

Bridging and Building Indigenous Focused Philanthropy Panel Session

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1. BEING AN ECHO

My contribution today is really to reflect on some of the issues that I see in Australia in relation to Indigenous focused philanthropy. As Jacqui Katona, CEO of Lumbu Indigenous Community Foundation says, "we need echoes, so that other people know how to help us achieve our own goals." I have checked the points I am going to make with Bennett Walker and with Jacqui Katona and hope that I might be a helpful echo today.

My interest in working with Indigenous Australians grew out of an organisational development project I worked on with Reconciliation Victoria, which was funded by the Victorian State Government. The main purpose of Reconciliation Victoria is to encourage active appreciation of and participation in the advancement of Reconciliation between all Victorians.

The following values guide its work:

- **RESPECT** for the diversity of cultures, and the rights of all Australians
- Increased understanding of Indigenous **RIGHTS** and heritage
- **RECOGNITION** of the unique status of Indigenous peoples in Australia.

The project involved a review of the organisations work, clarifying its priorities and developing new partnerships, including with philanthropy.

I was introduced to Bennett Walker by Henrietta Marie and talked with him and others about their idea of a community foundation for the Kuku Yalanjiwarra people of Mossman, on the edge of the Daintree Rainforest – a World Heritage area. It became clear that the issues facing the Kuku Yalanjiwarra were complex and interrelated: native title claims, ecotourism and other sustainable enterprises, drug and alcohol rehabilitation and small business development. We began work on a constitution for an indigenous community foundation and discussed tax and governance issues – and the practical projects that the community wanted to work on. These were complicated matters but some good work was done. The project is in a parking bay at this stage for a few reasons – I'm not sure if that's a long term or short term situation.

In another project with the United Nations University, which has been supported by The Christensen Fund, I helped identify potential funding partners, both government and philanthropic, which might support the development of a Research and Training Centre on Traditional Knowledge to be based in Australia. This project emphasised to me again the complex issues surrounding the protection of Traditional Knowledge around the world.

Most recently, I have been working on a business plan with the Lumbu Indigenous Community Foundation, which is the only national community foundation for Indigenous people in Australia. The project has involved clarifying their priorities and helping the organisation set some outcome targets. Again their work is broad and interrelated – and very much focused on individual and community capacity building. US funders such as

Levi Strauss Foundation, The Christensen Fund and the First Nations Development Institute have been important supporters of the organisation. Several Australian Foundations are also supporting them – but there are challenges in the Australian philanthropic operating environment, which I will talk about shortly.

2. THE STATUS OF ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIANS

Before I talk about philanthropy, I would like to give you a snapshot of the status of Indigenous Australians. This situation is of grave concern to many people – as many of you would know. Just as I was leaving Australia, the front page of one of the national newspapers had a headline “Diabetes threatens to wipe out Aborigines”. I will read an extract:

“The so called ‘Cocacolaisation’ of traditional cultures, with communities adopting Western lifestyles and fast-food diets, has been blamed for a rapid rise in type 2 diabetes. An estimated one in five indigenous Australians has diabetes. Inadequate access to health care means many cases are undiagnosed, resulting in blindness, kidney disease and amputations.” (The article also notes that the diabetes epidemic is mirrored in Asia, the Pacific, Canada, New Zealand and North and South America.)

Some further statistics:

The mean equivalised household income is \$394 for Indigenous Australians, compared with the national average of \$665 (2002 figures).

54.3% of Indigenous people are unable to raise \$2,000 within a week for something important.

51.7% indicate that their main source of income are government pensions and allowances.

Source: Revisiting the poverty war: income status and financial stress among Indigenous Australians, Boyd Hunter, to be published 2006 (provided by Prof Jon Altman)

Indigenous students score around one proficiency level lower than non-Indigenous Australians. Similar results were evident for reading and scientific literacy and for problem solving.

PISA in Brief from Australia's perspective, Australian Council for Educational Research, 2003 (Programme for International Student Assessment, OECD)

In 2001, the suicide rate for Indigenous people (35.5 per 100 000) was considerably higher than the rate for other Australians (13.1 per 100 000) (based on Queensland, WA, SA and the NT). Suicide death rates for the Indigenous population were particularly high in the 25-34 year age group (67.2 per 100 000).

And finally, the life expectancy of Indigenous people is around 20 years lower than that for the total Australian population.

Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2003, Overview, Council of Australian Governments

3. WHAT SHOULD PHILANTHROPY DO WHEN SUPPORTING INDIGENOUS PROJECTS AND PROGRAMS?

i) Apply Longer Timelines

There is a need to take a longer term perspective when making grants to Indigenous focused projects. This is for several reasons:

1. It is important to allow time for consultation between various groups, within extended families, and the wider community. Without this involvement, projects will not be supported and will simply wither away through local disinterest.
2. Some of the projects which are needed are in fact quite ambitious, for example building community foundations and other vehicles for community capacity building. This raises issues of skills and knowledge transfer, both about philanthropy and about managing a not for profit organisation (which is a huge body of knowledge in itself). This is a whole new way of doing things for many communities, which may be used to working with government funding or small commercial enterprises.

It takes time to pass on knowledge and to ensure that there are the right support people in a local area for the long term.

With longer timelines comes accountability, but not at the expense of the organic, creative approach which might want to be taken to a particular project. Set milestones, but be realistic.

2. Help create an enabling environment

In Australia, we face some hurdles. I often speak about the challenges within the Australian operating environment for community foundations in general, although we have had some small wins this year. However, the situation for Indigenous Community Foundations is even more challenging.

Our charitable tax system is quite bizarre. We have a two tiered system:

1. An organisation is endorsed as a charitable organisation. This still links to the English Statute of Elizabeth 1601 which defines charity under four heads: relief of poverty, sickness or distress, advancement of religion, advancement of education and other purposes beneficial to the community. These have been expanded through legislation, for example, to include cultural and environmental purposes for the public benefit.
2. An organisation then seeks to be endorsed as a Deductible Gift Recipient if it wants to receive tax deductible donations. There are a range of categories for DGRs but there is not one category that fits a community foundation's full activities, let alone an indigenous community foundation. Community foundations have to use a company and trust structure which has many limitations – that is another half an hour talk in itself.

Suffice to say, the holistic approach to dealing with issues facing Indigenous communities does not easily fit within the Australian DGR categories. Some might fit in

the Harm Prevention Charity category, others might be a Public Benevolent Institution – many really want to be community builders, engaged in managing native title and sustainable development, and linking this with reducing alcohol and drug abuse and encouraging business ventures.

The issue for philanthropy is that many foundations in Australia, with some important exceptions, can only fund a DGR organisation. This partly explains why US foundations, which can fund charitable activities, have been so important, for example, to Lumbu Indigenous Community Foundation.

Somehow, we need to find the political will at a national level to address this if the concept of self help is to be made to fly. Otherwise the current dependance model which a history of government funding encourages will not change.

3. Indigenous Governance

Indigenous organisations should be enabled to use their own traditional governance models as far as possible.

One interesting part of working with the Kuku Yalanjiwarra tribe was drafting the Constitution to provide that the structure of the Board would reflect male and female Elders drawn from the relevant family groups.

The issue of *public* as opposed to *private* benefit still needs work as charitable organisations must be for the public benefit, not only for a very defined private group. However, given the movement of Indigenous peoples in parts of Australia, providing services to a wider group is likely to be realistic.

In conclusion, I have to admit that I find this part of my work in philanthropy very challenging, and at times disheartening. It is important, in this context, that the work of the First Nations Development Institute and The Christensen Fund in Indigenous focused philanthropy is so inspiring.

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