MURDI PAAKI REGIONAL ASSEMBLY
COMMUNITY-LED GOVERNANCE
LESSONS LEARNED

SEPTEMBER 2019

FOREWORD

Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly is delighted to have this opportunity to collaborate with the National Indigenous Australians Agency to showcase our model for community-led governance. Our ambition is to inspire other First Nations groups which are in the early stages of planning their own governance structures and processes by presenting insights into arrangements for representation and practices of governance that have worked well for us, in our particular setting. More than this, though, we hope that presentation of the lessons learned by us will, in response, inform a learning process among our government, NGO and private sector partners about the capacity and intellect which resides among our peoples, and in our communities, and the scope for equal relationships to deliver positive change for our people.

We are at a turning point in our affairs. It is time to move away from old, failed models for engagement between First Nations people and governments. The old models have no part to play in place-based governance and leadership. Our relationships must reinforce our role as active citizens, not as passive consumers of services. There is no place for conventional service provider-consumer arrangements in our partnerships. Those wishing to engage with us must embrace and respond to the diversity in our communities. We're not a people, we are peoples. Why would it then make sense to impose uniform policy arrangements? For this reason, frameworks for community-led governance and representation which arise from a genuine desire for voice at community level must be shaped by local circumstances.

Our relationships at a political level are forward-looking, strategic and cordial, and we observe a willingness and commitment to achieve positive change for our communities and our people. Unfortunately, this spirit of collaborative innovation is rarely matched in implementation. Too often, delivery to the Region and communities is frustrated by bureaucracies wedded to 'business as usual'. We are denied accountability and face the ongoing unwillingness on the part of service providers of all shades to accept that we know what is best for our communities. These issues thread their way through the themes discussed in this document.

Current methods of leadership and governance worldwide are struggling. Conflict exists everywhere. For more than two decades Murdi Paaki has applied ancient thinking and decision-making in the modern setting. We see it as vital that our governance embraces 'triple bottom line' thinking. Holistic policy development around environmental, economic and social factors drives progress. Without any of these factors, policy will fail.

The Murdi Paaki Model is about empowerment, confidence and identity. Community-based leadership must inspire people. Collectively, our Community Working Parties and the Assembly are proud that our model is seen as an influence for positive change.

Des Jones
Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly Independent Chair
September 2019

DISCLAIMER

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INTRODUCTION

In a political sphere where change is the only constant, the Murdi Paaki governance model has been a beacon of stability for almost thirty years. This model has been evolving steadily since the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) came into being in 1990 but the qualities which define it have survived changes of Australian and NSW governments, the coming and going of successive Indigenous Affairs policies, programmes and services, and the handing down of leadership within the Murdi Paaki Region. But what is it that makes the Murdi Paaki model so enduring? How has it become such a successful governance structure for the Aboriginal people of the Region? And what lessons are there in the Murdi Paaki experience for government partners, and for other groups elsewhere who are interested in building their own custom-made arrangements for governance and representation?

These questions are the reason why this document has been prepared. The National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA), in partnership with the Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly (MPRA), has engaged Burns Aldis to explore the factors for success in the Murdi Paaki model for community-led governance. This resource is one of three which provide a history of the model and explore lessons learned in the course of that history. The lessons are presented as stand-alone documents and readers are invited to choose the lessons that interest them most.

This resource gives a brief outline of the background to the model and then presents a summary of lessons learned. It presents the voice and opinions of the Assembly. The information comes from a series of workshops and interviews with Assembly delegates and people who have been involved with the Assembly and the ATSIC Regional Council which came before it, and draws on their experiences with community-led governance in the Murdi Paaki Region.

All intellectual property in this project has been assigned to the Assembly – an important departure from the Government's usual practice of retaining intellectual property in work that it funds.

The Assembly has four very important aims for this project: to

- Recognise in a concrete way that the Assembly has purposefully grown a successful, sustainable community-led governance structure and, in doing so, has created something of great value that is worth recording;
- Offer governments insights into what works well, and the barriers which prevent equal partnerships with community representative bodies;
- Provide the Assembly with a body of evidence to use to make a compelling case for new approaches to doing business in the Region when advocating with

government partners and the NGO and private sectors; and
- Share lessons learned with other groups outside the Region which might wish to develop their own models for community-led governance.

Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly is grateful for the participation in this project not only of Assembly delegates and Community Working Party members but also of those who have played a role in the development of the Murdi Paaki model for community-led governance but are no longer directly involved. The Assembly notes in the interests of full disclosure that the Chairperson of the Walgett Community Working Party declined to be involved in the project as a result of ongoing concerns about intellectual property rights and the exploitive impact of successive research initiatives on community, as is his right.

Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly acknowledges with appreciation the interest of the NIAA in the Murdi Paaki model for community-led governance and thanks the Agency for its willingness to fund this project.

Most importantly for the Assembly, the Lessons Learned project is about documenting the way that the Murdi Paaki model has evolved to give voice to Aboriginal people in the Murdi Paaki Region, and to allow those voices to be heard:

> This is **our** story – that's the DNA of the Murdi Paaki mob. The original intent of the Assembly and governance out here is not about responding to government; it's about recognising our mob, the voice of our people. Everyone supports the concept of doing this sort of work so that we can highlight the leadership that has happened in the past – where this has come from – so when our young people are picking up in the future, like in 20 years time, they say: "Those fellows were trying to protect us. Trying to get our voice to government, and trying to do things for us". So we've got to leave something for our young people to inherit to read.

Des Jones, MPRA Independent Chair

For the purposes of this document, an Aboriginal person is a person of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (person) and is accepted as such by the community in which he or she lives.
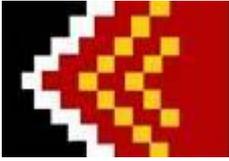
THE REGION

The Murdi Paaki Region occupies about two-fifths of the land area of NSW and is located in the north-west and far west of the state. It covers some of the most arid and remote parts of NSW. The largest settlement in the Region is the city of Broken Hill. There are fifteen other towns in the Region which are of interest in the history of the Murdi Paaki governance model. The Region includes all of the local government areas of Coonamble, Walgett, Brewarrina, Bourke, Central Darling, Broken Hill and Wentworth and the Unincorporated Far Western NSW and part of the Cobar and Balranald local government areas.

MURDI PAAKI REGION
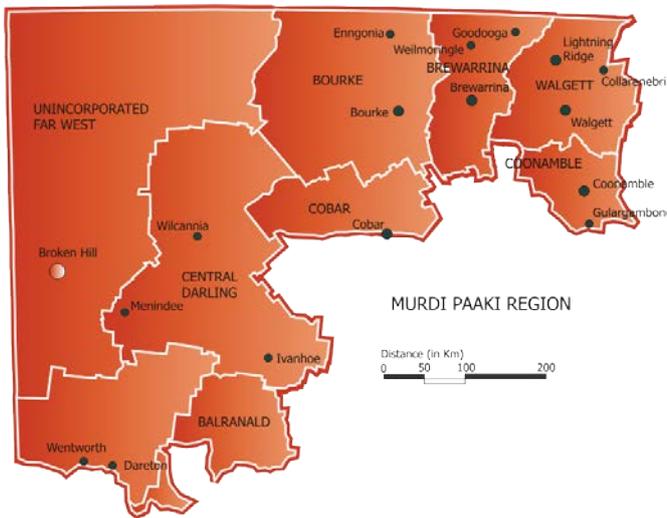
THE PEOPLES OF THE REGION

The Aboriginal people of the Region have been land owners from time immemorial. The Region takes in Country belonging to a number of nations, language groups and dialect groups: Gamilaroi/Gomeroi, Ngemba, Muruwari, Yuwaalaraay/Ularai, Weilwan, Baranbinja, Nawalgu, Gurnu, Paakantji/Barkandji, Ngiyampaa, Parundji, Garanggaba, Wanywalgu, Wangkumara, Wadigali, Wiljakali, Danggali, Kureinji, Malyangapa, Bandjigali, Barindji, Muti Muti and other smaller land-owning groups. Historical circumstances have led to a variety of other language groups, including Kooma, Budjari/Badjeti, Kullilla and Kunja people from south-western Queensland and Dieri people from South Australia, making their homes in the Region over the period since European colonisation.

For some of these groups, their traditional country is in the Region, and they have enjoyed the uninterrupted experience of living on Country. For others, the actions of the NSW Aborigines Protection Board and the Aborigines Welfare Board or, in Queensland, the Director of Native Affairs, between 1930 and 1950, resulted in their being forced from Country and, for many, confined on Government stations often referred to as 'missions'. Today, in consequence, communities in the Region are made up of people of many different cultural and language origins and place-based links. Aboriginal people's identity is thus forged through a variety of cultural and place-based connections including traditional country, places of contemporary residence, and locations which are important because of kinship ties.

POPULATION CHARACTERISTICS

The estimated resident Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population of the Region at the 30th June 2016 numbered 10,655 persons. Growth in population since 2006 is shown below. About 32% of the population is aged 14 years or younger. Rebuilding an economic base to provide opportunities for enterprise and employment is a high priority as labour force status indicators show declining participation in economic activity. To this end the Assembly has the aspiration to take back from NGOs those areas of service delivery which have been mainstreamed as a step in ensuring regional and community economic survivability in the face of non-Indigenous ageing, out-migration and business closures. It is pressing issues such as this which give practical meaning to the Assembly's model of community-led governance.
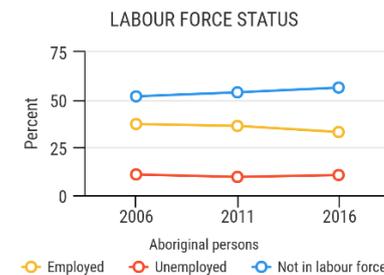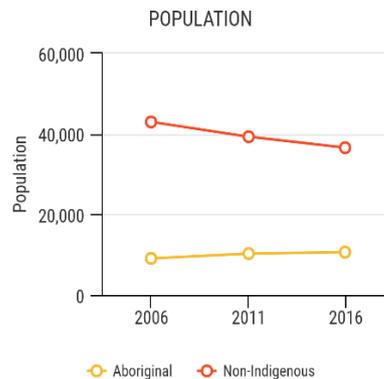
TIMELINE

1990   ATSIC Wangkumara and Far West Regional Councils created

1991   Tripartite housing and infrastructure master planning and capital works for former Reserves commences in the Region leading to a rolling programme of works overseen by the Regional Councils

1993   Wangkumara and Far West Regional Councils amalgamated to form Murdi Paaki Regional Council

1995   First Murdi Paaki Regional Plan – emphasis on aspiration for regional autonomy. Royal Australian Planning Institute Excellence Award

1995   Health Infrastructure Priority Projects (HIPP) programme commences in Dareton, leading to creation of the first Community Working Party and community-led capital works governance

1996   HIPP 2 and National Aboriginal Health Strategy (NAHS) housing and infrastructure funding allocated to the Region. CWPs progressively established in funded communities

1996   Murdi Paaki Aboriginal Housing and Infrastructure Regional Agreement signed with NSW Government to formalise community-led governance framework

1998   NSW Government announces Aboriginal Communities Development Programme – $106.3M allocated across 13 communities in the Region for capital works

1998   Control of Community Housing and Infrastructure Programme passes from Murdi Paaki Regional Council to NSW Aboriginal Housing Office

2002   (and 2003) Murdi Paaki Region selected as COAG Trial site. COAG Trial commences; Community Working Parties refreshed

2004   Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly created

2005   ATSIC abolished. Murdi Paaki Regional Council abolished. Assembly formally recognised as primary representative regional body

2005   Murdi Paaki Partnership Project establishes arrangements for CWP facilitation

2006   First Murdi Paaki Charter of Governance adopted

2006   Community Action Plans completed for each CWP

2007   COAG Trial concludes

2007   Murdi Paaki Regional Plan 2007 prepared and adopted

2009   (and 2013) Murdi Paaki Regional Partnership Agreement signed by Assembly, Australian and NSW Governments

2011   Murdi Paaki Regional Plan 2011 prepared and adopted

2015   Murdi Paaki Local Decision Making Accord signed by MPRA and NSW Government

2015   Assembly and Sydney University sign MoU to work together to improve community wellbeing

2015   New Murdi Paaki Charter of Governance adopted

2016   Murdi Paaki Regional Plan 2016 prepared and adopted

2016   Assembly and Westpac sign five year agreement to build financial literacy in the Region

2016   Murdi Paaki Services established as the operational arm of Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly

2017   Murdi Paaki Regional Housing and Business Consortium Project investigations completed to inform root and branch reform of the Region's Aboriginal social housing sector, strongly focussed to improved services to tenants

2018   Assembly and NSW Government sign Local Decision Making (LDM) Accord to establish Regional Aboriginal Housing Leadership Assembly to set community-led policy direction for Aboriginal social housing in the Region

2019   Assembly and NSW Government commence negotiations for LDM Accord II
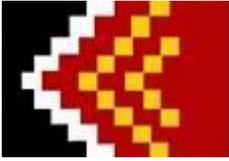
THE MURDI PAAKI MODEL

The Murdi Paaki model for community-led governance grew from the former ATSIC Regional Council structure, but with a difference. While the election of Regional Councils under the legislated structure favoured the larger communities, there was a strong desire in the Murdi Paaki Region for equal representation for each of the sixteen communities of the Region irrespective of size. When the opportunity arose, the form of representation and governance was revised to conform with the expressed wishes of the Murdi Paaki communities themselves.

> There's real acceptance because of the equity [the model] brought to the region – little communities having equal say, equal voting power, equal authority. It empowered small communities: Ivanhoe, Enngonia, Weilmoringle. Compare that to the ATSIC Regional Council model where not all communities had a voice.

Sam Jeffries, former MPRA Independent Chair

A representation of the Murdi Paaki community-led model as it is now structured is shown below. Authorship and ownership rests exclusively with the Aboriginal people of the Region. Assembly delegates are at pains to point out that the model is about how Aboriginal people engage with each other, both internally in their communities and externally with other communities across the Region. It is the framework for an authentically Aboriginal way of doing business which is owned by Aboriginal people of the Region, and is not available for governments to influence.

Communities

Community Working Parties

Community Action Plan

Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly

Support by Murdi Paaki Services Ltd

Charter of Governance

Engagement Protocol

Strategic Plan
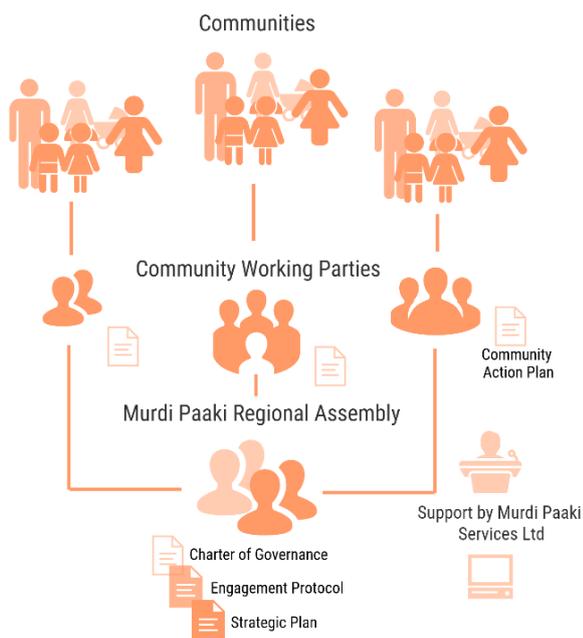
Engagement and relationships with the Australian, NSW and local governments and the NGO and corporate sectors takes place purely in relation to service and programme provision, funding and staffing.

The creation of the Assembly was initially viewed by the ATSIC Murdi Paaki Regional Council as an interim stage in the transition to Regional Authority status. When ATSIC was abolished, the Assembly, still signalling the aspiration for regional autonomy, stepped seamlessly into Council's shoes and took on its role in engaging with governments. The Assembly resolved to retain its unincorporated status so that Government could never abolish it, and so that it could never have an administrator appointed or be wound up under corporations legislation. Delegates continue to see the Assembly's unincorporated structure as a strength because it confers independence.

Each community has a Community Working Party (CWP). Any Aboriginal person in the community is entitled to be a member and, in some communities, Aboriginal community controlled service providers are also able to be represented although some CWPs may require that service provider personnel attend as community members. Arrangements for community governance at CWP level are unique to each community, within the overarching framework of the Murdi Paaki Charter of Governance.

Each CWP has a seat at Regional Assembly. Assembly delegates are usually CWP Chairs. There are also Assembly positions for the three NSW Aboriginal Land Council Councillors whose regions overlap the Murdi Paaki Region, and four Murdi Paaki Aboriginal Young and Emerging Leaders. The Assembly is chaired by an independent chairperson whose position is the only salaried position within the structure.

The Murdi Paaki model draws its authority from its broad community base:

> The commonest model is the top down. Always top down. **Our** model is our mob first. They're the decision-makers at the end of the day. Our communities have to come first.

Des Jones, MPRA Independent Chair

The governance characteristics of the model are adapted to the cultural, social and geographical context of the Region and its communities. Governance practices are culturally derived, but also informed by the provisions of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples:

> Indigenous people have the right of self-determination and by virtue of that right we freely determine our political status, and freely pursue our economic, social and cultural development. I believe that would have been the

foundation for why this Assembly was brought together, because it was a voluntary thing.

Grace Gordon, Brewarrina CWP Chair and MPRA Delegate

The Assembly's Statement of Purpose is:

To establish Aboriginal jurisdiction in the Murdi Paaki Region based on recognition of our human rights as Aboriginal peoples, political, social and cultural respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australian society, and equitable participation in the socio-economic development of the Region.

The model does not accommodate organisations or governments as these as considered to be service providers with special interests.

The Assembly is led by an Independent Chair. The Chair is recruited through a process of open advertisement, with the position description prepared by a human resources professional. The selection panel is drawn from Assembly delegates and senior government personnel. The salary package is set to be consistent with industry benchmarking as determined by the Assembly.

Although the Murdi Paaki model has been shown over time to be robust and legitimate, external factors still exist which can weaken the effectiveness of leadership, governance and representation. Despite consistently being willing to engage, the Assembly is frustrated by its inability to influence policy and programme design for service delivery. Government partners, especially at an operational level, show limited knowledge of and little interest in responding to the Assembly's evidence-based planning. This makes it challenging for communities, working through the Assembly, to have their legitimate points of view and their local knowledge recognised and acted on. Blinkered government approaches to innovation and rigid emphasis on process stifle the Assembly's potential as an agent of change.

Even where there is participation at regional and community level, governments and non-government organisations often seek to use the Assembly as a 'rubber stamp' for their initiatives; sometimes where these do not align with the Assembly's strategy. It is not unusual for services, programmes or projects to be presented on a 'take it or leave it' basis. Even so, the communities place such great value on the model that they are prepared to say 'no' to such approaches.

Through its evolution over the last three decades, the Assembly has worked tirelessly to develop its governance skills and those of community; provide strong leadership; advocate for the needs of Aboriginal people without fear or favour; refine its approach to doing business; and form partnerships to improve the situation of the communities of the Region, and each family and individual within these communities. The

Assembly takes the view that theirs is a story well worth sharing.

SUMMARY

- The Murdi Paaki model for community-led governance comprises the Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly and the sixteen Community Working Parties giving equal representation to the Region's principal communities;
- The model is community driven and practices a culturally-derived form of community governance;
- The Assembly is authorised to speak on behalf of communities through its relationship with the CWPs;
- The business of the Assembly is conducted to an agreed set of rules led by an Independent Chairperson.

GUIDELINES FOR SUCCESS

- Build a model based on equitable representation and participation for all Aboriginal people in the Region;
- Be aware of the benefits of remaining unincorporated;
- Give primacy to the community voice to ensure that everyone feels enfranchised and empowered;
- Create a framework in which local decisions are made at community level and matters of regional significance are dealt with at the level of the Assembly;
- Establish firm, culturally aligned rules for conducting internal business and for engagement by partners.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?

- Although the Murdi Paaki model is acknowledged as demonstrating good governance, the Assembly struggles to have an effective voice at operational level;
- The Assembly requires ongoing resourcing to function most effectively in giving advice to governments;
- CWPs may be demoralised and reduce involvement, often because of competing agendas, lack of productive activity, inability to influence outcomes and/or an unwillingness by stakeholders to engage.

TACKLING THE CHALLENGES

- The Assembly keeps a clear strategic focus and observes a respectful way of doing business but will fearlessly pursue injustice and inequity;
- The model derives its greatest potential to effect change from respectful, collaborative and pragmatic relationships between the Assembly and partners;
- A seat is kept at the Assembly table for each community to be represented.
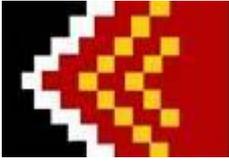
COMMUNITY WORKING PARTIES: STRUCTURE AND FOCUS

Each of the main 16 communities in the Murdi Paaki Region has an Aboriginal Community Working Party (CWP) as the peak body for local representation and decision-making. Each CWP develops its own locally-relevant governance practice within the boundaries of the Murdi Paaki Charter of Governance. CWPs are owned by the communities themselves and are the outgrowth of community desire for voice and representation.

CWPs are a representative model in which all Aboriginal people in a community are entitled to participate but participation is voluntary. There are no sitting fees.

> If you live in that postcode, you're entitled to come and have a say, if you're an Aboriginal person. A lot of our mob aren't into politics – they don't want to get into politics but they want their voice heard. And our Chairs take it up for them to the Assembly – that's how they participate.

Des Jones, MPRA Independent Chair

Community governance models are constructed by the communities themselves. CWP structure and composition are decided by the communities to suit local ways of engaging and decision-making, as are the processes used to give effect to the CWP.

The Assembly respects CWP autonomy, while requiring that the governance model as a whole works to a consistent set of values and practices around probity, inclusiveness and other matters of shared importance.

CWPs embrace their role in identifying need and planning a strategic response. The primary focus of effort is enhanced service delivery with the goal of improved socio-economic outcomes. Since the COAG Trial of the mid-2000s, each CWP has prepared a Community Action Plan (CAP) to set out its strategic priorities and map a development agenda at local scale.

The earliest CWPs were established to govern the delivery of major housing and infrastructure projects in their communities. CWPs were provided with administrative support by the project managers for these initiatives. The experience of leadership of project planning, coupled with exposure to consensus building through informed debate and strategic governance capacity development, built capability in the CWPs, and set the groundwork for confident participation in community governance. It took time.

Communities are most engaged through their CWPs, and CWPs are most productive, when there is strategic work to do and when that work is adequately resourced, either in terms of human capital or funding. CWP Chairs are often in full-time employment and have limited time to spend on CWP administration. In addition, some Chairs do not have ready access to technology. During periods when CWPs have not been provided with personnel support crucial to implement strategy, interest has waned.

Interest in participating in CWPs can also vary in response to community dynamics. If, for example, a CWP becomes unbalanced, or its agenda manipulated, through an individual or a single family group becoming dominant, other families may be deterred from participating. Under these circumstances, the Assembly can respond by conducting a refresh process to re-balance CWP membership and leadership. CWPs can also be affected by lack of flexibility on the part of employers who may be unwilling to release staff to attend meetings. This is particularly problematic where it impacts on CWP Chairs. More broadly, participation can also be affected by external factors which affect communities such as environmental crises and service delivery issues, or simply how much is going on in the community at the time.

Recent funding of two CWP field support positions in Murdi Paaki Services, the Assembly's operational arm, is seeing CWPs refreshed and revitalised:

> When they see the rubber hit the road in the communities, what they've been negotiating for a long time, then they start to feel the momentum, to come back, to be there.

Grace Gordon, Brewarrina CWP Chair and MPRA Delegate

The Murdi Paaki Partnership Project (MPPP) of 2005, an initiative of the Murdi Paaki COAG trial, provided for locally-based professional and technical support to strengthen the operation of the sixteen CWPs through the employment of eight Community Facilitators, each assigned to support two communities.

The role of facilitators is important in supporting CWPs to develop CAPs. Apart from providing administrative support and mentoring, facilitators would be tasked with ensuring that CAPs provide a current and reliable statement of community priorities. They are seen to be 'living documents' which develop over time as community needs change. CAPs also provide the building blocks for the Murdi Paaki Regional Plan. The example which follows, taken from the Lightning Ridge CAP illustrates the development of areas of action and their prioritisation by the CWP.

Early childhood
Safe community Housing maintenance skills programme
Specialist children's early intervention services
Culture and language in schools
School attendance Youth mentoring
Youth leadership programme Governance capacity of organisations
Reduce family violence Energy efficiency in homes
School language programme K
Cultural centre Youth Housing
Relationships programmes for youth
Housing for aged and frail Circle sentencing
Law and justice
Heating and cooling Affordable housing
Elders', men's and women's groups Cross-cultural competence
Employment
Aboriginal staff in education School retention rates
Education
Culture and heritage

Lightning Ridge Community Priorities and Priority Actions

- Observe and value our Aboriginal traditions, culture and history, including building a community cultural keeping place and knowledge centre as the focus for researching and displaying our cultural heritage, and creating a resource for knowledge transfer;

- Foster the ongoing role of the Lightning Ridge Aboriginal Child and Family Centre as the focal point for childcare, early childhood and family support services and continue to work to achieve service sustainability;

- In partnership with education sector stakeholders, develop and implement strategies which improve the educational attainment of our children and young people, and safeguard their wellbeing while at school;

- Advocate for improved safety in the home and community, including measures which reduce the adverse impacts of alcohol and other drug use and domestic and family violence, and which introduce culturally appropriate diversionary processes; and

- Improve access to affordable housing and increase awareness of, and access to, home ownership.

The strategic focus and knowledge residing in CWPs is evident but achievement is dependent upon the CWPs having access to trusted and skilled enablers.

When we had facilitators back in the day, our CWP was going good. We were the first over the line in the Region for Two Ways Together. And until we are supported by facilitators again, our little CWP will struggle to go anywhere.

Fay Johnstone, Ivanhoe CWP Chair and MPRA Delegate

SUMMARY

- Community Working Parties are the peak local bodies for representation and decision-making;
- CWP structures can vary across communities;
- The CWPs' roles include assessing local community development needs, undertaking strategic planning, advocacy and negotiation, and representing the voice of the community at the regional level;
- CWPs contribute the most when consistently resourced to action local priorities in equal partnership;
- Participation by members is entirely voluntary.

GUIDELINES FOR SUCCESS

- Ensure that CWPs are open and inclusive, and the way people come together is right for the community;
- Build CWP governance capacity; agree rules setting out the way members want to do community business;
- Refresh membership and leadership of CWPs regularly, at intervals of one, two or three years;
- Have an ability to plan strategically at a community level and prepare or update plans on a regular cycle;
- Make funding/people available to ensure that CWPs have the means to implement their decision-making.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?

- CWPs may wax and wane. Low periods may result from unbalanced community representation, separatism, or demoralisation caused by local competing agendas;
- Community organisations may seek to dominate;
- Chairs, who are often employed, are expected to be, and function as, 24/7 representatives of community;
- Conflict in a community can arise when governments seek to bypass CWPs in favour of interest groups.

TACKLING THE CHALLENGES

- Create a structure to support CWPs to function, including secretariat services, strategic planning support, and assistance with refresh processes;
- Support the leadership to be impartial and enquiring;
- Ensure all community members are able to have their voices heard and aspirations conveyed to the Assembly;
- Require complete transparency in decision-making;
- Develop formal partnerships with governments and others for equitable and effective engagement, resourcing, accountability, and outcomes.
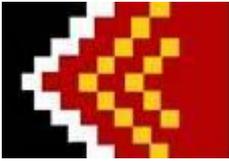
GOOD GOVERNANCE

For the Assembly, good governance is a consensus-based form of governance firmly founded in cultural protocols and geographical needs. It is an evolved form of the traditional model for decision-making around the camp fire, and is well adapted to local and regional circumstances. Assembly delegates stress the distinction between 'colonised' or corporate models of governance and the Murdi Paaki community-based model which is seen as more inclusive. International models of First Nations governance, when investigated, were not seen as applicable to the Region because of different national constitutional arrangements so the Assembly's model is truly reflective of long-standing cultural practice.

After the abolition of ATSIC, the Assembly resolved to adopt an unincorporated status and values this position for the independence it confers:

> I think that through the governance we have, we cannot be controlled by anybody.

Ted Fernando, Coonamble CWP Chair and MPRA Delegate

Governance arrangements at the regional and the CWP scale are clearly delineated and Assembly delegates are clear about their roles at the different scales:

> I'm both, but I don't sit on the fence – it's hard sometimes when you're coming here. The thing is that I've got to think widely, not locally. The structures are different – completely different.

Pam Handy, Wentworth/Dareton CWP Chair and MPRA Delegate

The Assembly embraces the need to account for community dynamics in fulfilling their role, and do so consistently and transparently:

> I think people obviously trust us to play the role – people want us to talk on their behalf and represent them, trust comes into it in a big way. They mightn't like you but they might trust you.

Des Jones, MPRA Independent Chair

For Assembly delegates, good governance is seen as a powerful attribute. From the earliest days, the Assembly has developed and documented policy frameworks for governance principles and practices to guide its way of doing business. While the Assembly recognises that a degree of give and take is needed in negotiating policy with governments, and that the process should be geared towards ensuring that both parties' needs can be met, it rejects attempts by government to dictate

what model of, and protocols for, governance are right for the Region.

SUMMARY

- Good governance in the Murdi Paaki context is governance that is culturally fit for purpose and meets the needs of community;
- The model is founded in core cultural values and principles, given effect in written policies and practices;
- The MPRA governance model accounts for the differing scales of regional and community governance;
- The model is sufficiently robust to resist attempts by external influences to corrupt or adapt the model to fit other policy-directed structures.

GUIDELINES FOR SUCCESS

- Create a governance model that meets local and regional cultural traditions and practice;
- Establish shared values; trust, inclusivity, consistency, transparency, voluntarism, independence, desire for change, and others, as the foundation of the model;
- Obtain consensus around doing business the right way; write policies and rules; and embed self-regulation;
- Respect the legal authority of other Aboriginal interests;
- Continue to develop the model to stay ahead of the challenges of the ever-changing political landscape.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?

- The Assembly is concerned by continuing attempts by government partners to co-opt the Murdi Paaki model to a government agenda. Typically, this takes the form of imposition of external, non-negotiated protocols for governance without any regard for the value of the work the Assembly has committed to developing a successful regional model over nearly three decades;
- With increasing activity, complexity and compliance, the Assembly fears it will be pushed towards a more corporatised form of governance.

TACKLING THE CHALLENGES

- Advocate to partners to ensure that the value of the regional model is understood, accepted and respected;
- Resist attempts to corrupt or otherwise manipulate the model to suit external agendas and political imperatives where the Assembly's values and principles are threatened;
- Require governments and other partners to follow the Murdi Paaki Engagement Protocol, directing enquiries through Murdi Paaki Services (MPS) for evaluation;
- Enhance the capacity of MPS to support the Assembly.
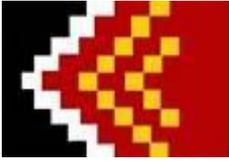
COMMUNITY WORKING PARTIES: LOCAL EXPERIENCE

CWP members, discussing their local experiences, see a variety of factors that make their CWPs successful, if to varying degrees. The most effective CWPs have a key group of people who sustain it, work collaboratively, manage conflict and work self-reliantly and selflessly towards local solutions for local problems. CWPs need to have strong leadership and broad engagement:

> The CWP Chair is the mouthpiece and must ensure that what is said is heard. Decision-making is a collective process.

Goodooga CWP member

Different policy arrangements over time have made it more or less possible to achieve this. The former Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) programme strengthened the ability of communities to build leadership capacity; as did the presence in the Region of a strong Aboriginal community controlled organisation sector.

> The community was very active in the times of CDEP. Things happened and we were able to build leadership.

Lightning Ridge CWP member

Many CWPs cite the problem of employed community members obtaining release from work to attend meetings as the main barrier to participation. If meetings are held in the daytime, employed community members cannot attend; if CWPs meet in the evening or at the weekend, service providers will not attend:

> Service provider staff job descriptions could allow time for Aboriginal workers to attend the Working Party.

Broken Hill CWP member

Other negative influences affecting participation include lack of access to transport, especially in communities where membership is dispersed; and almost universal frustration with slow progress around implementing Community Action Plans (CAPs). The opportunity to participate in productive activity is seen as the best way to maximise engagement:

> The way to engage people is to have an outcome from the Action Plan—people need to see progress.

Cobar CWP member

Most CWPs were in agreement that a high point for community engagement was the River Towns Project, during which the services of a Community Facilitator was available to each community. Apathy can also be a barrier to engagement, particularly where it exists in combination with self-interest:

> We are faced with people not willing to change—they want to do same old, same old and because there's nothing in it for them they say 'why bother?'

Collarenebri CWP member

CWPs are generally concerned about their ability to plan for succession. While the Murdi Paaki Aboriginal Young and Emerging Leaders Assembly is seen as having been very successful, the absence of CAP outcomes dissuades young people from further political activity. There is strong support for this initiative to be revitalised.

All communities are different and each requires a local framework for engagement. Some CWPs have or have had a formal membership process but this is generally seen as less inclusive.

> Our CWP has a somewhat informal meeting process. It's open to all, everyone can be on the agenda, it's inclusive.

Walgett CWP member

The cultural basis for CWPs is regarded as important.

> There are often 25 to 30 people at each meeting. The CWP observes cultural and traditional ways of doing business.

Menindee CWP member

CWP members talk about a consistent system of values

Communities, through their CWPs, bemoan the difficulties encountered in securing engagement and accountability from service providers, and make the point that accountability is vital to CWPs' ability to make strategy.

Accountability of service providers is essential if the community is going to progress. At the moment it's a box ticking exercise. The community requires data on services so that it can conduct its own research and arrive at its own conclusions and develop its own informed solutions.

Walgett CWP member

The question is how to get authority into the CWP so that service providers are forced to engage with us.

Wentworth/Dareton CWP member

For some CWPs, the interface between service providers and community is often exploitative or manipulative.

If the going gets hard, services take the easy way out—they run to the other side and drive the wedge in. But divide and rule is not the cultural way.

Collarenebri CWP member

Depending upon the ability or inclination of the CWP Chairperson to act as a two-way conduit for information, different CWPs express a varying sense of connection with the Assembly. CWP members cite communication as vital. Time available for consideration of often complex issues is limited and the CWPs feel that to rely on CWP Chairs/Assembly delegates to provide comprehensive feedback to communities is optimistic.

Communities need to be better aware of the impact that the Assembly can make so access to high level and quicker feedback is crucial.

Goodooga CWP member

Where the CWP Chair is not operating as an effective channel for communication, CWP members tend to rely on impressions formed from second or third hand reports and, as a result, overestimate the Assembly's influence, make incorrect assumptions about the Assembly's role in directing funding, and form unreliable impressions about the ways decisions are made.

The Assembly has not been proactive in ensuring equitable service delivery as there are fewer services available now.

Menindee CWP member

In some cases, the Assembly is perceived as an entity with an existence completely independent of the CWPs that constitute it:

There is a lack of knowledge of the Assembly and its achievements. CWPs benefit the Assembly but does the Assembly benefit CWPs?.

Broken Hill CWP member

The most successful CWP Chairs are those who are proactive in acting as an effective interface between the Assembly and their CWP, negotiating programmes with government, and collaborating with other local organisations, especially Local Aboriginal Land Councils (LALCs). They do, though, require resources to do this. CWP members see the value in developing strategic synergies, such as through aligning CAPs and LALC Community Land and Business Plans and through united approaches to securing funding for shared priorities.

Where CWPs have been less successful over the long term, members see value in the Assembly taking a more proactive approach to ensuring that the CWP is accountable to community.

SUMMARY

- CWPs experience varying levels of success depending upon active leadership and commitment of members;
- CWP Chairs fulfil vital roles in two-way communication between their respective CWPs and the Assembly and in shaping community views of the Assembly;
- CWPs function well when there is business to attend to and when they have professional support to do it;
- CWPs require accountability from service providers;
- Communities value Assembly involvement when CWPs are underperforming.

GUIDELINES FOR SUCCESS

- Ensure CWPs have strong leaders who are willing to participate with energy and work actively in promoting the interests of their communities;
- Build relationships and collaborate with community organisations to advance shared agendas and gain the best possible benefit from resources;
- Bring on the next generation of leaders so there is a clear succession pathway and injection of new ideas;
- Ensure CWPs can see outcomes from their own strategic work and from greater service provider accountability.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?

- Ensuring that community politics and governance frameworks are resulting in the right people rising to and remaining in positions of leadership;
- Community organisations can position themselves in opposition to the CWP and undermine the voice;
- Establishing respectful and productive relationships with service providers willing to recognise community priorities or to respond openly to CWP scrutiny;
- Communication/flow of information between Assembly representatives, CWPs and the community.

TACKLING THE CHALLENGES

- Maximise community participation, adopt frameworks that support the integrity of the model, and set in place arrangements for mentoring to develop leadership;
- Secure the return of community development and CWP support initiatives to provide the necessary opportunities and experiences able to scaffold CWP strengthening;
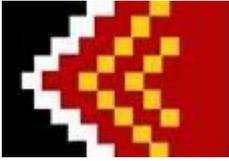
- Provide opportunities for CWPs to achieve outcomes against their CAPs so that CWPs are able to promote their effectiveness to community;
- Foster partnerships which centre on CAP delivery.
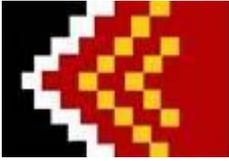
COMMUNITY-LED GOVERNANCE

CULTURE AND IDENTITY

The Assembly sees the cultural and kinship connections within and between the communities of the Region as a fundamental strength, but also emphasises the importance of recognition of and respect for diversity and for identity in all its forms:

> We want to make sure that all our communities are identified as different groups. We're all peoples, you know, we're different peoples … and we want to make sure that's maintained, that they are communities in their own right. Then you've got traditional owner groups and you've got family groups. They've all got to be recognised and valued.

Des Jones, MPRA Independent Chair

The Assembly expresses a strong sense of continuity with the traditional model of governance and decision-making – as a contemporary form of governance around the camp fire. This grounded approach is seen as conferring cultural authority:

> We should come together as we did for thousands of years. The Assembly embodies a cultural authority nobody even thinks about. It's the aspects and practices of culture – the Assembly being based on communities, not on Nations, is what makes the Assembly work. The Assembly has cultural authority from the communities as a result of the consultation process.

Sam Jeffries, former MPRA Independent Chair

Assembly delegates advocate strongly for cultural protocols to be respected in the way that business is conducted both within and between communities, and in partnerships with governments, NGOs and other entities:

> Working with our communities, you're going to have to engage around getting that information and getting it right. Lack of flexibility is why a lot of programmes fail in our communities - it's got to be done because they say it's got to be done. But that's not our way – our way is having discussions, working with people around that. It takes time.

Denise Hampton, Broken Hill CWP member

Cultural expectations around engagement have been clearly documented in the [Murdi Paaki Engagement Protocol,](#) which has been designed to guide the interaction of partners with the Assembly and CWPs.

SUMMARY

- The Assembly regards cultural and kinship connections within the Region as the basis for its governance, and emphasises the importance of recognising and responding to cultural diversity between communities;
- The MPRA Engagement Protocol documents cultural requirements for engagement by partner agencies and organisations. Recognition of and adherence to this Protocol by partner agencies is a work in progress;
- The Assembly acknowledges it continues the struggles of those that have gone before and gains strength from it.

GUIDELINES FOR SUCCESS

- Grant cultural authority to the leadership;
- Use knowledge of cultural traditions and practices when drawing up the framework for modern day community-led governance, and spell out expectations in a charter of governance;
- Build into the regional governance model scope for individual communities to develop their own ways of doing business which best fit local cultural practices;
- Advise partners to touch lightly, with care and flexibility, allowing time for community decision-making.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?

- Partners often are not aware of, nor value, the Engagement Protocol as the means to progress lasting and productive relationships;
- Partners often fail to recognise that their ways of doing business, too, are an expression of culture, which may require to be moderated when engaging with community;
- Partners pressure for answers, ignoring that the Assembly requires time and internal discussion to reach consensus;
- Community cultural observance must come first.

TACKLING THE CHALLENGES

- Insist that engagement take place within the parameters of engagement protocols and that partners recognise and respond to the cultural attributes of the Region and its communities;
- Position the role of culture firmly at the heart of community-led governance and instil cultural awareness in partner agencies and organisations;
- Emphasise that kinship binds community together as one.
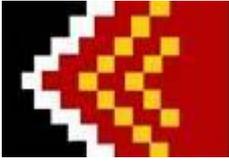
GEOGRAPHY MATTERS

The Murdi Paaki Region covers more or less the same area as the original ATSIC Region. The geography of the Region is seen by the delegates as a great strength because it reflects the traditional and contemporary linkages of families and communities, and movement paths, along the Barwon-Darling River system. The river system, in turn, provides a strong collective identity. The Assembly translates Murdi Paaki as 'Black Man's River':

> We were fortunate that the leadership back in the early days maintained the old ATSIC boundary. We still want to work in that boundary that identifies us all. Other communities, other regions were dismantled, they never adopted the old boundaries that somehow connected them to country and people. They identify with a certain region, our mob.

Des Jones, MPRA Independent Chair

At the same time, on a practical level, the Murdi Paaki communities are connected by the issues that arise from the Murdi Paaki geography – the water crisis, the loss of seasonal work in cropping industries, and the way that remoteness impacts on access to services and to opportunities for economic participation. The Region is thus always has been, and continues to be, a very rational grouping of communities from a policy and service delivery perspective:

> The Murdi Paaki communities continue to experience very similar social and economic issues, symptoms of social decline across populations. The rationale of these 'communities of common concern' is still as alive now as it was years ago.

Stuart Gordon, former ATSIC Regional Manager

The Assembly aspires to recognition of the MPRA boundaries as the rational basis for government planning and allocation of funding. Various government agencies plan and deliver services according to differing regional boundaries. This increases the difficulty the Assembly experiences in obtaining a coherent response to implementing its Regional Plan. Delegates are particularly frustrated by the remoteness classification that governments use to allocate personnel and funding because these are seen as arbitrary and not reflective of the lived experience of communities in the Region:

> The services you actually get if you're classified by remote. We don't get those services but still we're in the same sort of dilemma.

Ted Fernando, Coonamble CWP Chair and MPRA Delegate

SUMMARY

- The Assembly values the geographical boundaries of the Region as conferring identity to the Region and its peoples, and as providing a rational basis for planning, decision-making and allocation of funding. The boundary has cultural and kinship significance;
- Regional governance boundaries should be recognised by governments as providing the foundation for engagement and for structuring service delivery;
- Cross border issues adversely affect services and responsibilities are diffuse.

GUIDELINES FOR SUCCESS

- Adopt a geographical boundary which accounts for traditional language group affiliations, today's kinship relationships and communities of common interest;
- Try to strike an even balance in Chair travel demands;
- Ask government departments to use regional boundaries for service delivery which ensure all communities can experience the same service response to common geographical, economic and social issues;
- Know that community needs are diverse and may call for a place-based approach.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?

- Departmental regional boundaries are not consistent with each other or with the Murdi Paaki boundary. This complicates the process of securing government commitment to implement the Regional Plan;
- Departmental policies and practice do not consider the impacts of remoteness enough, particularly where regions span large parts of the state;
- Aboriginal people in the Region have relatively high rates of short- and long-term mobility, creating the need for flexible service delivery.

TACKLING THE CHALLENGES

- Negotiate a consistent approach which accepts the entire Region as remote, recognises relatively high levels of residential mobility, and results in an equitable framework for allocation of funding and/or services;
- Set boundaries to better foster engagement between the Assembly and governments and to facilitate the allocation of responsibilities and accountabilities.
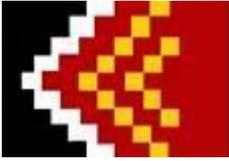
PROFESSIONAL CAPACITY

A key strategy in the *Murdi Paaki Regional Plan 2016* relates to regional capacity and capability. The Assembly understands well that unequal access to funding and expertise creates a power imbalance which constrains Aboriginal agency and frustrates its ability to bring about change. Obtaining positive outcomes from the *Regional Plan* would be greatly improved if negotiations with governments could be on an equal footing. Rebalancing the power relationship with governments would be the key to this objective.

Accordingly, the Assembly established Murdi Paaki Services (MPS) as its professional operating arm. MPS is an independent, professional legal entity owned by the Assembly. It is fully accountable to the Assembly. The organisation, which has its membership and board drawn from Assembly delegates, provides the Assembly with a mechanism to enter into contracts, receive funding and critically review proposals put to the Assembly by governments, NGOs and the private sector. The primary objectives of MPS are to:

- Take responsibility for pursuing the Assembly's strategic interests and driving positive change at a regional level;
- Act in liaison and co-ordination capacities with CWPs, and support local decision-making;
- Contribute knowledge and guidance to the Assembly's relationships with the Australian, NSW and local governments in support of rational planning, design, delivery, monitoring and evaluation of services;
- Apply for, negotiate and receive funding for priority projects of regional significance, including taking responsibility for managing flexible funding pools;
- Source, collate and interrogate information in relation to allocation of funding to the Region and identify and advocate around gaps, inefficiencies and inequities; and
- Conduct ongoing research and evaluation relating to socio-demographic and economic issues of interest.

An initial budget allowed MPS to be established as a corporation, governance arrangements developed and staff recruited. After a period of activity focussed on providing administrative support to the Assembly and refreshing CWPs, MPS is building its professional staff and forming alliances with values-aligned external providers. The Assembly has tasked MPS with taking the lead in service and programme reform across a range of sectors, locating regional priorities at the forefront of negotiations. The Assembly is acutely aware of systemic inefficiencies and seeks, with the assistance of MPS, to highlight these in the interests of service improvement and equity.

SUMMARY

- Governments should recognise power imbalances in relationships with Aboriginal communities and be prepared to address these comprehensively in the interests of obtaining reliable community contributions to continuous improvement in services and programmes;
- Aligning strategic interests can lead to improved outcomes for communities and governments;
- Trust, transparency and accountability are essential values in high level relationships;
- Rebuilding regional capacity is fundamental to survival.

GUIDELINES FOR SUCCESS

- Use, if needed, culturally-based and trusted experts and advocates able to listen to the voices of community people, pass on the message and have it acted on;
- Be prepared to commit to the long term development of this strategic resource once regional governance is sufficiently strong and governments, NGOs and the private sector can show readiness to engage positively;
- Allow the support structure to grow and change naturally as community needs and priorities evolve;
- Have an endorsed Strategic Plan to work to.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?

- Introducing a co-design process which formalises the contribution of the community through the Regional knowledge-holder as a matter of course in the interests of continuous service and programme improvement;
- Building and fostering high-level relationships across government and industry, and doing business differently;
- Recruiting professional staff to positions in regional and remote locations;
- Accessing data to underpin evidenced-based decision-making.

TACKLING THE CHALLENGES

- Recognise that the work of the organisation needs to meet strategically aligned government and Assembly objectives;
- Ensure access to and transparency around government information to allow informed decision-making.
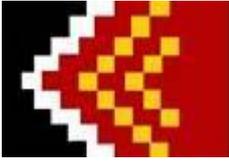
VALUES-BASED LEADERSHIP

Unity, loyalty and respect are the fundamental governing principles for the Assembly. In its Charter of Governance, the Assembly has articulated the following values for the conduct of delegates:

- Honesty
- Integrity
- Accountability to our communities
- Transparency
- Selflessness
- Professionalism
- Commitment
- Leadership
- Confidentiality

These values underpin MPRA's Code of Conduct. More broadly, the Charter, and all MPRA's plans and strategies, embody a number of strategic collective values around shared responsibility, good governance, community at the centre, regional autonomy and jurisdiction, and relationships.

As individual delegates, Assembly members place great emphasis on a number of behavioural traits and choices and have taken to heart the personal values listed above. In particular, delegates prize voluntarism, vision, inclusivity, rigour and commitment, and are willing to be available to meet the needs of their communities at all times:

> We're 24/7, we're not Dolly Parton, not nine till five; and it's important to look at what that says about our leadership.

Pam Handy, Wentworth/Dareton CWP Chair and MPRA Delegate

> We don't get a rest – we get the police knocking on our doors dropping someone off, we're getting phone calls from the hospital to go up there … we're doing everything; we're not paid. But –we're looking after the community.

Monica Kerwin, Wilcannia CWP Chair and MPRA Delegates

There is clear recognition of the importance of transparency and accountability, and the way the Assembly has documented its commitment to these values over time, together with its enduring focus on the sovereignty of community, has resulted in a robust governance structure that regulates itself:

> It suits our needs – daily plus future planning, we would prioritise the things that matter to us, not what matters to government nor anybody else. I think the part that's best for us is we self-regulate. And community will do it, they'll

know who's not going to make it as a chair, they won't put them in. So it regulates itself.

Des Jones, MPRA Independent Chair

SUMMARY

- The Assembly has developed a culturally-derived system of shared values that underpin the conduct of delegates, define the way the Assembly as a whole conducts business, and ensure that it is self-regulating;
- Assembly delegates model the values in day-to-day life, and prize the collective sense of commitment that they derive from exercising values-aligned leadership;
- The Assembly has also defined a system of values for the Region as a whole and these form the basis of the Assembly's strategic agenda.

GUIDELINES FOR SUCCESS

- Develop an agreed system of culturally relevant values which ensure that community-led governance is seen to function with consistency, integrity and professionalism;
- Agree goals, objectives and strategies at regional and community levels which express the aims, targets and actions for community-led governance;
- Develop a Code of Conduct for members based on agreed values, principles and ways of doing;
- Keep to the values when advocating, consulting, negotiating, decision-making and reporting.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?

- Although Assembly delegates are committed to modelling agreed values, this can come at a personal cost since communities can be demanding. Providing leadership will invariably involve dealing with conflict;
- The Assembly can find its values and principles intentionally challenged and undermined by approaches to community which advantage an interest group or organisation to the detriment of others;
- Negotiating with governments is a demanding role which places great stress and expectation on leaders.

TACKLING THE CHALLENGES

- An Independent Chair ensures that the Assembly's agreed protocols are observed and respected, and reputation for ethical practice maintained;
- Leadership is culturally based and acknowledges the efforts of those that have gone before;
- The mutual support provided by fellow delegates is helpful to Assembly members in managing the stresses involved in providing leadership at a community level.
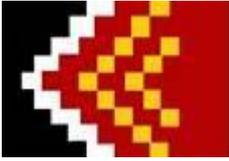
MOTIVATION

Assembly delegates and CWP members are not paid for their governance work or their role in representing their communities. They are motivated by a variety of shared values and understandings which derive from their life experience as Aboriginal people living in the most remote parts of NSW, and are committed to their work regardless of the difficulties:

> All that we do here is through passion, it's because we're sick of seeing the same thing happening over and over and over and we want to try and fix that. We cop more abuse in our own community from our own people than the whitefellas coming in … so we've got to put up with that, but we keep going back, keep doing it.

Larry Flick, Collarenebri CWP Chair and MPRA Delegate

This commitment is informed by the ongoing experience of dispossession and marginalisation that Aboriginal people in the Region face on a daily basis:

> The thing that probably moulded people together was the fact that we were still and still are today experiencing that original injustice that's happened to our people – so we're still sitting here 30 years later … I think that's the common thing between the people because to come together in an independent way where the voice wasn't controlled but still a really strong voice we can put these issues up to the government to get action.

Grace Gordon, Brewarrina CWP Chair and MPRA Delegate

At the same time, though, Assembly delegates do not approach their role from a position of victimhood; but with a firm commitment to place evidence-based solutions on the table, defend them in a way that is intelligent and strategic, and assert the moral authority of their cause; often in frustrating circumstances:

> The thing that separates us is the level of authority about what we can and can't do. We have moral authority, but no real control over the way the system works. We have to try to make that work better to continue to advance. The Assembly has taken that on and been able to advance, albeit slowly.

Sam Jeffries, former MPRA Independent Chair

SUMMARY

- Assembly delegates and CWP members are motivated by the passion they feel for ensuring that positive change is brought about in the interests of community;
- Subscribing to and modelling a system of shared values and principles is important to motivating participation in community-led governance;
- While acknowledging the impacts of racism and marginalisation, the Assembly is motivated by its appetite for developing and implementing an evidence-based strategic agenda for change.

GUIDELINES FOR SUCCESS

- Recognise and embrace the factors that motivate people to want to lead – the experience of racism and exclusion but, more importantly, the value in developing and arguing for an evidence-based, co-ordinated and planned strategic agenda for change;
- Approach the task of community-led governance with passion, faith and confidence, and a wish to succeed;
- Roll out a consistent stream of community-led projects that engage CWPs in bringing about positive change;
- Accept that communities know what is best for them.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?

- Fatigue is a risk for community leaders, especially if the process of leading a change agenda is encountering resistance either in community or when negotiating with process-fixated government partners;
- The need to induce government partners to adopt a strengths-based approach which recognises that some communities are more ready for change than others;
- To prevent walking away when efforts fail to yield a positive return;
- To keep a focus on long-term objectives.

TACKLING THE CHALLENGES

- Draw on the strength of past and present leaders and activists, especially other members of the governance structure, and support each other to share the task;
- Ensure that there are sufficient people with governance capacity at a community level to allow for leadership to rotate as necessary;
- Reinforce with partners that change can only occur in a working environment of true, equal and values-aligned collaboration.
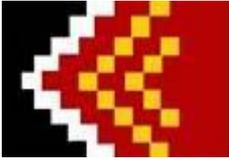
VOICE AND REPRESENTATION

MPRA provides a tiered forum for representation of Aboriginal people in the Region at the community level. All Aboriginal people in the sixteen largest communities of the Region are able to be a member of their local CWP. The very smallest communities, such as Euston and Wanaaring, are able to join their voices to their closest CWP. Each CWP sends a delegate, usually the Chairperson, to the Assembly. This structure grew from dissatisfaction with the democratic basis for the former ATSIC Regional Councils, and the desire that communities be directly represented at the Assembly table:

> I think that's how it all happened because first up, in Ivanhoe, we didn't have representation on the Regional Council and we needed something that all the communities in our region could be involved in.

Fay Johnstone, MPRA Ivanhoe delegate

CWP and MPRA members are not restricted in terms of raising and advocating for matters that are important to their communities. The constant interplay between living life in one of the Murdi Paaki communities and speaking at a CWP or Assembly meeting ensures that delegates remain grounded and engaged. The Assembly sees voice as one of the chief tools for improving the circumstances of Aboriginal people in the Region:

> I think that with the Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly, if you've got that voice where a diverse group of people can come together and look at those issues – that's how we can improve the issues that our communities are facing.

Denise Hampton, Broken Hill CWP

MPRA sees itself as unique in that the people's voice is represented by the people themselves and not mediated through corporate entities and agencies. The regional Aboriginal controlled service providers set up during the ATSIC period supported the Assembly to continue to meet when no government funding was available:

> You drive to any other region—the other alliances are dominated by agencies. They've got no voice. We were supported by our own regional structures that were developed out of the Regional Council strategy, to keep continuing the voice of the people. You won't get that in any other regions—that corporations would support another voice—because they think they're the voice. We made sure the community voice is an unrestricted voice—so they have the opportunity to speak, go and live their lives and come back and continue to have a say in the development of their communities.

Des Jones, MPRA Independent Chair

SUMMARY

- Having one's voice heard and having a truly open representative structure is one of the chief tools for improving the circumstances of Aboriginal people;
- Structures for community-led governance should allow for representation for all Aboriginal people at community level, and for equal representation for communities at regional level where practicable;
- Models for representation should be structured to be culturally oriented and to allow everyone to feel safe around the table.

GUIDELINES FOR SUCCESS

- Develop a culturally oriented form of assembly that allows the voice of all community members to be heard;
- Adopt local arrangements which are able to bring in and sustain community members with the best interests of the whole community at the front of their minds;
- Value access to and ownership of a forum where everyone at the table feels safe to raise and argue for matters important to community;
- Have strong, consultative leadership;
- Have a clear and consistent purpose.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?

- Externally-imposed models, such as the former ATSIC structure, may not allow for the voice of smaller communities to be heard;
- At times, CWPs may become unbalanced if interest groups come to dominate the membership;
- People sometimes become discouraged if they feel that their voice has not been listened to or that their issues are not being adequately responded to;
- Partners may pick and choose particular sections of the community to engage with, excluding others.

TACKLING THE CHALLENGES

- Build a model which reflects communities' desire to be heard but which recognises that different arrangements may be necessary for very small communities;
- Carry out community business to culturally aligned and mutually agreed governance protocols;
- Refresh the membership of the CWP if it becomes unbalanced, unrepresentative and/or is waning or on an annual, biennial or triennial basis;
- Ensure that representations made by or on behalf of community members receive action and feedback;
- Never restrict participation; respect all points of view.
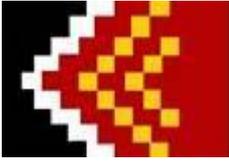
MANAGING CONFLICT

The ATSIC Murdi Paaki Regional Council resolved at an early stage that it needed to minimise the risk of conflict within itself, with other Aboriginal peak organisations and within communities if it was to be recognised for its legitimacy and leadership. The Assembly has adopted the principles and values established during the time of the Regional Council and codified these in its Charter, Code of Conduct and Engagement Protocol. This governance framework, its clear focus on people and its decision not to manage 'money', allows the Assembly to rise above community conflict in fulfilling its role, and do so consistently and transparently.

The Assembly resolved also to confine its activities to within defined boundaries and so does not involve itself in matters which are the legal responsibility of other entities, such as Native Title, land rights or cultural authority issues.

Governance arrangements at the regional and CWP scale are well delineated, culturally driven and delegates are clear about their roles at the different scales.

Assembly business is conducted under the stewardship of an Independent Chairperson appointed through an open and transparent recruitment process. The Chair ensures that all delegates have equal voice, points of view are discussed respectfully and decisions are reached by consensus. Meetings are minuted.

The forced moves of the 1930s and 40s saw some language groups relocated off Country to distant communities. Continuing occupation becomes, at times, a source of tension with traditional owners. The Assembly manages this through its mentoring of CWP Chairs, formal governance rules and the refresh process.

More difficult to manage is the lack of accountability of governments and NGOs in their dealings with the Assembly and CWPs, particularly when these involve favouring special interest groups and/or active subversion of the Assembly's strategic interests or processes. This can only be called out.

> They [service providers] want to talk to you outside of the meeting but they don't want to bring the issue in and discuss it on the record—it causes conflict in the community.

Anthony Knight, Weilmoringle CWP Chair and MPRA Delegate

SUMMARY

- Frameworks for community-led governance should be created and shaped through open and transparent consultation processes involving whole of community to ensure legitimacy, authority and fair representation;
- The risk of conflict should be recognised early and managed through a culturally relevant governance framework which has the full support of communities;
- Matters for which others have established responsibilities and accountabilities should be avoided;
- Focus on people, not 'money'.

GUIDELINES FOR SUCCESS

- Develop and adopt rules to guide the conduct of business and relationships consistent with community ideals and cultural traditions and practices;
- Build a reputation for integrity, ethical behaviour and trust in all dealings and relationships to set a benchmark for acceptable and expected conduct;
- Adopt a 'hands-off' approach to matters which are legally or morally the responsibility of other groups;
- Prioritise integrity and accountability in all dealings with community, governments and other service providers.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?

- A delegate may pull out of the Assembly where s/he fails to retain the confidence of other delegates denying his/her community a voice;
- Conflict within communities, which can arise because of domination by particular families or land-owning groups, can deter community members from participating in their CWP for a time;
- Conflict can arise between the Assembly and service providers which fail to be accountable for outcomes or which otherwise disrespect the Assembly's authority.

TACKLING THE CHALLENGES

- Build a model which allows for equitable representation and participation throughout the preferred structure;
- Document and reinforce the regional focus of the regional representative body;
- Build and maintain a strong intellectual commitment to loyalty, unity and cohesion within the regional representative structure and support and mentor leaders at a local level;
- Be fearless in naming and resisting any external attempts to corrupt the community-led governance structure.
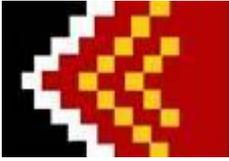
STRATEGY AND PLANNING

The Assembly writes a Regional Plan every five years. The Plan is based on evidence including census data, economic statistics, inputs from governments, communities via their CWP Community Action Plans (see below) and through direct representation by the CWP Chairs. The Plan focuses on issues and strategies which are important across the whole Region, or relevant to a large proportion of regional communities. The Assembly sets priorities in the Plan and defines actions:

> The Assembly develops priorities through a comprehensive planning process. It's difficult to understand how others can do it without the planning. If you believe in something you keep at it. The MPRA Chair insists that if you want to go on the agenda, you must have read and be prepared to respond to the Regional Plan.

Sam Jeffries, Former MPRA Independent Chair

The drive to regional autonomy was the first priority in the ATSIC days and the Assembly has maintained and advocated for this status consistently since. The Assembly sees autonomy, self-determination and self-management, as the key steps to closing the gap.

The Assembly implements the Plan by continuously undertaking strategic development and negotiating for change.

> [The Assembly] always places it through a social justice lens – a sense of not just putting stuff out there, but doing it in a way that makes a difference in terms of indicators of people thriving, not just surviving; demonstrating social and economic outcomes commensurate with the rest of Australia rather than putting it out there thinking it's going to work. The Assembly plans with cultural competency, and co-designs strategy with people.

Stuart Gordon, Former ATSIC Regional Manager

Each CWP also writes a Community Action Plan (CAP). These are based on the inputs of the community through the CWP's engagement process. CAPs focus on the specific needs, aims and aspirations of each community and collectively underpin the Regional Plan.

> The community must drive the decision-making , and whoever the decision-makers are in our Region or our communities, they must feel the effects of their decisions.

Des Jones, MPRA Independent Chair

Planning, to be effective, should devolve decisions to the lowest practical level.

SUMMARY

- Strategic planning is crucial in setting the focus and programme for positive change;
- Planning must be at the right scale and lead to achievable and measurable outcomes;
- Planning must be informed by credible evidence;
- Engagement must reflect equal partnership and trust;
- Access to skilled support is vital to successful planning, implementation and evaluation;
- Strong leadership and active advocacy of strategic interests underpin progress.

GUIDELINES FOR SUCCESS

- Plans for change should be realistic, achievable, evidence-based and justifiable, and reflect the needs, hopes and contributions of the whole community;
- Planning should take place as close as possible to the level at which people feel the effect of strategy;
- Active and clear sighted leadership in planning underpins a higher quality strategic agenda which is better able to be negotiated with governments;
- Skilled support may be needed for effective regional and community planning.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?

- Governments often lack an appreciation of the rigour of community-led planning, fail to take the plans seriously and/or choose not to engage with them;
- Outcomes may be compromised by bureaucratic processes, perceptions of community readiness, and underestimation of a community's capacity to deliver;
- Inconsistent commitment to change within bureaucracies may thwart achievement of community-led initiatives. Ticking boxes is not enough;
- One size fits all' approaches fail in the local context.

TACKLING THE CHALLENGES

- Be rigorous in gathering and presenting evidence to back the plans;
- Advocate strongly and confidently to governments and other potential partners, and assert the community's moral and intellectual authority;
- In particular, advocate to persuade governments to be open to community-initiated ways of doing business, and to be aware that government processes and practices, too, are culturally formed.
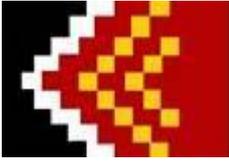
ENGAGING OUR YOUNG PEOPLE AS FUTURE LEADERS

The Assembly is committed to developing the leadership qualities of young people and has, for many years, sponsored the Murdi Paaki Aboriginal Young and Emerging Leaders Assembly project (MPAYELA). MPAYELA, described further on the [MPRA website](#), provides structured leadership development for young people, and others with leadership potential, to succeed to leadership roles in their CWP and in the Assembly over time, thus securing the future of the Murdi Paaki governance model. The initiative strengthens the ability of resource-poor communities to conceive ideas, action community aspirations and have a strong voice.

Young leaders meet in their own forum to discuss the issues they face. The MPRA structure includes four positions for MPAYELA participants, who are exposed to the rigours of Assembly meetings on the same terms as CWP Chairs, and inject the views of the younger generation into discussion. The Murdi Paaki Services board also has a designated MPAYELA position.

The success of the MPAYELA has been bolstered by an holistic approach to youth development; for example, through linkages with the Clontarf Foundation.

The success of the MPAYELA is a matter for pride. Over 400 young people have taken part in MPAYELA since it commenced, with over 120 moving on to university. The Assembly embraces the knowledge that the next generation of leaders, having the cultural connections they need to work within community, will carry out the business of the Assembly in new and innovative ways.

> I think MPAYELA has been a high point for us, developing the young leaders … it's building capacity amongst our young people … generating some good outcomes.

Des Jones, MPRA Independent Chair

MPAYELA is yet to create the critical mass of highly motivated young people with a developed leadership sensibility which will permit the talent pool to be shared comfortably with government or other employers. Delegates are concerned that people whose capacity for culturally motivated leadership has been nurtured become unavailable to the Assembly and the CWPs:

> [The MPAYELA] is good but we lose them to the mainstream – they go and get mainstream jobs. When they get those jobs, they're not released from them [to contribute to community]. I say to them, "This is an important part of our growth".

Grace Gordon, Brewarrina CWP Chair and MPRA delegate

SUMMARY

- The Assembly is conscious of continuity in community leadership and governance and sees succession planning as essential to securing the future of the model;
- MPAYELA has been established as a structured programme for leadership and personal development;
- The Assembly structure includes designated MPAYELA positions and anticipates succession;
- Young people completing the MPAYELA programme have embraced higher education and are in demand for employment, but this has implications for succession.

GUIDELINES FOR SUCCESS

- Create formal programmes of learning to develop the leadership capacity and personal potential of young people and other emerging leaders;
- Ensure that content is culturally and geographically specific to the community and the Region;
- Safeguard intellectual property in the programme;
- Engage young leaders in strategic decision-making;
- Ensure leadership development programmes are able to run continuously to grow enough potential leaders to meet future needs.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?

- Inconsistency in funding availability makes it difficult to sustain programmes such as the MPAYELA sufficiently to allow young people continuing access to structured leadership development and active participation;
- Young leaders who have completed the MPAYELA programme are being snapped up by agencies seeking high quality personnel. Draining of talent in this way makes it more difficult to secure leadership succession at a community level and weakens future capacity;
- Cultural values may be diluted by corporate values.

TACKLING THE CHALLENGES

- Ensure that youth leadership development is continuous, to build as large a talent pool within communities as possible;
- Work towards development of community-based avenues for employment to keep young leaders, as much as possible, in the community sector;
- Roll out a continuous stream of initiatives at community level which keep young leaders engaged and produce a sense of achievement and progress;
- Provide young leaders a defined role in governance.
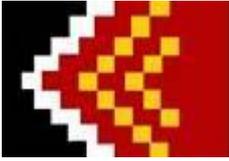
REGIONAL SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

The Assembly's predecessor ATSIC Regional Council, while itself unincorporated, recognised the need for the creation of regionally-based, purpose-specific services to address identified service gaps within the Region. Council's response was to establish three organisations: Far West Ward Aboriginal Health Service (FWWAHS), later Maari Ma Health Aboriginal Corporation, to provide primary health care services and manage health services at a sub-regional scale; Murdi Paaki Regional Housing Corporation (MPRHC), as a regional Aboriginal social housing manager able to acquire assets from failing community-based housing co-operatives; and Murdi Paaki Training and Employment Aboriginal Corporation (TEAC), later Murdi Paaki Regional Enterprise Corporation, responsible for regional economic development. These organisations, while successfully undertaking and expanding their core business, also played a key role in sustaining the Assembly when the Australian Government retreated from partnerships following the abolition of Regional Partnership Agreements:

> We wanted this to happen and that's why we kept coming, and when the Regional Assembly was formed, when we never had any money to meet back in the day, Maari Ma, Murdi Paaki Housing and Murdi Paaki Regional Enterprise Corporation, they all put in money to keep us going.

Fay Johnstone, Ivanhoe CWP Chair and MPRA Delegate

The 2016 *Murdi Paaki Regional Plan* identified a series of actions which led to the creation of Murdi Paaki Services Limited (MPS) as the Assembly's professional operating arm. MPS is engaged in assisting CWPs and in equipping the Assembly with strategic and practical support in rolling out Regional Plan initiatives, and Assembly delegates are finding its services vital to making progress:

> Without funding and setting up MPS, we couldn't be able to make these agreements, because we just didn't have the capacity. Now we're sitting at the table with government on an even path, we can start negotiation directly with government – it's about how to do business in the Murdi Paaki Region, so it's a high point.

Des Jones, MPRA Independent Chair

The Regional Plan also documented strategy which refocused delivery of human services to Aboriginal organisations within the Region as the means to rebuild human capital, improve service access, ensure cultural safety, and restore the Region's economic base which has been eroded by mainstreaming. The future wellbeing and sustainability of communities is dependent upon this.

SUMMARY

- The Assembly and, before it, the ATSIC Murdi Paaki Regional Council, through its strategic planning processes, identified and acted on the need for organisations to fill gaps in regional infrastructure;
- The organisations have fulfilled their objectives and have provided services to the Region that have exceeded expectations to the extent that, at times, they have been able to sustain the governance model;
- There is a need to grow new regional social infrastructure to counter the mainstreaming of services.

GUIDELINES FOR SUCCESS

- Identify, plan and advocate to address gaps in human services strategically at regional or community level;
- Imagine the objectives and form of new Aboriginal services which can competently fill service gaps, improve cultural safety, and remain accountable;
- Build strong connections between community-led governance, governments and those funded service organisations responsible for serving the community;
- Progressively claw back from NGOs responsibility for delivering and improving services into community.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?

- Organisations may refocus their activities outside the Region over time, reducing service accountability;
- Greater complexity and compliance is threatening the survival of smaller NGOs and the potential for the Region to manage and deliver services into communities;
- Opportunities to build a human services base are lost as governments preference non-Indigenous NGOs;
- Skills, services and social capital are lost to the Region through differential outmigration and ageing of the non-Aboriginal population.

TACKLING THE CHALLENGES

- Maintain channels of communication with organisations and continue to express expectations in relation to the role the organisations were established to undertake;
- Foster the expansion of a strong and sustainable regional human service capability to underpin local economic activity, employment and access to culturally safe services;
- Develop a strategic approach to meeting the impacts of demographic change.
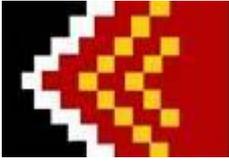
WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP

The Assembly has a long history of working in partnership with governments. The first formal partnership was with the NSW Government through a Housing and Infrastructure Regional Agreement; later, with the NSW and Australian Governments in the context of the COAG Trial, a variety of Shared Responsibility Agreements, and Regional Partnership Agreements, and more recently, with the NSW Government through a Local Decision Making Accord under the OCHRE Policy. These agreements have the potential to bring about real change in the way that community needs are met:

> The Assembly represents a vehicle by which governments can activate or incorporate a social justice approach into their programme development. How do you ensure that you are able to accommodate the hopes, aspirations and viewpoints of local Aboriginal people? What structure do you put in place to do that?

Stuart Gordon, former ATSIC Regional Manager

The Assembly's interactions with the Australian and NSW Governments and others are guided by a suite of partnership governance principles, adopted by the Assembly, which aim to:

- Offer government a legitimate representative structure at the community level through which to direct investment;
- Reinforce the need for governments to be responsive to community needs;
- Recognise that communities continue to need assistance in partnership with government for those matters beyond the powers of communities to fix;
- Support direct participation in regional decision-making to make it more relevant for communities and to give them greater ownership;
- Recognise the important role Community Working Parties play in improving service delivery;
- Work with government and NGOs to achieve better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people;
- Focus on community well-being as the indicator for desired outcomes.

In compiling the principles, the Assembly fused in important elements of good governance: participation, transparency and accountability.

The preferred methodology for developing relationships and promoting initiatives is described by the Murdi Paaki Engagement Protocol. The protocol presents a respectful and efficient means of introducing, assessing, refining and progressing services, programmes and projects. It offers the opportunity for co-design, improved targeting and agreement as to outcomes.

In reality, partnership initiatives have met with mixed success. The COAG Trial ushered in a productive time for CWPs, which were provided with secretariat and project support for the period of the Trial. Even at the best of times, though, the Assembly has found it challenging to obtain government buy-in where the Assembly's priorities are not in direct accord with those of governments. Nevertheless, the Assembly aspires to strategic alignment between planning owned by government partners and its Regional Plan as the means of embedding a common set of foundational principles and negotiating an effective agenda for positive advancement:

> I think the state has a role to play, and we have a big role in the State Plan, so that we should be having our workshops with NSW Government about how we fit into the State Plan, and how our planning should be recognised.

Des Jones, MPRA Independent Chair

Regardless of setbacks and frustrations, Assembly delegates recognise the value of perseverance and of bringing a strategic approach to bear on negotiation processes and exhibit willingness to work with all levels of government and the NGO/community sectors to ensure that Aboriginal jurisdiction, self-determination and knowledge is acknowledged and applied in regional agreement-making. The framework which facilitates the participation of Aboriginal people in cultural, social and economic activity is shown diagrammatically below. It is this integrated framework which provides the means for Aboriginal communities, families and individuals, through the regional and local representative infrastructure, to exercise their rights to all aspects of the development agenda. The missing element currently is the regional funding pool.

Even though evaluation of the first LDM Accord indicated that very little has changed in the way the NSW Government responds to the needs of the Region, the current round of LDM Accord II negotiations is viewed with a degree of optimism, and more than a little pride in the determination that has brought the Assembly to this point:

> I've been here for a while but what I'm seeing now is, we're talking about the Local Decision Model and that's where we've got to push to go forward. We're talking to the government at a higher level and we've been fighting for that for a long time.

Allan Cobb, Lightning Ridge CWP Chair and MPRA Delegate

A criticism of current partnership arrangements is lack of accountability for outcomes. Assembly delegates involved in service provision to communities perceive an

imbalance in accountability regimes. While local organisations are compelled to meet onerous reporting requirements, government and mainstream NGO service providers rarely account to communities via CWPs for their own performance. Lack of accountability by services is but one symptom of a system seen to be beset by inefficiency arising from poor service design.

A co-ordinated, coherent approach to delivering on Regional Plan strategies would result not only in stronger outcomes for community but on cost savings to governments through elimination of gaps, overlaps and policy failures.

The Assembly observed that funding agencies tend to conflate funding of organisations with building relationships with communities. Governments fund organisations, not communities; and the funding of organisations is not a substitute for engagement with a community through its CWP.

SUMMARY

- The Assembly values the principle of working in partnership with governments, NGOs and the private sector because of the potential of these partnerships to contribute to positive change in communities;
- Although frustrations frequently arise in this context, the Assembly continues to cultivate partnerships strategically and with patience, optimism and hope;
- The Assembly seeks equality in working relationships and the exercise of authority;
- Focus must be working 'with' not working 'on'.

GUIDELINES FOR SUCCESS

- Build strong, trusting, and open relationships with governments and others to form the foundations for effective and successful regional/local collaborations;
- Obtain funding adequate to ensure collaborations are negotiated with all parties able to contribute equally;
- Play the long game, and be patient, realistic and strategic in negotiating partnership arrangements;
- Advocate for evaluation and accountability measures to be built into agreements, and work with partners to promote a policy and practice learning culture.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?

The Assembly is frequently frustrated by insincere partner engagement and sub-optimal outcomes resulting from:

- Top-down decision-making;
- Lack of accountability for outcomes;
- Failure to recognise local capacity, voice and agency;
- Disregard for the Assembly's evidence-based planning;
- Constant churn in government personnel and focus;
- Turnabout in the government policy landscape;
- Lack of corporate memory that results in demands for the Assembly to prove itself over and over.

TACKLING THE CHALLENGES

- Promote a strategic agenda for change;
- Enter into partnerships at the highest level fully informed, asserting joint ownership of leadership and strategy;
- Ensure that partnerships have defined responsibilities, outcomes and accountabilities;
- Foster long term relationships with senior government officers with an interest in doing business differently;
- Reinforce the strengths of culturally-based solutions.
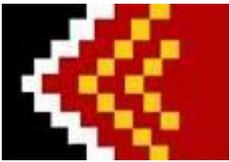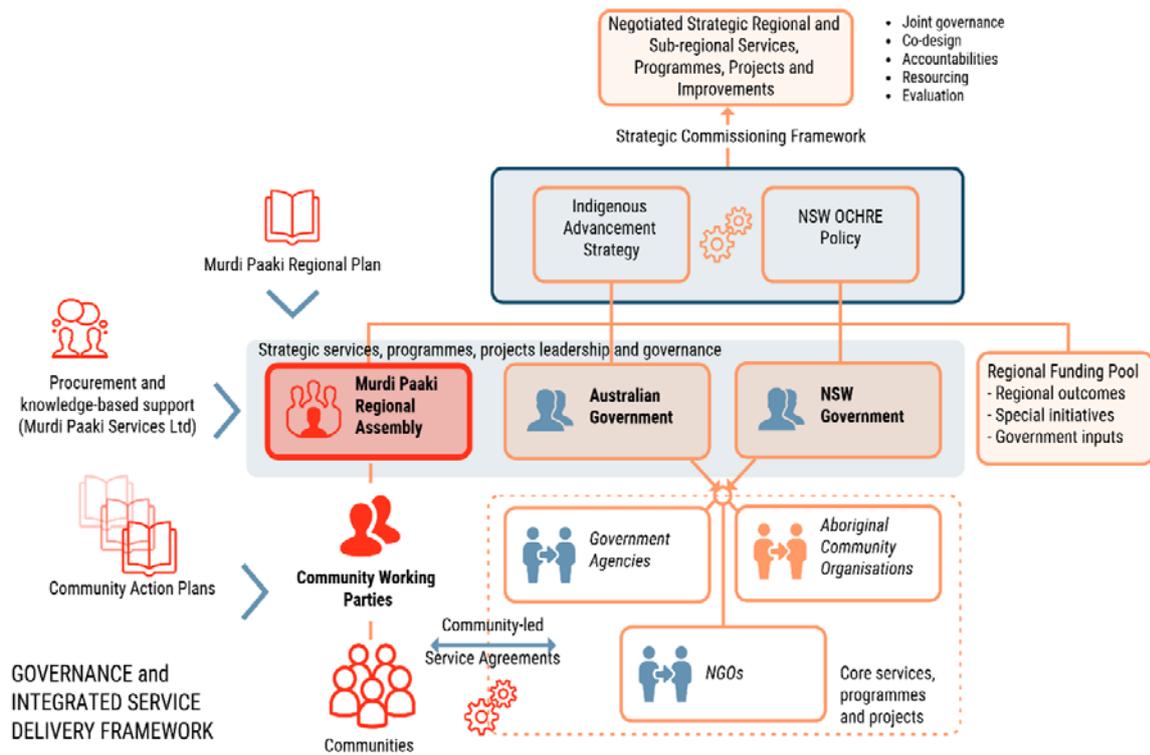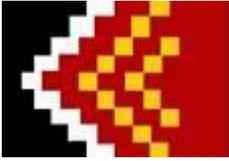
EVIDENCE AND OUTCOMES

Achieving authentic two-way accountability around policies, programmes and services is a priority for the Assembly and for CWPs. Accountability is important not just for government service provision but also for the NGO sector and measures to show performance need to be built into delivery arrangements:

> I'm continually talking about the evaluation and monitoring of programmes … it's important somewhere in the mix that we come back to having a monitoring and evaluation process put into place, around the service delivery … the local service providers are not coming to the table and bringing their reports in about service delivery, or looking at better ways of serving community.

Grace Gordon, Brewarrina CWP Chair and MPRA Delegate

Assembly delegates have grown accustomed to NGOs coming to CWPs seeking and obtaining endorsement for their funding bids, then failing to communicate in any way, let alone reporting outcomes.

Aboriginal community controlled organisations within the Region routinely report against remotely-set KPIs; these do not necessarily reflect the outcomes sought by the Assembly and CWPs:

> I'm controlled by governments' funding agreements if I get resourced - I'm having to meet milestones and report around KPIs; … we report the numbers and data every time but adequate resources are not coming back into communities to meet demand for service delivery.

Pam Handy, Wentworth/Dareton CWP Chair and MPRA Delegate

The Assembly focuses on outcomes rather than activity and encourages meaningful evaluation as the way to demonstrate progress and inform further advancement. The Assembly also seeks a more culturally relevant basis for reporting, and this would include a recognition that qualitative methods of evaluation are often more culturally relevant than quantitative methods:

> The Assembly values culturally relevant ways of knowing and deciding needs. Governments have their own system where they get their advice from – but we have a problem with the perception of 'experts'. Our people's needs are complex and holistic but they're not recorded in a way that's culturally relevant. Communities are reluctant to give data to just anyone.

Des Jones, MPRA Independent Chair

SUMMARY

- Authentic two-way accountability is required in relationships with government, NGO and private sector partners around policies, programmes and services;
- Accountability should take the form of agreed protocols for needs assessment and for monitoring and evaluation of outcomes (not just activity) based in culturally relevant methods of gathering and interpreting data;
- Local knowledge and expertise adds value;
- Transparency is fundamental to trust in partnership;
- Expectations should be matched by commitment.

GUIDELINES FOR SUCCESS

- Reinforce the often stated view of service providers that communities know their needs better than anyone;
- Inform service providers about culturally safe ways to research community service and programme needs;
- In every negotiation related to programme and service delivery, argue for culturally relevant and targeted approaches to performance monitoring, evaluation, review and feedback to be included. Always question;
- Refine programme and service delivery where evidence points to poor performance and need for improvement.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?

- Service providers tend to rely heavily on the advice of in-house 'experts' who have limited knowledge of the lived environment of remote communities or their capacity;
- Governments are often not open to parallel, evidence-based processes of identifying and quantifying need;
- Existing methods for demonstrating performance are activity-based and do not indicate true outcomes;
- Agencies have their own reporting requirements which may generate an overwhelming burden of red tape;
- Limited budgets are often allocated ineffectively.

TACKLING THE CHALLENGES

- Understanding that published statistics are not always reliable, use local knowledge networks to obtain a first hand expression of community characteristics;
- Focus on evidence which gives meaning, scale and authority to any initiative and assesses effectiveness;
- Develop alternative methods of assessing and reporting outcomes which reduce the compliance load;
- Provide transparency around data and accountability.
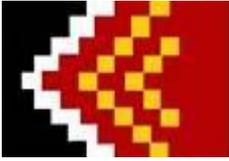
RECOGNITION AND RESPECT

The Assembly aspires to recognition of its collective achievement in developing an exemplary model for community-led governance and its ongoing capacity for engagement and strategic action:

> Sitting around the table making decisions – anything we can do to record and promote the Regional Assembly, I'm all for it.

Ted Fernando, Coonamble CWP Chair and MPRA Delegate

However, the Assembly has found that attracting a response from governments that adequately reflects understanding of the unique attributes of the Assembly is a challenge. The Assembly has rarely had the sense that its structures and approaches have resulted in targeted policies or allocation of funding. The Assembly has a 25 year history of conceiving evidence-based strategy. The view of the delegates is that recognition of their skilled approach to planning has not resulted in a tailored response from governments; rather, that benefits have tended to flow from, not to, the Region in the form of short-lived learnings for government partners around co-ordination and engagement:

> For me, it's not underestimating the knowledge we've got in this region. These people aren't just bush blacks; the people out here have got a lot of knowledge and experience about governance, leadership, but they're never recognised for it. Government agendas have not recognised our planning process. We're treated under funding just like everybody else …. We're not recognised for our capacity or our intellect.

Des Jones, MPRA Independent Chair

Frustration in this regard particularly arises when governments insist on treating the Assembly as one of a number of regional entities recently created by government, all embarking on a governance journey constrained by imposition of a centrally defined, one-size-fits-all governance framework.

> The OCHRE arrangements are around earned autonomy – I used to say to Aboriginal Affairs NSW: "Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly is not LDM, it's the MPRA. LDM is your policy framework for regional structures to formulate.

Sam Jeffries, former, MPRA Independent Chair

SUMMARY

- The Assembly aspires to have its achievements and capacity recognised such that it is acknowledged and treated as an equal when engaging with all tiers of government, industry and civic society;
- Generalised assumptions about the capacity of Aboriginal community-led governance underlying universally applied top down policy and strategy obscure the Region's strengths and opportunities;
- Most will be gained from a strengths-based approach that recognises and responds to community capacity.

GUIDELINES FOR SUCCESS

- Have trust in the ability of community-led governance to bring about positive and lasting change in communities;
- Continually focus on growing leadership, relationships, strategy and advocacy as the way to bring about ongoing evolution of community-led governance;
- Reinforce to governments the efficiencies that can be gained by working in cooperation and collaboration with Aboriginal representative structures;
- Recognise and respect the fact that the ultimate goal of community-led governance is autonomy.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?

- Recognising local capacity and ability, and allowing the space for communities to make decisions about their own growth, and to own and lead the change process with such external support as they may request;
- To break out from the endless cycle of demonstrating capacity and readiness, and of imposed programmes that do not reflect community priorities and needs;
- To tailor collaborations and partnerships that respect the complexities of community-led governance;
- Simply, building trust and respect in relationships.

TACKLING THE CHALLENGES

- Interactions with communities should be respectful, culturally aware, and acknowledge and be conducted at the level of capacity and achievement reached;
- Community structures must be respected as unique creations of community guided by their own values;
- Progress can be facilitated by stable processes; strategically aligned reform and change initiatives; coordinated and monitored initiatives; relevant accountabilities and imagination.
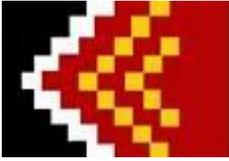
THE FUTURE

The Murdi Paaki model for community-led governance
has been a work in progress for almost 30 years. Over
that time, Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly and the
Community Working Parties have sharpened their ability
to provide culturally relevant leadership with rigour,
vision and intellect. These purpose-built governance
arrangements have endured a shifting political
landscape. The complexion of governments changes
with the rhythm of the electoral cycle; and Indigenous
affairs administration with the policy imperatives of the
day. During the ATSIC years, the Assembly's
predecessor Regional Council successfully managed
budgets exceeding (at the time) $15 million per year.
Council's decision-making in this regard was above
reproach. In the period since ATSIC, though, the
Assembly has been asked to prove its credentials over
and over as it has had to contend with ongoing churn in
the personnel it deals with, and corporate amnesia. The
Assembly likes to use the analogy of a revolving door –
partners enter and leave the door but Assembly
delegates continue to go around, still in the door.

Now, the Assembly is feeling optimistic about prospects
for recognition of its highly evolved form of leadership,
engagement, governance and strategic development,
and for a more equal partnership with governments.
The Assembly now has an operational capacity for the
first time since the ATSIC days; the latest Regional Plan is
being actioned; a Local Decision Making Accord has
led to the first purpose-specific joint governance body in
the social housing space; and a heightened level of
interest in the Assembly's work is showing promise for a
more fruitful approach to Local Decision Making Accord
II negotiations. Soon, the Assembly hopes, the door will
stop revolving and the communities of the Region will be
able to march out into a future in which all can flourish.

The Assembly sees these Lessons Learned as providing
an opportunity both for government partners and for
others seeking to develop community-led governance
elsewhere to obtain useful insights into the highs and
lows experienced over the last three decades. The
Assembly's aspirations have always been about voice. If
the voices captured in the lessons are able to contribute
to a positive process of change, then this project will
have done its work.