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TRANSLATING ABORIGINAL LAND
RIGHTS INTO DEVELOPMENT
OUTCOMES: FACTORS CONTRIBUTING
TO A SUCCESSFUL PROGRAM IN
CENTRAL AUSTRALIA

J. HUNT AND D. CAMPBELL

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Translating Aboriginal land rights into development outcomes: factors contributing to a successful program in Central Australia

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Abstract

This paper explores some of the factors that appear to be supporting the growth and success of the Central Land Council's multimillion-dollar Aboriginal community development program that operates across Central Australia. The program has driven a major change in the way that Aboriginal groups across Central Australia apply a significant amount of their income. It has introduced a facilitated process that supports Aboriginal groups to set and achieve development objectives using income earned from collectively owned land. The program is premised on empowerment, ownership and control at the group level. Establishment of this process has taken time and commitment, in a context where participants are generally focused on individual autonomy and decision making at the family or very local level. However, the program is showing signs of real success in delivering Aboriginal control and empowerment, and a range of social, cultural and economic benefits. The paper explores the factors that appear to underpin this success. What is clear is that facilitating Aboriginal control is developing Aboriginal collective capacity to determine development in line with Aboriginal values and priorities, and is delivering outcomes people want to see.

Keywords: community development, Aboriginal, Central Land Council, governance, land rights, land-use agreements, native title, empowerment

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Acronyms

ANU	The Australian National University
CAEPR	Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research
CD	community development
CLC	Central Land Council
GMAAAC	Granites Mine Affected Area Aboriginal Corporation
URM	Uluru Rent Money
WETT	Worlpiri Education and Training Trust

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Introduction

The Central Land Council (CLC) is a Commonwealth entity established under the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976*. It is governed by a council of 90 traditional owners from across Central Australia. For the past 10 years, to enable its constituents to gain greater benefits from payments flowing from collectively held native title and land-use agreements, the CLC has complemented payments to individuals and long-term financial investment with a new community development (CD) approach.

The CLC has always taken seriously the obligation to effectively manage the processes associated with distributing income arising from land-use agreements. For more than 20 years, a specific unit of the CLC has ensured that Aboriginal corporations are formed to receive and distribute collectively owned income. The CLC works with these corporations to distribute funds to relevant individuals and families, and to ensure that 50% of their income is invested to deliver long-term financial returns. Having secured a commitment to financial investment and efficient processes for managing individual distributions, the CLC was then able to turn its attention to the next challenge: how could it promote broader and more sustainable social, cultural and economic benefits from income, and at the same time promote group cohesion, capacity and empowerment? The CLC has sought to achieve these outcomes through a CD program, which is supporting a significant change in the way many groups are using substantial amounts of money flowing from land-use agreements.

The Aboriginal groups that the CLC works with are many, varied and dynamic. The CLC's CD approach draws on a central CD premise of maximising participation – that is, generating broad benefits by encouraging Aboriginal people to be inclusive rather than exclusive when determining and reviewing group membership. The starting point for the make-up of a group is always the source and purpose of the relevant income. In most cases, income is paid to traditional owners who have been formally recognised in the claim process, in return for using their collectively owned land under a land-use agreement. For example, under a 99-year lease, rent is paid by the Australian Government to the traditional owners of the land on which the Uluru–Kata Tjuta National Park operates. In the Tanami Desert, a mining company pays royalties to the traditional owner group that collectively owns the land on which the goldmine operates.¹ In most cases, these traditional owners will

set up, and form the membership of, an incorporated body to receive income. Some CD projects involve this corporation in decision making – for example, the Kurra Aboriginal Corporation is the trustee for the Warlpiri Education and Training Trust. Others, such as the Uluru Rent Money project, work directly with the traditional owner group and do not involve the corporation, which focuses on receiving and distributing income to individual family heads.

Although traditional landowners generally form the majority of each planning and decision-making group, they often (but not always) choose to involve other Aboriginal residents of a region or community. The motivations for this, which are different in each case, include recognising that other Aboriginal people are affected by the source of income, acknowledging the cultural role of others as 'managers' of land, bringing in additional capacity and expertise, managing relationships with Aboriginal residents, and having a sense of responsibility for other Aboriginal people residing on their ancestral lands. For example, the CLC's Community Lease Money project is being implemented in 31 geographical communities, each with its own governance group. In most of the 31 locations, working groups have been chosen by, and are made up of, both traditional owners and residents. In Ntaria, on the other hand, the working group consists exclusively of traditional owners who plan and fund projects for the benefit of both Ntaria traditional owners and residents. As in other cases where the traditional owners constitute the decision-making group, such as for most of the 16 groups involved in the Northern Territory Parks Rent Money project, Aboriginal residents of the region or community have some level of involvement in planning.

The Granites Mine Affected Area Aboriginal Corporation (GMAAAC) project is a CLC CD project that has a considerably different approach to groups. In this case, the income is compensation paid under the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* to areas affected by the goldmine in the Tanami Desert, rather than royalties for landowners. GMAAAC funds are for the benefit of nine communities in the Tanami region. Residents of each community have input into planning and determine which residents will be appointed to each community committee to determine the allocation of GMAAAC funds.

This paper addresses how payments from land-use agreements can be collectively applied by such Aboriginal groups to achieve development outcomes, using the CLC's work as an example. As such, it is intended as a practical contribution to the ongoing discussion in Australia on how to translate native title and other land rights into development outcomes that are determined and valued by Aboriginal people. Its lessons on the way that capable Aboriginal organisations can facilitate comprehensive CD approaches to achieve development outcomes that are determined and valued at the local level also have broader application to others interested in development in Aboriginal Australia.

CLC community development projects

The CLC's six major regional projects have been described elsewhere (Campbell & Hunt 2010, 2012, 2015; Hunt & Campbell 2013) and are summarised in Table 1.²

An independent evaluation of the CD program in 2013–14 found that it was achieving outcomes valued by Aboriginal people (Roche & Ensor 2014):

These include the generation of employment opportunities, enhanced training and education outcomes, skills development, improved childcare, youth engagement, cultural strengthening and maintenance, and improved health and overall wellbeing for kidney patients. (2014:ii)

In addition to these tangible benefits, the program is very clearly valued by Aboriginal people for the way in which it is helping to strengthen culture, and gives them greater voice and control – in their view, these factors are central to achieving successful outcomes. The evaluators note that the CLC's CD approach to using Aboriginal rent and royalty monies is bringing longer-term collective benefits to communities than individual distributions are able to. This is notably benefiting some of the more marginalised members of communities and avoiding conflict arising within groups.

This paper explores some of the factors that appear to be supporting the growth and success of this multimillion-dollar program across Central Australia. It is written from our perspective; one of the authors has had a lead role since the program's inception, and the other has reflected regularly with the CLC CD team over most of its life: analysing its progress, addressing its challenges and strategising for the future. An earlier draft was discussed at some length at one of these reflection meetings with senior CD staff and other members of the CD Reference Group, which has acted as a regular mentoring body and sounding board for CD staff over the years. While its conclusions are our own, we have benefited considerably from the input of CLC staff and others on the CD Reference Group. The paper begins with a brief discussion of the context and then discusses five key factors that seem to have underpinned the success of the program to date, and points to areas for further work in the future.

TABLE 1. Central Land Council's current major regional community development projects

Project	Activity
Uluru Rent Money	Use rent paid to relevant traditional owners for a range of sustainable initiatives
Warlpiri Education and Training Trust	Use mining royalties for sustainable education, training and health benefits
Tanami Dialysis Support Service	Support dialysis facilities in remote communities using interest earned on invested mining royalties
Granites Mine Affected Area Aboriginal Corporation	Support nine communities to apply 'affected area' monies from mining towards broad community benefit
NT Parks Rent Money	Use rent paid to relevant traditional owners of 16 national parks for a range of sustainable initiatives
Community Lease Money	Use rent paid for community leases for a diverse range of development activities in 31 communities

Context

The Central Australian economic, cultural, social and political environment is extremely complex. Here we find all the governance challenges of remote Australia (Walker 2012) in a diverse and changing intercultural context. In particular, events over the past decade have meant that Aboriginal people have had very limited opportunities to engage in meaningful decision making about their own development. A ‘combination of the NTER³ [Northern Territory Emergency Response], the abolition of community government councils, the cessation of the CDEP program, the abolition of the permit system within communities and the abolition of ATSIC regional councils’ (Roche & Ensor 2014:105) have had a cumulative effect, leading to a serious erosion of Aboriginal voice, power and control over community matters important to them. While elsewhere Indigenous people may see governance as ‘nation-building’ (Bauman et al. 2015), in the Northern Territory the loss of self-determination has been particularly keenly felt and has contributed to a loss of morale among many Aboriginal people. They feel they have little knowledge of, or say in, what external agencies are doing in their communities (Roche & Ensor 2014). The CD work of the CLC has been occurring in this very disempowering context and is designed, above all, to promote Aboriginal control and empowerment.

Research on CD in Aboriginal communities in Australia emphasises that participation and ownership are needed for development to be successful (see Campbell et al. 2004, Campbell & Hunt 2010, Smith et al. 2010, Hoffmann et al. 2012, Morley 2015). In New Zealand, research on Maori development emphasises Maori values and world views as essential bases for Maori social and economic development (Bishop & Tiakiwai 2002, Carter et al. 2011). Research with native nations in North America indicates that four conditions are necessary for successful Indigenous development: Indigenous control over decision making, effective institutions, resources and cultural match (i.e. governance that aligns with the values and world views of the Indigenous nation) (Jorgenson 2007).⁴ In Central Australia, these four conditions are not present. In particular, Aboriginal people have very little control in a context in which governments make most of the decisions affecting Aboriginal development. However, as far as possible, the CLC program attempts to operationalise the four key conditions identified above in relation to decisions about development with Aboriginal funds, albeit in a wider environment that fails to reflect them (Hunt et al. 2008, Walker 2012). The CLC program puts Aboriginal ownership of development and Aboriginal priorities at the core of the work.

The experience of the CLC in community development

The change from individual or family control of income to control of a portion of funds by Aboriginal groups has created an inherent challenge in a program that has a core objective of promoting Aboriginal empowerment, ownership and control. This change is made more difficult by the focus of many Aboriginal program participants on individual autonomy, decision making at the very local level and securing resources for family, rather than a sense of working for the benefit of the broader group or community (Myers 1986, 1991). By ‘community’, we mean a wider social grouping, which may be made up of traditional owners of an area of land (a community of interest), or the traditional owners of – and Aboriginal residents living in – specific locations or regions. The CLC has been cognisant of these significant challenges from the outset, and the program is showing signs of real success in delivering both Aboriginal control and empowerment, and a range of social, cultural and economic benefits.

Recent monitoring and evaluation of the CLC’s approach of supporting groups to plan and apply their resources shows that this approach is driving a range of positive development outcomes, including Aboriginal agency and control. For example, projects that provide adult learning centres, a community swimming pool, dialysis units, sporting and media activities, or improved stores or churches have much wider benefit than payments direct to individuals. While there is clearly room for further improvement, the CLC has been successful in managing the tension between individuals or family groups demanding control and benefits, and the approach of facilitating broader representation and lasting community benefit. Success can be attributed to several key factors, including:

- the leadership of the program by the CLC as a trusted and capable Aboriginal entity, including constituents and staff (both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) who are willing to advocate for and support change
- the development and ongoing refinement of locally appropriate governance structures that are suited to each project and location
- appropriate (good-fit) planning processes that are adapted and extended over time
- effective facilitation of governance groups by capable outsiders who can act as change agents to facilitate informed and inclusive planning and decision making, focused on sustainable development

- an overarching commitment to action, reflection and adaptation, based on negotiation between the Aboriginal project participants and the CLC staff facilitating the CD approach.

Arguably, the adaptive management approach and emphasis on negotiating how the work is done – which has implicitly been adopted by the CLC over the past 10 years – has been key. This approach will continue as the CLC works to increasingly bring in less powerful participants and encourage the design of longer-term initiatives with the potential to generate greater change for more Aboriginal Central Australians. These factors are discussed in more detail below.

Aboriginal leadership of the program

The CD program has driven a major change in the way Aboriginal groups across Central Australia apply a significant amount of their income. Critically, change was initially advocated by a group of Aboriginal women, all trained teachers. In 2001, they lobbied the CLC's Director, himself an Aboriginal man, to help them obtain some of the mining royalties to support education and training projects determined by Warlpiri people; these royalties were being distributed directly to landowners, or set aside in long-term financial investments. Aware of the potential to create more lasting outcomes and avoid some of the negative effects of individual royalty distributions, including the conflict that can arise within groups over allocations, under the Director's leadership, the CLC took this request seriously. In 2003, the CLC saw an opportunity and successfully negotiated an agreement between the Warlpiri landowners and the Newmont mining company under which an additional portion of royalties would be paid annually to a new Warlpiri Education and Training Trust (WETT). The relevant traditional owners and their royalty association, Kurra Aboriginal Corporation, agreed to this arrangement, and Kurra was appointed as the trustee to make all decisions on WETT funding.

When the WETT work began in 2005, it became clear that not all members of the corporation supported the application of some royalties to education and training, even though this had been agreed to in 2003. For the first few years, meetings of the 150–200 corporation members were often challenging for the Aboriginal women championing WETT and the CLC CD staff, as they sought to engage Kurra members in WETT planning and decision making. Some Warlpiri were confused by the new approach, which they described as 'Warlpiri acting like government', suggesting that they did not see it as a Warlpiri endeavour or have a sense of ownership

of it. This was clearly something they had never done. A small but vocal minority was opposed to the idea of Warlpiri royalties being applied through WETT, and wanted to reverse the earlier decision and distribute the royalties to individual members. The CLC did not respond to the pressure from this small group to overturn the earlier decision.

At the same time, the CLC was establishing the Uluru Rent Money (URM) CD project in its southwest region. As with WETT, the URM project did not reduce the amount of money being distributed to individuals and families but involved a new portion of income resulting from an increase in the national park entry fee. The decision to direct this additional income to community benefit initiatives was made by the CLC Executive in late 2004. The 11 Aboriginal members of the CLC Executive made a strong decision that the additional income would be used for community benefit, based on their long-term knowledge of the traditional owner group for the Uluru–Kata Tjuta National Park, including the existence of a degree of conflict over how rent money was being allocated between families and individuals. As for WETT, some people in the region opposed the establishment of the URM project; they characterised it as taking control away from Aboriginal people because it required them to work with CLC CD staff to collectively set priorities and plan projects. In the years since, the CLC Executive has formally endorsed an organisational CD approach (in 2009) and, aware that those who do not support this approach are in a minority, the 90-member Council decided in 2010 and 2012 to direct additional income from land-use agreement payments through Aboriginal groups, rather than individuals, for lasting community benefit. In the CLC's decision-making processes in these cases, long-term and trusted legal, CD and policy staff drafted resolutions, informed by extensive consultations with Aboriginal traditional owners, for the consideration of delegates.

Over time, the CLC has seen this pattern generally repeated each time a new Aboriginal group starts working with the program. A small group of people, or even just several key individuals, support the change because they can see the potential benefit of working with the CLC through facilitated processes to apply some of their income collectively. Many others are initially uncertain about the approach and whether the group will really have control over decision making or just be 'consulted', with decisions then made by outsiders. This group generally comes on board as they become familiar with the process in which they retain control and start to see tangible results. A few staunch opponents resist any loss of individual or family level control over

how 'their' income is applied, and some of these people continue to challenge the approach. But critically, in every project, certain Aboriginal people champion going this way with the money – at the local group level, the CLC Executive level or the full 90-member Council level. This provides the legitimacy needed to drive such change. This is not an 'intervention' that is being imposed by government or initiated by a non-Aboriginal organisation coming into the region, as is the case with so many other programs for Aboriginal people. Nor is it a change that has been universally sought, developed or supported by all Aboriginal people involved from the outset. Instead, it is a change that is being called for by some Aboriginal people – generally traditional owners, but sometimes their elected representatives – who give it the legitimacy that is so critical to embarking on this new way of working. Given that much of the income involved can rightly be considered private (similar to the dividends paid to shareholders of a company), the willingness of these Aboriginal leaders to advocate for this approach and for participants to support it suggests a remarkable willingness to strategically adapt to achieve better outcomes for group members from these resources.

Development and refinement of locally appropriate governance structures

From the outset, the CD program has been about supporting Aboriginal groups to collectively control the application of their money. This has required a focus on setting up Aboriginal governance structures that Aboriginal participants consider appropriate to each region and project context. Indigenous people need governance that is both culturally legitimate and effective in contemporary circumstances (Hunt et al. 2008). Indigenous governance is a complex intercultural endeavour, whereby Indigenous people have to bring together their cultural values and expectations of legitimate governance with the requirements of government accountability and compliance regimes. This was explained by some respondents to a recent governance survey as a 'negotiation of meaning that takes place, the influence of western and Indigenous thinking on each other and the new forms of governance which are created being at the intersection of two life world circles' (Bauman et al. 2015:12). The CLC's CD Unit is at the forefront of supporting Aboriginal people in Central Australia to bring these two ways of thinking together in a very practical way to manage their income for CD projects.

Another consideration is the question of relational autonomy, subsidiarity and dispersed governance. Aboriginal people build their governance on networks of family and kin relations, and they almost always seek to make decisions as close as possible to those who will be affected by them (using the principle of subsidiarity). While people seek to be in regional relationships, they also seek a high degree of local autonomy (relational autonomy). This implies a type of dispersed governance, whereby different decisions are made at different levels in any network or organisation. Smith (2008) refers to Aboriginal people using relational nodal networks of shared identity as an organising principle in their governance; this can be highly local or can scale up through networking to larger aggregations of regional, state or territory, or even national significance (Bauman et al. 2015). When Aboriginal people are engaged in regional CD projects, they are likely to be aiming to put such principles into practice, but how they do so may differ in different contexts. Here we outline different governance structures for CD projects, and how the CLC has worked with groups to adapt and improve them over time so that they are a good fit for each group and context.

The URM project has two separate governance arrangements for the portion of rent applied across the southwest region where traditional owners live and the portion directed to the Mutitjulu community. The project's regional governance arrangements, put in place in 2005, were designed by the CLC based on the comprehensive knowledge of anthropology staff of Anangu land ownership and culture, including the autonomy-relatedness dynamic (Myers 1991, Jagger 2011). To support the relatedness of the broad traditional owner group, the URM project brought traditional owners together to decide on both regional projects and the locations where people would be consulted on community project priorities. The project's governance arrangements also supported the autonomy of traditional owners within the group by delegating decision making on community-level priorities to the residents (traditional owners and others) of the chosen locations.

As well as taking into account cultural approaches to decision making, the CD program also seeks to ensure transparency and accountability, and to build the capacity of each Aboriginal group to collectively plan and manage its resources. Therefore, in 2007, the CLC began convening a second annual meeting of the broad traditional owner group so that project plans and budgets for the URM project from each community location could be reviewed. The endorsement of all plans by the broad group over the life of the URM project suggests that the

delegation of decision making on local project priorities to the local level was appropriate, while also ensuring that the group maintained oversight of the application of their collective income.

The 2013–14 evaluation of the CD program identified limitations in the governance arrangements for the URM project. These included a lack of knowledge at the community level about the regional decision-making processes, and the absence of community-level governance arrangements because of the way the money moved annually between locations, as determined by the traditional owner group. A related issue identified by CLC staff was the challenge of effectively facilitating such a large governance group, with 40–70 members from across a large region coming to meetings, to plan regional initiatives that would create broad benefit. Over time, a pattern had become established whereby individual traditional owners lobbied for funding at the very local level (for their own family outstation), and the group sought to share the money evenly by funding a different set of outstations each year. As a result, relatively limited funding was being directed to communities and regional projects.

Informed by the evaluation, over a six-month period in 2015, known and trusted CLC CD staff worked with traditional owners at an individual, family and group level to discuss these issues, and negotiate new and substantially different governance arrangements. Ultimately, seven regional priorities were set by the broad group, including education, culture and dialysis. A working group, made up of even numbers of men and women, that represents seven locations in the region has been chosen to develop initiatives. Once planned and costed, these initiatives will be brought back to the broad group for approval. In making these changes, it is clear that the group has considered the limitations of continuing to fund many outstation upgrades and is now looking to invest in more sustainable development outcomes that benefit more Anangu. Some project participants also reflected positively on their involvement in other CLC CD project working groups, and advocated setting one up for the URM project to improve project planning and outcomes.

A different governance arrangement was put in place to work with the Mutitjulu community and its annual portion of funding from the URM project. In 2006, the community set six project priorities, and established a working group of community members (Uluru–Kata Tjuta National Park traditional owners and Mutitjulu residents) to plan and fund them. Between 2007 and 2015, with ongoing support from the CLC’s CD Unit, the working

group successfully planned and funded these projects, including the construction and opening of a community swimming pool – a major achievement given the inherent challenges in building a pool in a World Heritage-listed national park in the remote Central Australian desert. The 2013–14 evaluation and subsequent independent monitoring show that respondents are very positive about the way decisions have been made for Mutitjulu’s portion of URM project funding (Roche & Ensor 2014, Kelly 2015). This was confirmed by consultations by CLC CD staff in 2015. A new set of projects has now been determined by the broader community, and a working group has again been appointed by community members (both traditional owners and residents) to plan and fund them. The working group includes both people who have been involved from the outset, thereby ensuring continuity, and some new members who are bringing new ideas to the process. Interestingly, there is now close alignment between the way the two URM project income streams are being governed; the only difference is that the regional project retains a role for the broad group to come together and make final funding decisions. This will ensure that the working group is accountable to the large and dispersed traditional owner group, and designs projects that create benefit across the region.

WETT’s governance arrangements have also evolved over time. The WETT governance structure was designed to maintain Kurra Aboriginal Corporation control over funding decisions, with the corporation being appointed as the trustee and its directors making all funding decisions. Over time, it became clear that Kurra directors, who were accustomed to dealing with decisions on financial investments and individual distributions, were finding it difficult to give WETT decisions the time and consideration needed at their meetings. To increase Kurra engagement with WETT, in 2009 the corporation took up the CLC’s suggestion and created a subcommittee of Kurra WETT directors. These directors have since met separately to consider WETT funding decisions in a more considered way, separate from the sometimes contested decision making on individual distributions.

Recognising the complexity of remote Aboriginal education and training, the CLC suggested that Kurra set up an advisory committee of Warlpiri and non-Warlpiri experts. This suggestion was adopted when WETT started in 2005. The WETT Advisory Committee initially included representatives from the Australian Government and Northern Territory education departments, in an attempt to promote alignment and complementary funding between WETT and government-funded initiatives. When it emerged, several years later, that the involvement of government representatives may have

been having the opposite effect – with governments possibly diverting funds away from the Warlpiri communities because of their knowledge of WETT funding – the CLC supported Kurra to review and end government involvement. The WETT Advisory Committee is now made up of a majority of Warlpiri representatives (with an increased focus on succession planning and bringing younger people in), the CLC Director, a mining company representative and an independent education expert.⁵ Although the WETT governance arrangements have legitimacy at the regional traditional owner level and have driven generally effective regional initiatives, a future focus will be on strengthening WETT decision making at the local level in the four WETT communities.

The governance lessons from the URM and WETT projects have informed the way the CLC now works with other Aboriginal groups involved in the CD program. Once an Aboriginal group has set aside income for community benefit, the first step each time is to support the group to decide on, and put in place, locally appropriate governance arrangements. This sees the participants determine how they will make decisions, who should be involved, and, importantly, how to manage the very real challenge of balancing relatedness at the regional level – which has the potential to support the development of broader regional initiatives – with autonomy and needs at the local level. Appropriate governance structures that incorporate regional and local decision making are critical in promoting a balance between larger projects of wider regional significance and many smaller projects that are each of benefit to fewer people.

Good-fit planning processes

Research in other complex environments suggests that, for development to be successful, management needs to change from static to dynamic planning, from prescriptive to flexible planning models, and from comprehensive to diversified planning. It also concludes that this requires decentralised and collaborative planning, and adaptive management approaches.

Moving from static to dynamic planning means that plans are viewed as hypotheses about programs based on a theory of change. Plans should make assumptions explicit and include some key questions. Small interventions should be used to test and confirm, reject or refine the hypothesis. The planning model should be iterative, responding also to changes in the context (i.e. an action–research approach to planning). This means ensuring that feedback loops for learning are built into the system.

Moving from comprehensive to diversified planning means that, rather than creating detailed plans that generate massive amounts of information, development practitioners should plan lightly and recognise that plans are meant to be communication tools. Planners need to consider appropriate formats for diverse audiences and allow subgroups to make operational plans in ways that suit them, within a broad strategic vision (i.e. ‘nested’ planning).

These approaches require planning that is both decentralised and collaborative, and uses adaptive management styles. They require letting go of ‘command and control’ planning and the idea that risk can be avoided by high levels of control at the centre, and a greater openness to learning and responsiveness through implementation (Hummelbrunner & Jones 2013ab, Ramalingam 2013). Although not every CLC plan has followed every element of this ideal, to a considerable degree the CLC approach to CD has reflected these principles; it has particularly tried to be adaptive, flexible and collaborative. We have found that this approach is working at both the community level and across the program as a whole.

We have written elsewhere about the importance of striking the right balance at the community level between careful planning and getting initiatives happening, given the general desire of CLC constituents to see action and change (Campbell & Hunt 2015), which is understandable in the Central Australian context of overconsultation and ongoing disadvantage. Small, tangible initiatives early in a new CD project mean timely results, which are critical in building trust and engagement in the process. Attempts to get new groups to start with comprehensive planning processes that develop 5- or 10-year visions, strategies across key priorities and specific subprojects to address these priorities have generally been ineffective. Instead, most successful planning processes start with a group listing their key project priorities – for example, ‘a new community store, fixing up the oval, and repairs and upgrades for outstations’. Once a group has agreed on their top priorities, staff facilitate more detailed planning for each project idea, which draws out the intended change and benefits the group is seeking. For example, a new store will have health benefits (more room to stock fresh fruit and vegetables), economic benefits (local training and employment, and income generation for the community from a better range of products and higher turnover), and social and cultural benefits (people will stay in the community rather than travelling to town for shopping). Starting with tangible needs and priorities has proven far more effective than beginning with abstract discussions on people’s vision for a better future.

As the CLC has learnt how to facilitate effective planning with groups that results in action and outcomes, it has developed a simple ('light touch') but highly effective planning tool. The consistent application of the seven steps in this 'planning for action' process, together with the flexibility to negotiate with an Aboriginal group – moving back and forth between steps, where necessary – has proven highly effective. The Planning for Action tool (see Fig. 1) was formalised in 2014 and is now routinely used in all CD meetings.

Many CLC constituents are now familiar with the planning tool and supportive of the process it sets out, to the point that, in meetings, participants are increasingly using it to hold others to this process. The importance of step 4 (Plan project) is increasingly invoked in instances where one person may be trying to push the group to jump to step 5 (Decide on project) or all the way to the 'Project happens' point without a completed project plan and budget. This planning visual was recently described by a CLC Executive member as 'our guideline keeping this CD work strong'. It is effective because it is clear and transparent, is consistently applied to ensure that each Aboriginal group has control of decision making based on adequate information and, most importantly, is a planning process that leads to action as determined by the Aboriginal group.

The Planning for Action tool is useful, but, like any tool, the way in which it is used influences the quality of the process and the outcomes achieved. The CLC is starting to work with some more well-established groups to apply this planning process in more comprehensive ways. The program's long-term CD goal is to support Aboriginal strength and resilience in both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal domains. This will not be achieved if groups only work on their immediate needs, with a focus on action alone. The monitoring step in the planning process is critical because it requires groups to reflect on how funded projects went, the outcomes they achieved and who benefited. In addition to routine reflection in each CD meeting and annual monitoring since 2009, the 2013–14 evaluation of the CD program provided an opportunity for Aboriginal participants to reflect on specific subproject outcomes to date. Key findings from Lajamanu, one of three case-study sites in the evaluation, is that some Warlpiri are concerned about the sustainability of subprojects, and the overarching sustainability of the WETT and GMAAAC projects, which rely on revenue from the goldmine. The evaluation also found that, although the local employment opportunities currently generated by the CD program in Lajamanu are highly valued, Aboriginal people also identified a need for greater employment in current subprojects and as a feature of all future projects.

FIG. 1. Planning for Action tool for community development projects



The CLC has begun trialling a number of different approaches to planning in Lajamanu to strengthen sustainability and local employment outcomes. This is possible because the CLC has now been supporting CD in this community for 10 years, and people have enough trust in the process to consider it worthy of a greater time investment. One effective strategy has been to run committee planning meetings over two days, rather than one, and to use the extra time to give people additional information to inform their decision making. The additional information has included community demographics and the age groups targeted by previous subprojects. This has highlighted for committee members the need to fund more initiatives aimed at the many children and young people in the community, and demonstrates the power and value of data in Aboriginal hands (Yu 2012). Staff also presented subprojects funded to date by categories – for example sport, health and employment. As a result, the Lajamanu GMAAAC committee identified the need to direct more funding to formal and cultural education, employment and business development.

Another strategy increasingly being used by staff is conducting individual and small-group consultations on community priorities, outside and ahead of the formal meeting context, and bringing the results to decision-making meetings. The highly politicised nature of public meetings of Aboriginal groups in Central Australia has been well documented by anthropologists such as Fred Myers (1986) and is regularly observed by CLC staff.⁶ Despite the constraints of limited operational resources, the CLC's CD approach is shifting to more consultations with family and other small groupings before decision-making meetings, to ensure that people are well informed and have a chance to more carefully consider funding priorities with the potential to generate broad benefit. This is because deeper engagement and dialogue are possible in contexts with family and close kin, where there are stronger levels of mutual trust and ethical commitments, and thus less possibility of opportunistic and self-aggrandising behaviour. Targeted small-group meetings (e.g. with women or young people) may also help to ensure that particular segments of the broader community are not disenfranchised from accessing benefits, and that more sustainable outcomes are therefore achieved. It is anticipated that it may be possible to use small-group consultations to progressively develop a consensus on priorities that advance the interests of the broader group, and then bring this to public meetings for endorsement.

Since it is hard to predict what will happen when one intervenes in a complex system, testing and adapting as you go is a sensible approach. Moving from prescriptive to flexible planning models means that, for example, plans are only partially elaborated initially and then developed gradually, around promising initiatives. The Planning for Action tool that has been developed over time is clearly a good fit, with some groups also now ready to engage with it more comprehensively and in different ways to strengthen outcomes.

Support from capable outsiders

CD approaches draw on the assets, knowledge and capacities of the group or community they seek to benefit, based on the understanding that this will generate locally appropriate initiatives with more sustainable outcomes. While Aboriginal capacities and leadership are critical, as discussed above, so too is the role played by capable 'outsider-insiders' who can act as change agents. Martin and Martin (2016) write about the critical role that individuals both inside and outside a group play in social change. They draw on the work of Brady (2000) and Sutton (2001) in identifying a particular role for trusted outsiders who can act as an authorising 'other' or 'a person who is outside the individual's immediate kin network who can legitimate the transformation of particular behaviours' (Martin & Martin 2016:226) that may otherwise run counter to group behavioural norms.

CD staff have a challenging role in facilitating the CLC CD process to support Aboriginal control and promoting inclusive decision making around Aboriginal money. Although a majority of CLC staff are Aboriginal, the CD team has predominantly included non-Aboriginal outsider-insiders with relevant qualifications, such as CD, youth work, anthropology, accounting and engineering. Several local Aboriginal staff have been employed but found the CD work very challenging, particularly when they were related to participants. Our experience is that collaborating with Aboriginal community members (either employees of the CLC as regional coordinators, or participants in the program) who are well educated 'both ways' and highly skilled in intercultural work is more productive. These are insider-outsiders, as described by Martin and Martin (2016).

For outsider staff to be effective, they must have a mix of the right principles and skills. Experience shows that one without the other is ineffective. Critical characteristics include a commitment to Aboriginal controlled development, an awareness of the power they have as

professional outsiders in every intercultural exchange where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal domains intersect (Trigger 1986), and the skills to negotiate and effectively share power. CD staff seek to ensure genuine Aboriginal engagement, ownership and control at all stages in the process. Simple but effective strategies include negotiating with each group on when and where meetings are held, and who can attend; agreeing at the outset how a meeting will be conducted and how the group will respond if this process is not adhered to (including by staff); working alongside a local chairperson to facilitate meetings; reading group dynamics, and deciding how and when to respectfully intervene to support inclusive and informed decision making; and active listening and awareness of where one stands or is seated in relation to the group, as well as body language. Staff work actively to shift the power to Aboriginal decision makers, who clearly appreciate this way of working (Roche & Ensor 2014).

This concerted effort to shift power is essential to the empowerment goal of the program. For empowerment to occur, Kenny says:

... disadvantaged groups must have confidence in their ability to manage their own affairs and increase their levels of democratic participation. People must develop a belief that they actually can collectively control their lives. (2006:163)

She adds that human agency is central to empowerment. Kabeer (1999) also emphasises that empowerment involves voice, agency and resources. Although the financial resources for the CD program belong to Aboriginal participants, the key issue is that their voice and agency must be facilitated to direct the program. Thus, participation in decision making to exercise voice and agency is necessary to achieve empowerment. However, external interpretations of what participation means in Central Australia can often mean mere information delivery or consultation (Office of the Coordinator-General for Remote Services 2012). When they refer to participation, Aboriginal people are usually seeking control – that is, the ability to identify the problem and make decisions about solutions – rather than mere consultation, and this is how the CLC has interpreted participation for empowerment.

Of course, there are criticisms of participatory approaches: that they are subject to local elite capture (Dasgupta & Beard 2007), and that they neglect the politics of difference (i.e. certain marginalised people, such as women or young people, can be excluded). Spaces for participation can also reproduce existing

power relations (Cornwall 2002, 2008; Gaventa 2002); these can be ‘invited spaces’ or spaces people own, such as within their own communities and organisations. And power can be exercised visibly or as hidden power, by controlling who participates and the agenda for participation (VeneKlasen & Miller 2002).

The CLC is well aware of such issues. While being highly attuned to their own position in relation to Aboriginal group members as they seek to promote Aboriginal control, ‘outsider’ CD staff also have a role in promoting the participation of less powerful group members. Having operated in the region for almost 40 years, with many long-term staff who continue to work closely with Aboriginal groups, the CLC has an in-depth understanding of power dynamics within many groups. As the CD approach has become established and accepted across the region, CD staff are increasingly combining this understanding with their own knowledge to encourage groups to be more inclusive in their decision making. That is, they are more actively taking on the role of change agent.

From the outset, the CD program has sought to involve traditional owners, consistent with the CLC’s statutory functions, and bring in other affected Aboriginal people, such as community members. Early on, the question emerged of whether the program should support decision making by senior traditional owners and/or community leaders, or whether it should promote inclusive participation. As the program has evolved, CLC CD staff are increasingly working with groups to consider the importance of bringing different sections of the community (including less powerful people) into planning and decision making, because this makes for more effective project design. Some groups are working to ensure this. Even where they do not, staff who have established relationships with the group respectfully work to encourage this approach through their many informal conversations with group members outside meetings. Ultimately, it is up to the group to appoint their decision makers, and the CLC sees this as a slow change process that, over time, will bring more people in. Monitoring and evaluation suggests that the CLC is working effectively to include groups and individuals within communities that are often excluded from decision making, and there are signs that less powerful people are benefiting from the program (Roche & Ensor 2014).

In addition to being highly attuned to power relations within the group, and between group members and staff, CLC CD staff must facilitate a consistent approach, while having the capacity to judge when, and to what extent, flexibility is required. It is not uncommon for one member

of a governance group to ask the rest of the group to approve funding for a subproject without any plan or budget. Early in a new project, or if there is a pressing community need such as an upcoming sports weekend, the group may be inclined to agree to skip steps 3 and 4 of the Planning for Action tool, and move straight to decision making. In these instances, staff remind the group that, without a clear project plan and budget, the group cannot make an informed decision, nor can the CLC enter a funding agreement with a project partner and hold them to account. At times, this is characterised, particularly by more powerful group members, as ‘non-Aboriginal people making the rules’ or ‘telling us what to do’. This can be an uncomfortable accusation for staff committed to Aboriginal control; in such instances, staff must respectfully and assertively ensure that the process endorsed by the CLC Executive, and previously by the group itself, is adhered to. It again highlights the active change agent role that staff play in facilitating the approach the CLC has mandated.

The staff’s capacity to effectively facilitate CD processes ‘out bush’ is essential but not all that is required. Also critical are a range of other technical inputs and skills. A large volume of the CD program workload involves preparing accurate information on a group’s finances, the progress of funded projects and projects being considered for funding. Considerable time is spent preparing for meetings, including developing communication strategies that enable participants with limited literacy and numeracy to access often complex financial and project management information. Legal and CD staff have developed and refined funding agreements that maximise compliance without being too onerous; this is particularly important for the many small Aboriginal organisations funded. More than 300 funding agreements are now in place and being managed by the CLC, increasingly with input from governance groups that are becoming more involved in holding partner organisations to account. The CLC’s commitment to increasing Aboriginal control and empowerment in all aspects of the program means that this is not a standard ‘project management’ exercise in which the CLC is seeking compliance to achieve its objectives. Rather, it should be viewed as the implementation phase, following decisions by Aboriginal governance groups. In this process, the CLC acts as something of a ‘shield’ for the group by entering into funding agreements on its behalf, but accountability is ultimately to the Aboriginal group that funded the project. Therefore, staff inform the group if a partner is failing to deliver, and a suitable response is negotiated. For most Aboriginal participants, this is a new experience, which requires much support and advice from CLC staff. Internal financial management systems

and support from finance staff are also required to ensure the effective administration of the significant amounts of money involved.

Commitment to action, reflection and adaptation

We have referred above to some of the ways in which the CD approach has been refined and adapted over time, based on action and reflection. This has been one of the most important factors in the program’s success and has been applied at all levels of the program, the six regional projects and their governance groups, and each subproject. When it initiated the program in 2005, the CLC was clear that it would draw on CD theory and its own experience operating in Central Australia to support Aboriginal planning and decision making. This involved identifying key principles – including respect; learning; and asset-based, culturally appropriate, community control – and relevant planning processes for trial, rather than designing a detailed program plan. The CLC’s CD Framework, which was finalised in 2009, was based on what was learnt during the first four years of the program through trial and error. Program goals and objectives have been refined over time since 2009, based on what CLC staff have seen prioritised by Aboriginal groups. The 2013–14 evaluation helped the CLC more explicitly articulate the CD program’s ‘theory of change’ – that is, the assumptions it makes about how change occurs through its CD approach. Working on a set of assumptions, rather than to a detailed predetermined ‘log frame’ or project plan, has been critical, given the complex context and the incremental development of the CD approach.

A formal monitoring and evaluation framework was not put in place until 2009 (see Kelly 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015). Until then, monitoring relied on routine staff reporting and reflection, informal feedback from groups, and biannual reflection with a reference group involving external members with CD expertise. The process of twice-yearly reflection with the reference group enabled staff from the CLC CD Unit to review their practices and their experiences of what was and was not working well, and gradually adapt the program as it grew and matured. With time, the reflections focused more on the findings and recommendations of the annual monitoring reports, which involved feedback from Aboriginal committees and community members. The completion of the independent evaluation in 2014 was a milestone, in that reviewers who previously had nothing to do with the program provided feedback based on their international and Aboriginal Australian experience of good practice in CD. The

evaluation was considered by the staff and reference group, and practices were amended as a result.

At this overall program level, adaptive management and regular reflection with light-touch planning, which is being gradually elaborated and systematised based on learning, seems to be working. Challenges remain of finding time and resources to conduct this reflection amid the considerable day-to-day demands on staff. However, CLC experience suggests that stopping to reflect and learn reaps large rewards, which more than outweigh the resources required. It is through these processes that solutions to problems are identified and new approaches are developed. The nature of these reflections has changed from testing ideas about how to proceed and troubleshooting at the outset to analysing the annual monitoring findings and determining key issues to focus on in the future. The stability and long-term engagement of key CD Unit and Directorate staff have helped to allow such learning, and enabled a culture of reflection, learning and adaptation. This has undoubtedly contributed to the program's success.

Conclusions

This paper has explored some of the key factors that we believe have enabled the CLC's CD program to deliver a broad range of outcomes that Aboriginal people in Central Australia value. What is clear is that facilitating Aboriginal control is developing Aboriginal collective capacity to determine development in line with Aboriginal values and priorities, and is delivering outcomes people want to see. The evolutionary approach, with adaptive ways of working in collaboration with Aboriginal leaders and others at a community level, is working. What is more, Aboriginal people are starting to reflect more on their own practice, the suitability of their governance arrangements and the sustainability of their funds, and are seeking to obtain greater long-term benefit in recent decisions. Maintaining a consistent approach to planning that has evolved from practical testing with Aboriginal people is important, while also retaining some flexibility, where necessary. Regular staff reflection, systematic monitoring in recent years, and a willingness to learn and adapt have been key aspects of the program's evolution and success.

Importantly, the program's benefits are not just for individuals. Rather, they point to a growing capacity of diverse groupings to practise governance for contemporary purposes, articulate development priorities and plan appropriate ways of meeting these priorities. This has potential to benefit communities beyond the

particular projects they manage as their governance capacities strengthen. The most recent monitoring report (Kelly 2015) reflects this growing confidence that people have the ability to drive their own development agendas with their own funds. In this sense, the program is genuinely transformative. However, its impact remains limited when other stakeholders operate in quite different ways, such that Aboriginal groups do not control many aspects of services and the conditions under which they live their lives. The disabling and disempowering environment surrounding this program constrains its possibilities.

Nevertheless, the program will continue to develop in new directions as it supports Aboriginal people to build their skills and capacities to reflect on what they are achieving and what else they want to do. There is potential to work on more regional projects, as the URM project is exploring. There is also potential to place greater emphasis on human development, as immediate infrastructure needs are met and people can focus on other programs they need, such as youth development activities. Transforming communities is a long-term task when these communities have many complex social problems, have a large number of young people relative to older ones, and have experienced dramatic changes in their ways of life in recent generations and within the past decade. The steady progress of this ongoing program, its leadership by Aboriginal people and the CLC as a strong and legitimate Aboriginal organisation, the development and application of appropriate planning processes, the continuity of capable staff, and ongoing reflection and adaptation all contribute to outcomes. Most importantly, Aboriginal people themselves are now convinced of the value of this way of working and will continue to shape it in the future.

Notes

1. Some level of contestation often occurs within groups as to who the 'real' traditional owners are, and supporting constituents to resolve traditional owner disputes of varying degrees is an ongoing role for the CLC (see also Holcombe 2004).
2. Six smaller and/or newer CD projects are being implemented under the CD program. See the CLC *Annual report 2014–15* for further detail.
3. For more information on the NTER, see Altman and Hinkson (2007).
4. We note that Indigenous values and world views are not static but changing, as is the case with any cultural group.
5. The WETT Advisory Committee is the only working group operating under the CD program that includes outsiders. As noted above, it does not make funding decisions but provides advice to the Aboriginal decision-making body, the Kurra Aboriginal Corporation.
6. Here we acknowledge David Martin's contribution to our understanding of Aboriginal meetings.

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