely to be arrested, 15 times more likely to be imprisoned and 16 times more likely to die in custody than non-Indigenous Australians. Overall, Indigenous people make up 20 per cent of the prison

population in Australia today. In light of these statistics it seems reasonable to suggest that the political reforms of recent decades have proved ineffective thus far in overcoming the disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians and the associated social exclusion and social tensions.

The more recent political attempts at addressing Indigenous disadvantage under the banner of 'closing the gap' focus chiefly on the lack of formal economic participation by Indigenous people, which is seen to be responsible for the low socio-economic status of Indigenous Australians and their comparatively poor health statistics. The political challenge in this regard is seen to be the creation of employment prospects for Indigenous people, especially in rural and remote areas where despite many years of economic boom in the resources sector, Indigenous participation remains low whilst welfare dependence continues to be high (Altman, Gray, and Levitus, 2005; Brereton and Parmenter, 2008). The remote regions of Australia, which this paper focuses on, present a special political challenge due to the unique combination of geographical remoteness, sparse populations and the absence of mainstream employment. In addition, Indigenous land ownership and strong ties to customary life fuel ongoing conflicts between dominant non-Indigenous and Indigenous worldviews in these parts of the country (Altman, 2007). Consequently, mainstreaming attempts of Indigenous communities in remote regions have proven difficult in the past.

Over many years, a high proportion of Indigenous Australians benefited in social and economic terms from participation in CDEP-funded programmes, which were originally designed to provide a bridge between welfare and mainstream employment (Altman and Gray, 2005). The late 1990s saw much political enthusiasm under the federal Howard government to reform Australia's welfare system, focusing also on the CDEP scheme due to the growing perception of its role in the maintenance of Indigenous welfare dependence (Spicer, 1997). Despite evidence of social and economic improvements in the lives of Indigenous people through participation in CDEP-funded projects (Altman and Gray, 2005; Morphy and Sanders, 2002), the fear of ever-expanding demands for welfare support led to a review by government of the welfare system (McClure, 2000), which culminated in the design of a so-called 'new participation framework' under the banner of mutual obligation (Commonwealth of Australia, 2001); this triggered the dismantling of CDEP funding. The aim of this new policy approach was purported to help Indigenous people lessen their reliance on income support and achieve economic self-sufficiency. This objective is to be achieved by way of Indigenous people seeking to improve their chances of obtaining employment, actively looking for work and giving back to the communities that support them (Newman, 1999). This approach, however, raises a series of concerns.

Closing the Gap On Non-Indigenous Terms

There is little disagreement about the role of economic participation in the improvement of people's socio-economic status, their health and well-being per se (Sen, 1999). However, in the Australian Indigenous context, especially in rural and remote parts of the country, there is dispute about the adequacy of mainstreaming attempts targeting Aboriginal people who have strong cultural ties, engage in customary practices and have strong attachments to their land. The government's mainstreaming efforts are driven by a belief that the free market philosophy can succeed in rural and remote Australia and bring about growth and development as experienced across the rest of the country. Such an approach assumes the adequacy of this development blueprint in both geographical and cultural terms. Many years of successive governments attempting to address Indigenous employment, especially in remote Australia, have been unable to raise Indigenous economic participation figures markedly, underscoring the view that universal mainstreaming approaches are ill-suited for communities whose cultural and economic circumstances are very different from those of dominant society. While overall 20 000 new Indigenous public and private sector jobs were created between 2002 and 2007 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008), between 71 000 and 106 000 new jobs would need to be created to meet the policy target of halving the employment gap by 2016 (Biddle, Taylor, and Yap, 2008). Not only is this an ambitious policy goal, it will also be a particular challenge to meet this objective through job creation in rural and remote parts of the country, which explains growing calls for regionally differentiated policy responses to address Indigenous unemployment and disadvantage (Altman, Biddle, and Hunter, 2008).

The closing the gap policy framework aims at so-called 'work readiness', seeking the creation of 'real jobs' for Indigenous people. However, as suggested earlier, finding mainstream employment in remote Australia is limited due to geographic isolation alone. In recognizing the absence of commercial opportunity in remote Indigenous communities, policy-makers promote the idea of people moving to places where such opportunities exist. The consequent uprooting of Indigenous people, as required under this policy approach, is problematic, however, for it requires Indigenous people to leave their ancestral lands in search of mainstream employment. In this regard, their low educational status and economic marginality do not bode well for successful labour migration. In addition,

orthodox forms of employment harbour the risk of undermining ongoing Indigenous involvement in cultural practices and customs due to the inflexibility of the dominant, non-Indigenous approach to paid employment (Altman, 2007). Indigenous economic mainstreaming, as pursued under the closing the gap policy framework, is thus being criticised for driving cultural shifts by way of imposing requirements for geographic dislocation and militating against ongoing cultural engagements. It also risks reducing culture to a matter of “individual choice, the kind of activity people might participate in *after* they have secured an education, a job and a mortgage, as a lifestyle option rather than a form of ontological anchorage” (Altman and Hinkson, 2010: 191 (original emphasis)).

The logic of the market, which the closing the gap framework promulgates, tends to undervalue traditional Indigenous practices and gives little attention to their market and non-market values, which explains a government focus on policy prescriptions that favour non-Indigenous forms of employment. In the face of mounting mainstreaming pressures there is growing recognition, however, of the value of what Altman (2007) describes as hybrid economic activities in Australia’s remote regions, which blend cultural, customary and economic practices, which serve the protection of social, cultural and environmental values whilst also providing economic returns in areas such as land management, health and the arts. Importantly, it is the protection of these socio-cultural values that are seen as instrumental in achieving and maintaining health and well-being (Pholi, et al., 2009) and thus indispensable for closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia. In this context, the cases reported on in this paper will illustrate further how Indigenous approaches outside policy parameters for Indigenous mainstreaming not only help protect Indigenous values but also offer alternative pathways for Indigenous economic participation, and thus help overcome the culture-economy dichotomy the closing gap approach is seen to create.

Indigenous Entrepreneurship

The dominant policy discourse in Australia over recent years may lead to the erroneous conclusion that entrepreneurial activity is foreign to Indigenous people. Perceptions such as these may also arise in view of the seemingly non-materialistic and collectivist nature of Indigenous lifestyles (Schwab, 1995) as wealth accumulation and private ownership are not necessarily seen by Indigenous people as sources of success or social status in the way they are framed by the dominant, non-Indigenous culture (Altman, 2000). The seeming lack of aspiration for mainstream symbols of success is thus prone to be interpreted as profligacy, fecklessness, laziness or lacking in pride and self-esteem; misperceptions such as these serve to drive social exclusion and vilification (Brenner and Theodore, 2002).

Aboriginal enterprises and entrepreneurial activity, however, have a long tradition. In fact, Aboriginal enterprises are known as some of the world’s oldest recorded business undertakings (Foley, 2011), which dispels the myth that Aboriginal communities can solely be understood in hunter-gatherer terms as is often suggested (e.g., Broome, 1994). East Arnhem Land, for example, which this paper focuses on, provides good historical evidence of the business and trading activities of local Yolngu people, dating back to the 17th century. For hundreds of years there was a flourishing trade between Yolngu and the Macassans from southern Sulawesi, Indonesia of goods such as trepan, sea cucumber and tools (Berndt and Berndt, 1999; Worsely, 1955). In the early years of the 20th century, however, these trading activities were legislated against by the South Australian government, and further commercial and trading restrictions were placed on Aboriginal people by the Australian government; restrictions that were in place until the 1960s (Smith, 2006). In other words, not only have Indigenous Australians a long history of entrepreneurial and enterprising activities, these very activities were suppressed by their colonisers who only in recent decades have been trying to revitalise and stimulate Indigenous economic pursuits.

Despite a discernible void in the literature in the area of Indigenous entrepreneurship in Australia, there is growing interest in, and academic focus on Indigenous entrepreneurship per se, which has been evolving into a discrete area of inquiry (Hindle and Moroz, 2010). Even though definitions of Indigenous entrepreneurship today remain fragmented (Paredo and Anderson, 2006), enterprising activities by Indigenous people are largely perceived as a means of overcoming economic disadvantage and social exclusion (Hindle and Moroz, 2010) and as means of liberation and self-determination (Foley, 2003). In addition, many definitions of Indigenous enterprise highlight the centrality of social and cultural norms relating to Indigeneity (see Dana and Anderson, 2006). Thus, Indigenous entrepreneurship can usefully be understood in terms of pursuing economic opportunity for the purpose of diminishing Indigenous disadvantage through culturally viable and acceptable forms of wealth creation (Hindle and Moroz, 2010). Such understanding of Indigenous entrepreneurship highlights that the generation of profits and income is vital to achieve financial autonomy, while culture, family and community form equally central dimensions of Indigenous enterprise (Hindle and Moroz, 2010; Moylan, 2008). In other words, there is a focus on the delivery

of benefits to Indigenous communities (Lindsay, 2005); yet, these go beyond, albeit important, socio-economic improvements. It is this social orientation evident in Indigenous entrepreneurship that led to theorising about its close alignment to social entrepreneurship (Brueckner, Paulin, Davis, and Chatterjee, 2010; Pearson and Helms, 2010a) which regards social value creation as a measure of entrepreneurial success in contrast to profitability in the conventional entrepreneurial context (Nicholls, 2006). The entrepreneurial activities described below will serve to illustrate further the foregrounding of social, community-focused aspects.

An East Arnhem Land experience

The two cases presented here are based on ongoing research efforts (see Pearson and Helms, 2010a; Pearson and Helms, 2010b; Pearson and Helms, forthcoming) seeking to document and analyse Indigenous entrepreneurial activities in East Arnhem Land. Attention is directed at the work of local Yulgnu people from the Gumatj and Rirratjingu clans near the towns of Nhulunbuy and Yirrkala in the North-East of East Arnhem Land.

The Gumatj operations under the leadership of Galarrway Yunupingu aim at local income and employment generation and the provision of benefits to local community members by way of harnessing local resources and skills and creating partnerships with local and outside organisations. Local hardwood timber represents a relatively abundant local resource found in the tropical savannah forests on traditional Gumatj land in the area. In the face of acute housing shortages and substandard living arrangements for many Yulgnu people living in the area – a persistent problem substantial government spending in recent years was unable to address (Mercer, 2009; Toohey, 2009) – the opportunity was identified to use local timber resources for housing construction whilst providing employment and training opportunities for local Yulgnu. The Gumatj Corporation formed partnerships with Forestry Tasmania, the Architectural Division of the University of Tasmania and Fairbrother Builders and was successful in securing Commonwealth government subsidies through the Jobnet work programme which in conjunction with the receipt of mining royalties provided the needed knowhow and financial capital to commence utilising local timber resources for the purpose of housing construction.

Based on a Memorandum of Understanding between the project partners, Forestry Tasmania staff provided training to local community members and offered instruction in the cutting and processing of timber while the Architectural School of the University of Tasmania Construction made available architectural drawings and milled timber lists for the accommodation to be built by local Yulgnus. Beyond financial support, links to government facilitated logistical support and reductions in red tape, and Fairbrother representatives oversaw building construction. Local hardwoods were cut and processed on site in the forested areas south of Nhulunbuy using a mobile Lucas mill (see Fig. 1). The milled timber was then transported to different locations to commence building construction.



FIG. 1: TIMBER MILLING NEAR GARRATHIYA

Over a period of two years between 2009 and 2010 building projects were completed at the Garrathiya cattle station near Port Bradshaw and in Dhanaya. The buildings at Garrathiya comprised of a bunkhouse to accommodate up to 12 local Yulgnus working at the cattle station as well as an ablution block and a large kitchen area while a 240m² multi-bedroom house was constructed in Dhanaya (see Fig. 2). Both projects were completed on time and within budget at comparatively lower cost to equivalent construction work undertaken by non-Indigenous contractors. Local contractors were used only for plumbing and electrical work.



FIG. 2: BUNK HOUSE AT GARRATHIYA AND LIVING QUARTERS IN DHANAYA

The above housing construction projects were community-based ventures (after Peredo and Chrisman, 2006), that served the purpose of fostering community involvement, skill transfer as well as providing direct and indirect economic benefits. The work was embedded in existing social structures and cultural connections with the country, offering an opportunity for Indigenous people to work on their ancestral lands together with other community members. Involvement in the project thus did not come at cultural expense. In fact, participating Yulgnu people were able to engage in cultural activities such as group hunting, fishing or ceremonial activities, allowing for a blending of customary and commercial activities. Participation in the project also enabled the transfer of technical knowledge, providing local Yulgnu with marketable skills (e.g. timber cutting, milling, construction) which are seen as critical for entry into mainstream employment. The community focus of the projects, that is building much-needed accommodation for clan members, also helped promote a sense of citizenship, sharing and contribution to the community, whilst also fostering participants' personal sense of achievement and self-esteem.

Further projects currently underway aim at building on the approach taken for the housing construction process, using existing low cost infrastructure, local resources and partnerships for local capacity building. In addition to further housing projects undertakings such as furniture making with the support of external craftsmen as well as the planned introduction of a mobile slaughter house for meat production from local cattle grazing operations serve the purpose of widening opportunities for community members to receive marketable skills and gain employment whilst being axiomatic in the improvement of local living conditions (e.g. furniture, low cost nutrition). Instead of risking losing ties to local culture and customs, participants can maintain local traditions and customary practices and at the same time take steps toward more formal economic participation.

The second case reported here describes the entrepreneurial activities of members of the Rirratjingu clan in the town of Yirrkala, located 20 km south of Nhulunbuy. Specifically, the focus here is on the Dudungurr Nursery, a not for profit enterprise which at the time research commenced was part of the local Bunuwal Group overseen by the Rirratjingu Aboriginal Corporation. Since late 2009 efforts have been underway to revitalise the operations of the

Dudungurr Nursery which ceased in years previously following the abolishment of CDEP funding and the dismantling of Landcare. Whilst managed by Gareth Wise - a non-Indigenous ethno-botanist, the nursery is community owned and staffed by local community members. The focal point of the operation is the collection, storage and propagation of native seeds and plants used for landscaping and revegetation work (see Fig. 3). Nursery activities are self-funded through ground maintenance and landscaping contracts with local authorities, businesses and residents as well as through the sale of native plants.



FIG 4: SEED COLLECTION AND LAND REVEGETATION

The nursery provides a platform for community members to become involved in semi-formal economic activities that serve social, cultural, environmental and economic goals. To illustrate, the nursery deliberately ‘overstaffs’ to ensure that a critical mass of workers are present each day, recognising that not all nursery staff will attend work. This practice provides flexibility to nursery workers and eliminates the pressure from a rigid ‘nine-to-five’ work routine by running on ‘Indigenous time’. Therefore, non-attendance merely results in non-payment but not reprimand. This in turn also provides opportunities for attending cultural events or participating in customary practices such as local arts, hunting and fishing. At the same time, the work at the nursery is itself a form of cultural expression. The aims and nature of nursery operations are well aligned with locals’ connections to the land and their sense of custodianship. Plant and seed collection activities also ensure the keeping alive, passing on and recording of local knowledge of native flora which are intrinsically linked to local customs and traditional laws. Traditional healing practices, for example, rely on traditional knowledge about native plants, which places the nursery at the very centre of local culture. In economic terms, nursery work provides a source of income and helps staff acquire technical skills not only in botanical work but also in areas such numeracy and literacy as well as project and time management (e.g. landscaping contracts, plant watering regimes); thus improving local opportunities for mainstream employment.

Staff attending work at the nursery also receive training in managing their financial affairs, receive advice on lifestyle and have access to counselling. The nursery also provides an in-house banking service, which is a voluntary initiative enabling staff to have part of their income quarantined to achieve personal saving goals, to prevent ‘humberging’ from family and other clan members or to ensure that tea, coffee and food are provided during breaks (smokos) at work, which for many staff are the only regular meals during the week. Upon successful project completion nursery staff also receive rewards in the form of group activities that help build team cohesion and maintain a group focus. These rewards are often structured around customary practices such as camping, hunting and fishing, which also help maintain the connection to the land and traditional practices, especially for the younger generation.

The non-Indigenous management of the nursery enables staff to traverse culturally, exposing them to non-Indigenous ways of working in a culturally safe place. The nursery functions in this regard as a third space enterprise (after Moje et al., 2004), providing a space for crossing between Indigenous and non-Indigenous culture and building a bridge between Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledges. The sharing of knowledge in this third space creates room for mutual learning. Non-Indigenous ways of knowing are enriched through insights into traditional and cultural knowledge whilst Indigenous exposure to non-Indigenous, economy-relevant ways of knowing offer opportunities for, and increase chances of success in mainstream economic participation.

Whilst non-profit in orientation, the nursery also harbours the potential for growth in commercial terms in that opportunities exist to tap into areas such as tourism, traditional healing, education and bush food, only to mention a few, and efforts are currently underway to explore these options. Noteworthy in this regard is the observation that such an expansion would not compromise the socio-cultural functions of the organisation but instead would serve to increase its capacity to fulfil these roles as they are mutually reinforcing. Fig. 4 provides a summary depiction of the multiple roles and functions of the nursery operations.

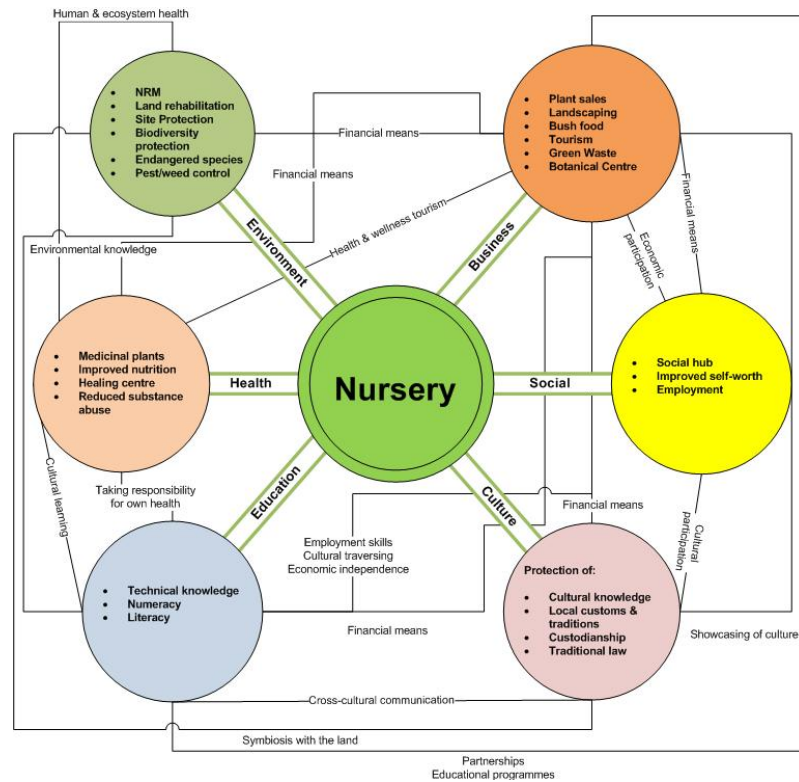


FIG. 4: MODEL OF THE DUDUNGURR NURSERY

Discussion and Concluding Comments

The entrepreneurial examples detailed above shed light onto the potential of alternative Indigenous business models, which currently fall outside orthodox mainstreaming attempts. It was shown that the operations of both Gumatj and Rirratjingu clans offer promising pathways for Indigenous economic participation, allowing for culturally safe ways of learning about the non-Indigenous, economic way of life. This approach is in contrast to the dominant policy approach which envisages Indigenous labour migration to places of economic opportunity with all the concomitant risks explored previously. The cases reported here illustrate how economic opportunities were created locally, which eliminated the need to sever local ties to culture and land. These findings are congruent with research pointing to growing evidence of Indigenous hybrid economies in remote Australia where economic and cultural activities were found to coexist and to be blended (Altman, 2007). This blending not only provided livelihood opportunities for participants in these business ventures, it also fostered the provision of social (e.g. provision of housing), cultural (e.g. preservation of botanical knowledge) and environmental services (land management) that are largely unnoticed within the so-called ‘real’ economy (Pearson, 2000). Therefore, much care should be taken so as not to mandate Indigenous mainstreaming into the ‘real’ economy by policy decree if the paternalism of the past is not to be repeated (Pholi, et al., 2009) but also to ensure that the *real* value of work already undertaken is accounted for and recognised.

In terms of policy implications, it needs noting also that the two Indigenous ventures described here hinge to varying degrees on skills and expertise external to the respective organisations. Referred to here are skills and an expertise in identifying funding opportunities, grant writing capabilities, capitalising on formal and informal networks or simply being able to temper some of the organisational goals and visions to ensure financial feasibility or compatibility with the rules and customs of the formal economy. While access to these skills currently helps attain the goals of both organisations, they may not be relied upon in the long-term. In other words, there is a vulnerability concerning the longevity of these ventures. This also relates to the question of organisational leadership and the task of keeping visions and aspirations alive. In this regard, current government measures to support Indigenous entrepreneurial activity makes access to assistance dependent on having access to the skills required to meet bureaucratic requirements such as the ability to write business plans and produce cash flow

forecasts (Pearson and Helms, 2010a). As such, targeted policy measures that provide assistance to Indigenous enterprises in overcoming structural impediments for access to funding and operational support may prove effective in fostering both the uptake and survival of Indigenous business ventures. Such an approach may usefully be coupled with measures that help maintain and build the local social capital needed for the creation of business ventures in contrast to attempts that seek the migration of talent to places of economic opportunity away from local Indigenous contexts. (Altman, 2007; Foley, 2008).

This paper described two distinct examples of Indigenous business ventures operating in remote parts of East Arnhem Land. Both operations were shown to facilitate the development of local people and their communities, playing a vital role also in the maintenance of culture and land. The Gumatj operations can be seen as more actively geared towards becoming a fully-fledged business venture – also in non-Indigenous terms – in the medium-term, especially in light of new plans for the production of marketable commodities such as furniture and meat. In contrast, the Rirratjingu nursery venture was found to serve primarily socio-cultural and environmental goals, and while potential for a more active economic engagement exists, the organisation is likely to maintain its customary emphasis. This variety of approaches is indicative of the potential in remote parts of Australia for the establishment of business ventures that not only help meet policy goals for Indigenous economic participation but also serve vital environmental and socio-cultural functions. The East Arnhem Land experience briefly sketched here also underpins the need for policy formats that cater for a variety of different business models some of which may well remain outside the bounds of the formal economy. Rather than viewing these ventures as economically deficient and in need of mainstreaming, reflection is needed on the true values they provide and the true cost their normalisation would entail.

References

- [1] Altman, J. C. (2000). The economic status of Indigenous Australians (CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 193). Canberra: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research - The Australian National University.
- [2] Altman, J. C. (2004). Practical reconciliation and the new mainstreaming: Will it make a difference to Indigenous Australians? *Dialogue*, 23(2), 35-46.
- [3] Altman, J. C. (2007). Alleviating poverty in remote Indigenous Australia: The role of the hybrid economy. Topical Issue No. 10/2007. Canberra: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, ANU.
- [4] Altman, J. C. (2009). Beyond closing the gap: Valuing diversity in Indigenous Australia. Canberra: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research.
- [5] Altman, J. C., Biddle, N., & Hunter, B. H. (2008). How realistic are the prospects for 'closing the gaps' in socioeconomic outcomes for Indigenous Australians? CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 287/2008. Canberra: The Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research.
- [6] Altman, J. C., & Gray, M. (2005). The economic and social impacts of the CDEP scheme in remote Australia. *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 40(3), 399-410.
- [7] Altman, J. C., Gray, M., & Levitus, R. (2005). Policy issues for the community development employment projects scheme in rural and remote Australia. Canberra: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research.
- [8] Altman, J. C., & Hinkson, M. (2010). Very risky business: the quest to normalise remote Aboriginal Australia. In G. Marston, J. Moss & J. Quiggin (Eds.), *Risk, responsibility and the welfare state* (pp. 185-211). Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.
- [9] Attwood, B. (1989). *The making of the Aborigines*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2008). Labour force characteristics of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians: Cat. No. 6287.0. Canberra: ABS.
- [10] Australian Bureau of Statistics, & Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2008). *The health and welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples*. Canberra: ABS & AIHW.
- [11] Berndt, R. M., & Berndt, C. H. (1999). *The World of the first Australians: Aboriginal traditional life past and present*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.
- [12] Biddle, N., Taylor, J., & Yap, M. (2008). Indigenous participation in regional labour markets, 2001–06. CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 288. Canberra: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research.
- [13] Boese, M., & Scutella, R. (2006). *The brotherhood's social barometer. Challenges facing Australian youth*. Fitzroy, Vic: Brotherhood of St Laurence.
- [14] Brenner, N., & Theodore, N. (Eds.). (2002). *Spaces of neoliberalism: Urban restructuring in North America and Western Europe*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.
- [15] Brereton, D., & Parmenter, J. (2008). Indigenous employment in the Australian mining industry. *Journal of Energy and Natural Resources Law*, 26(1), 66-79.

Please contact authors for full list of references.