

Changing Perceptions of Disadvantage - A Multi-cultural Both-ways Exchange Program

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Abstract The goal of Indigenous children living on a community in the Tiwi Islands is neither to get an education nor to be employed – it is to get the dole and remain trapped in a lifestyle of poverty and disadvantage. There is no notional idea of breaking this cycle – more a resignation of its inevitability – the consequence being a continuation of the less than acceptable educational, health, social and demographic indicators for these children. Evidence clearly demonstrates that “being poor and unemployed statistically lowers self-esteem and increases illness, death and the likelihood of arrest and imprisonment just as poor health and limited educational achievements affect employability”. The current paper articulates some of the issues we identified when working with Indigenous people and proposes one option to challenge the status quo using an innovative, multi-cultural, both-ways program of community development.

Keywords Indigenous Australians, disadvantage, exchange programs

No! No!– We Don’t Need a Job - We Can Just Get the Dole (Social Welfare Payment)””

1. Introduction

Countless political, academic and social resources describe the many, and multifaceted approaches, that have been implemented to address the disadvantages and the dysfunction of Australia’s Indigenous peoples. While substantial gains have been made in many countries, independent of location, Indigenous populations around the world have suffered from the dispossession and alienation of their land that has resulted in significant deleterious consequences to the psychosocial well-being of these populations. Without exception, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are the most disadvantaged group in Australian society and consistently experience lower levels of health, well being, employment, education, health, housing, crime and violence (Overcoming Indigenous

Disadvantage, 2011) as a result of marginalization, discrimination and prejudice. Disadvantage in one area leads to disadvantage in other areas. More specifically, the gap in life expectancy remains at 11.5 years for males and 9.7 years for females, the unemployment rate is 17% compared to 5% for non- Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander (ATSI) people, they are 1.5 times more likely to have a disability or long term health condition, and are 14 times more like to be incarcerated (ABS, 2013). As noted in the fifth Australian Productivity Report on Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage (2011) “Of the 45 quantitative indicators in the report, available data show improvement in outcomes for 13 indicators — including in employment, educational attainment and home ownership. For 10 indicators, including many health and school education outcomes, there has been no significant improvement, while for another seven, including social indicators such as criminal justice, outcomes have actually deteriorated. As such, despite considerable political, social and economic commitment, only marginal improvements have been identified.

The Stronger Futures policy, announced in 2011, has its origins in the Northern Territory Emergency Response initiative (NTER). The NTER was developed to address the social dysfunction in many communities that was impacting the lives of women and children as articulated in the Report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse titled *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle: ‘Little Children are Sacred’* (Wild, R. & Anderson, P., 2007). It is not the intent or focus of this report to debate the Intervention, as it became known as, but to acknowledge the more contemporary measures are based on building on the achievements of the NTER whilst addressing the hurt and distress that was caused by the way in which the NTER was implemented. The primary focus of Stronger Futures was to tackle alcohol use, education, housing and employment. Two of these priorities, education and employment, were the driving forces in the development, within the Ranger program, of a both-ways, international exchange program. www.pc.gov.au/_data/.../15-better-indigenous-policies-chapter12.pdf

The Working on Country Indigenous Ranger Program, an ongoing Australian Government initiative, assists

Indigenous people to build on their traditional knowledge and to protect and manage land and sea country (Working on Country; Department of the Environment, 2013). More than 680 rangers are currently employed in paid positions across 90 ranger teams located in all States and the Northern Territory. The Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory jobs package will add a further 50 Indigenous Ranger positions. This program provides real employment and training opportunities for some of the most remote and economically marginalized communities in Australia. It recognizes the cultural relationships and connections between Indigenous people and their country and supports the aspirations and ambitions of Indigenous people who want to care for their country. The social outcomes from the program are diverse and interconnected, relating to health and wellbeing, economic, cultural and educational outcomes for the individual rangers, their families and communities (Measuring the Social Outcomes Report, 2011). The rangers are often important role models and leaders in their communities. They work with elders and young people to share and pass on traditional knowledge.

Within the Working on Country Indigenous Ranger Program, there are approximately 55 Yirrkala, 40 Thamarurr rangers and 7 Dhimurru Rangers in training with Charles Darwin University (CDU) and Batchelor Institute of Tertiary Education (completing a Certificate II or III Conservation and Land Management) and approximately 250 rangers within the CDU Indigenous ranger training footprint. In addition, through the School of Indigenous Knowledges and Public Policy, a Vocational Education and Training (VET) Certificate 1 and Ilin Conservation and Land Management is part of the VET in School program where senior school children can participate in obtaining a higher education certificate. These educational pathways enable Indigenous students to continue into higher education courses in environmental science and become future leaders who manage their country for the well being of their people. It was while teaching on community that the idea for the both-ways exchange program was born, in part, because there is a need to break out of the 'training treadmill' and to find a way to make it obvious to the Indigenous students that their communities are, in fact, places of opportunity where they could become leaders of change and progress. This is in stark contrast to the belief that many of the students hold in that community life leads to alcohol abuse, violence, boredom and the never ending cycle of poverty and despair. While training opportunities may be advantageous for some, many youth still do not view their futures as being filled with hope and optimism. Evidence for the relative despair of youth on community is supported by the intervention from the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) known as the Youth in Communities (YIC) program. Among the key indicators of success of this initiative, identified by the government were;

1. reduced involvement in violence;
2. reduced incidence of arrests or detention for criminal activities;

3. reduced outbreaks of sniffing amongst the YIC participant group;
4. reduced suicides of young people;
5. reduced incidents of self-harming;
6. reduced antisocial behaviour amongst participants e.g. damage to property, abusive or aggressive behaviour to other members of the community;
7. reduced substance abuse

Given these key indicators are indicative of dysfunction, it is reasonable to suggest that intervention, at a community level, with youth is both necessary and urgently required. This is supported by the fact that 20.1 million dollars was allocated to the support diversionary activities in remote communities for Indigenous youth (10-20 years) in the Northern Territory to address issues such as substance use, disengagement from education, training and employment, self-harm and criminal activity (FaHCSIA)

2. The Current Project

When teaching on community it is necessary to be an active role model and engage with students in non-formal and social settings. During these sessions, as part of the educative process, we talk to the students about the importance of doing their school work and learning conservation land management because education is important for them to get a job. When we said this on a recent trip to the Tiwi Islands, a remote community 80km north of Darwin, the students chanted in unison – 'no no – we don't need a job - we can just get the dole' (social welfare payment). That was their goal – not education, not employment – but to get the dole. We explained that not every country has Centrelink payments and that sometime 'down the track' they may not have, and their children may not have, the 'luxury' of welfare payments as the government can change the rules at any time. We started talking to them about places (e.g. Africa, Timor and Asia) where there is no Centrelink or social security money available and we made it very clear to them that in these countries if you don't work you do not eat and then you die. The students were horrified and in total disbelief - we had their attention for nearly two hours as we described different cultures and governmental policies. They could not believe that there were places that had no government help or money. Third world countries – they had no notionally idea about them – yet they, on most indicators, are Australia's most disadvantaged and underprivileged group that live, effectively, in third or fourth world conditions, yet they knew nothing about the disadvantage experienced by millions of other people around the world.

3. Implementation/Method

While stories have meaning, and are intrinsically part of Indigenous culture, we thought it would be more authentic if

community members could listen to one of their own family talking about a real experience – that is, what life is like for other indigenous people living in a third World country. We know, from a few of the rangers that have been overseas, that this type of experience had a profound effect on them and was continually communicated throughout their community. We decided to progress the plan to take Rangers to Cambodia – something that has never been attempted previously. We partnered with Max Williams from Partners against Poverty – a not for profit Christian organization working in Cambodia. Partners against Poverty have developed a significant new project at Neal Village in Takeo province Cambodia 45 km south west of Phnom Penh. At Neal village they have established a small farm to train people from provinces throughout Cambodia in the latest techniques for growing chickens, fish, pigs and various vegetables. Once trained, graduates are selected and appointed to establish and manage a new farming venture in their village or province. In addition to training potential farm managers, the farm also trains families living in the immediate vicinity, helping them to establish income producing mini farms of their own. The training farm is intended to be a central resource to the surrounding families providing ongoing advise, stock feed, vaccines and vet care for those in need.

Why Cambodia? Cambodian nationals have been equally as oppressed, brutalized, dispossessed, and colonized as Indigenous Australians. They lost knowledge, culture and much of their history as a result of the Khmer Rouge genocide – not dissimilar to the ATSI people. The UN education ranking is 132/179, the human development index is 139/184 and the economic freedom index is 117/179 – all indicators of social, economic and educational disadvantaged. The Multi-dimensional Poverty Index indicates that 45.9% of the population live in poverty and an additional 21.4% were vulnerable to multi-dimensional poverty (Human Development Report, 2013). The average life expectancy for Cambodians is, on average, seven years less than for Indigenous Australians (males 60 v 67, females 65 v 72) and the infant mortality rate of 51 death per 1000 is between four (14.3 in NT) and 12.5 (4.3 SA) times higher compared to their ATSI counterparts (International Human Development Indicators, 2012). As such, the Cambodians and Indigenous Australian populations have robust similarities of disadvantage. However, they are also traditional owners rebuilding their societies and culture within an economic (e.g. tourism, mining) and social (land ownership) boom - that neither populations has knowledge of or experience with.

However, the stark contrast is that Cambodians have to work – there are no government payments. Apart from the ad hoc activities of various NGO's, there is no social welfare, no shelters, and no soup kitchens. In Australia, as noted by Wood (2011), "We are bringing up generation after generation of Aboriginal people who have never worked properly. Maybe they have worked a little, but on the whole they have never worked. Their kids see that as the norm and

their grandkids see that as the norm. This is supported by Langton (2012) who argued against the current welfare system because it resulted in Indigenous people having a "perverted" sense of entitlement. We believe the current project will begin to dispel this belief of entitlement. If our Indigenous youth experience life as a Cambodian national, it is anticipated this experience will improve the knowledge of Indigenous people and show them the harshness of life in a country where there are no 'handouts'. Accordingly, it should reduce the belief that they are 'hard done by', increase their awareness that their communities are places of opportunity, and challenge their sense of being owed a living.

While we intend to establish a role modeling approach, we will not target 'important' Indigenous people. We believe that we will have the most success by choosing people who are young, who are impressionable, not been away before, not related to anyone special and someone who wouldn't normally 'get a guernsey'. At present, when many young Indigenous people from remote communities go on a trip to a capital city (e.g. Melbourne) they get a distorted view that everyone else has more than they do – they compare their life to the life of a person in the city and feel deprived. If they go to Cambodia they will feel 'well off' – a feeling they are unlikely to have experienced previously. They may also get ideas from watching the Cambodians using recycled materials and they might think about what they throw away start being more ingenious - as are the Cambodians. We would also argue, as a consequence of Cambodian youth and Indigenous Rangers exchanging experiences, both cultures may learn how to negotiate good outcomes for themselves. Furthermore, as noted by Hensengerth (2008), the youth in Cambodia have been raised by care givers who endured years of trauma that has resulted in widespread domestic violence within families with detrimental effects on the children's psycho-social well-being. Indigenous youth have a very similar life experience. While secondary to the goals of this project, sharing their histories may contribute to a broader understanding of their experiences and may, in part, contribute to their healing.

4. Conclusion

The ultimate goal of this project is to create a change in the outlook of the youth of our remote communities. We do not see these communities as the hopeless places that they are often portrayed - but as places of profound opportunity. If we can reframe the perception of Indigenous youth, by providing them with the opportunity to view their lives and their Community from a Cambodian perspective then will see the opportunities that are there right now for them and their families. The belief that these opportunities are theirs to seize will be worth far more than any training course or government inspired project could ever hope to achieve.

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