

**Submission  
No 7**

**INQUIRY INTO ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN  
ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES**

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# Submission to the Inquiry into Economic Development in Aboriginal Communities

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Indigenous policy has long been a contentious area of public policy, contested by numerous stakeholders with differing perspectives. However there is near-unanimous agreement on the fact that while progress has been made in 'closing the gap', policymakers still face a significant challenge in how to address the systemic disadvantages faced by the First Australians.

The terms of reference of this committee inquiry are right to address options for capacity building through the utilisation of existing community networks, and to emphasise the importance of Indigenous-owned enterprises. This submission focuses on the role of education, the arts and employment in fostering sustainable economic development in remote Indigenous communities.

## Education

Community development is a long-term game; it cannot be driven or evaluated by short-term goals. The economic potential of the next generation is determined by the investments made today. Education, as the key determinant of strong economic and social outcomes, is the most important investment society can make.

There is, however, no one-size-fits-all approach to education: just as students respond differently to particular methods of teaching, so too should governments take care to approach education in Indigenous communities in a manner that is accessible to local young people, by integrating it with the local culture. Therefore, educational programmes within Indigenous communities should cater to the needs of the community and engage with subject areas such as the cultural heritage of the local community, the Arts, sport, care for the land and the local environment.

As experience has demonstrated in remote Indigenous communities, bi-lingual education for schoolkids has had a strong impact on success in school. It is important to recognise that for some kids English is a second language to the traditional language(s) of the community. Employing local Indigenous community members as translators and/or traditional language teachers would not only create meaningful employment, but would also have a positive impact on school participation. Young people will be better able to engage with school and improve their skills if people from their own community are involved, and if instructions are offered in their own language.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Big hART (2011) *Submission to the DEEWR Remote Participation and Employment Services Review*, Department of Employment, Commonwealth of Australia, accessed online 18 September 2015: <[https://submissions.employment.gov.au/empforms/Archive/Remote-Employment-Review/Documents/060\\_Big\\_hART.pdf](https://submissions.employment.gov.au/empforms/Archive/Remote-Employment-Review/Documents/060_Big_hART.pdf)>.

## The Value of the Arts

The potential economic and social benefits of integrating cultural and community practices such as art into enterprises owned and operated by Indigenous people are often under-emphasised. Art is such a strong pillar of the culture in many Indigenous communities; there is no reason why it should not also be an important element of their local economies.

Social justice and creative arts company Big hART has a long history of working alongside remote Indigenous communities with the aim to achieve economic, social and cultural goals. The organisation's *Namatjira* project aimed to support the family of Albert Namtjira in the Western Aranda region through a community arts programme, as well as a critically acclaimed touring live show and a documentary film.<sup>2</sup> The success of the project demonstrates the economic impact that art centres can have in rural Indigenous communities; in particular by integrating cultural practices with economic participation.<sup>3</sup> Art centres have a multifaceted role within Indigenous communities, serving as an economic and cultural hub, including:

- facilitating direct economic participation for Indigenous artists who have the chance to sell their artworks;
- helping to cultivate employable attributes in young people with little formal work experience;
- demonstrating the effectiveness of Aboriginal-owned enterprises where they are culturally-integrated;
- providing multiplying economic benefits beyond the artists themselves, helping the wider local economy;
- supporting the general health and wellbeing of Indigenous people.<sup>4 5</sup>

In many instances, these Art centres are grossly underfunded. Adequate and secure funding would not only help to foster financially viable art centres, but will have multiplying economic benefits throughout the entire community in a manner that is culturally appropriate.<sup>6 7</sup> Big hART's creative director Scott Rankin notes the inconsistency of policymakers on both sides of politics who on one hand call for greater economic participation from Indigenous communities, while on the other hand underfunding Indigenous art centres that have the potential to increase participation, but lack the financial support to prosper.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Read more about the *Namatjira* project at: <<http://www.namatjira.bighart.org/>>.

<sup>3</sup> Big hART (2011): p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Marinos, S. (2012) *Social Policy*, Big hART, accessed online 22 September 2015: <<http://www.namatjira.bighart.org/category/social-policy/>>.

<sup>5</sup> Big hART (2011): p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Marinos (2012).

<sup>7</sup> Rentschler, R., Bridson, K and Evans, J. (2010) *Big hART: The Namatjira Project*, Stats and Stories – Case Study 4, Regional Arts Australia: p. 11, accessed online 20 September 2015: <<http://regionalarts.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Big-hART-Case-Study.pdf/>>.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Pryor, S. (2014) 'Albert Namitjira Descendants Bring Art Work to Parliament House,' Sydney Morning Herald, 26 November.

## Employment

Employment is the key to economic development. There are two sides to any employment equation, supply and demand, and both must be promoted by government to cultivate economic development over the longer term. While groups such as the Institute of Public Affairs have typically advocated policies aimed at increasing the supply of labour (e.g. reducing welfare payments and benefits),<sup>9</sup> policies to increase the demand for labour (e.g. subsidies, tax breaks and direct government employment) should also be encouraged. In all things, Indigenous employment policy should be guided by the necessity of cultivating relationships and building trust between community members and workers brought in from outside. Projects are more likely to be successful if they are developed in conjunction with the local community and driven by mutual respect and meaningful consultation.<sup>10</sup>

### Demand for Labour

Direct government employment has had a demonstrated positive impact on regional Indigenous economies by integrating aspects of the local culture into the work programmes, including traditional art, languages and connection with the land and with the community. Examples from the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands in South Australia include:

- Park rangers;
- Environmental health workers;
- Education workers/traditional language teachers;
- Youth mentoring/holiday program workers;
- Childcare workers;
- Professional artists;
- 'Community Constables'/Police Aboriginal Liaison Officers; and
- Indigenous Art Centre managers.<sup>11</sup>

Further, government-led employment programmes have the potential to offer pathways for people with no employment experience into the non-government sector.

### Supply of Labour

Policies to increase the number of Indigenous people looking for work should be incentive-driven rather than punitive. Punitive measures have the potential to drive a wedge between Indigenous community members and non-Indigenous workers, increasing perceptions of an 'us versus them' divide which is counter-productive. The government should instead look at implementing incentives to increase the numbers of Indigenous people looking for paid employment. Such incentives could include:

- Employment opportunities with clear benefits for the community;

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<sup>9</sup> Tudge, A. (2011) 'A New Deal for Indigenous Australians,' *IPA Review*, 63 (4): pp. 20-23.

<sup>10</sup> Big hART (2011): p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> Department of the Premier and Cabinet (2012) *South Australian Government Update: Progress on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands – Service Delivery and Development*, Government of South Australia, October.

- The availability of work that values their cultural background;
- Projects that are driven by the community; and
- Opportunities to share existing knowledge, especially traditional language and cultural practices.

In many contexts, employment conditions are inappropriate and incompatible with Indigenous culture. In particular, the government should, where possible, allow for flexible working arrangements such as more fluid work hours. Instigating cultural leave would demonstrate the government's understanding of the value of community activities by allowing Indigenous community members to continue to participate in cultural activities and ceremonies (e.g. funerals and other family commitments) once they are employed.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Big hART (2011): p. 9-10.

## Recommendations

1. That as far as possible, government activity in Indigenous communities emphasises local empowerment and community engagement as a guiding philosophy.
2. That education in rural Indigenous communities integrates the local culture into the curriculum to encourage cultural maintenance and Indigenous participation.
3. That traditional Indigenous languages are incorporated into the curricula of schools in remote Indigenous communities; and that they are taught by members of the local community.
4. That funding for the Arts from all levels of government be considered not as an unnecessary luxury, or as a burden, but a vital component of social, cultural and economic life in Indigenous communities.
5. That Indigenous art centres be given adequate, sustainable and secure levels of funding, appropriate to their potential as an economic and cultural hub for the local community.
6. That employment policy in remote Indigenous communities be developed in conjunction with the local population through meaningful consultation and the development of long-term relationships.
7. That all levels of government create employment opportunities for Indigenous community members that integrate aspects of the local culture, including traditional languages, art and care for the land.
8. That punitive supply-side employment policies such as restricting access to welfare be reduced in favour of policies that create incentives for economic participation.
9. That flexible work arrangements are introduced for Indigenous community members as an incentive to enter the workforce.
10. That 'cultural leave' be introduced as a valid workplace entitlement for Indigenous people in rural communities as an incentive to enter the workforce.