Monday in Maningrida

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It’s 8.30am on a Monday morning in Maningrida, a large Aboriginal township in north-central Arnhem Land. The barge that supplies essential goods and materials to the town has already been unloaded and, amidst the dry season dust and the ever-present dogs, a great mix of work activity has begun. Toyotas and heavy machinery criss-cross the streets, ferrying the largely Aboriginal workforce to a host of jobs. King Gee work-gear and Blundstones, interspersed with Djelk Ranger uniforms and a kaleidoscope of bright floral dresses, dominate the fashion stakes. Thirteen different retail outlets have just opened for business, selling everything from 4WD parts, hardware and gardening supplies to fridges, DVDs and clothing. Work vehicles for outstations programs clog the two fuel stations. Dual tanks are essential, as the Maningrida region is over 10 000 square kilometres in size and there are thirty-two separate outstations, creating a myriad of jobs. Meanwhile, people go off to work, never arriving with a fuss, but rather slipping in to a range of jobs. The workers include metal fabricators, shop assistants, health workers, Aboriginal homelands teachers, home liaison officers, grader drivers, land and sea rangers, garbage collectors, board executives and essential services workers, to name a few. By 9am many of the town’s residents are actively engaged in their work and another week is underway.1

IN THE PAST TWELVE MONTHS Maningrida has experienced three high-profile allegations of sexual abuse; at the time of writing all are before the courts. These incidents have gained the community prominent focus in the mainstream media as well as positioning it high on the Federal Government’s list of communities requiring intervention in its ‘emergency response’. The ugly nature of these cases has given credence to the need for urgent government intervention. However, the complex history and socio-economic circumstances of Maningrida require considered and dispassionate analysis, coupled with the realistic development goals, if the goals of the intervention are to be realised. In Maningrida, hastily conceived policy runs the risk of destroying an
existing emerging development base that should, in fact, be the very platform on which better and safer futures for Indigenous children might be built upon.

Decades of global research concerning Indigenous development has been consistent in its finding that for sustained success, initiatives must be participatory, locally driven and cognisant of Indigenous aspirations. In Australia, current neo-conservative policy discourse has incrementally rejected this evidence base, and revived an approach to development which ignores the realities of political, historical and social marginality that constitute considerable barriers to development. Instead, this ‘failure’ is now being attributed to Indigenous people’s culture, their local governance structures and a perceived refusal to adopt the dominant society’s socio-economic aspirations. The concomitant policy remedy is high levels of state penetration, disregard for Indigenous development aspiration and the creation of overtly individualised, culturally prescriptive intervention. This policy approach is represented in the Federal Government’s national emergency response. The unexplored risk in this approach is that in a place like Maningrida, a growing and dynamic development base may be irreparably damaged.

Models of ‘grassroots’, ‘local’, ‘participatory’, and ‘Aboriginal’ development have grown directly from the global experience of fraught Indigenous engagements in modernity, and a tense but increasingly successful relationship with post-colonial states. Canada, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Greenland have all pursued policy based on the recognition of Indigenous development aspirations and have negotiated distinctly local industry bases. In remote Indigenous Australia, the possibilities of localised development are exemplified in the diversity of initiatives an Aboriginal community like Maningrida has been able to create.

In examining the complexities of what drives Maningrida’s successful enterprise, it must be remembered that there is no industrial base here, distances to market are immense and the labour force has very low literacy levels, creating an incredibly challenging development environment. Historically, this has been exacerbated by critical levels of under-investment by the state, particularly in housing, health, education, and economic development. These are all important factors that are unlikely to change soon. In attempting to mitigate them, Maningrida has
used a mixed base of transfers from the state in the form of grant programs and Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP), and income generated from local enterprise and continued customary production. This base has allowed local aspirations to be incorporated into a range of enterprises and social programs that are enabling distinctly intercultural modes of economic growth. These modes depend upon a cultural alignment between Indigenous and non-Indigenous governance, the incorporation of expert outside knowledge and highly flexible income arrangements.

At the forefront of this development model is an intercultural institution named the Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation. The Corporation runs twenty separate businesses and last year had a turnover of $26 million. Of this figure, 55 per cent was contributed directly from enterprise and trading activities. The most successful of these enterprises, Maningrida Arts and Culture, returned $1.1 million directly to artists in the 2005–2006 financial year and purchased art and craft from over 700 producers. The corporation also runs, among other things, a mud brick factory, a ‘good food’ kitchen, housing, roads and building crews, an outstation supply service, a camping and gardening store, a supermarket, and a women’s centre that produces quality screen-printed fabric. The Corporation’s responsibilities are augmented by a range of human services that it auspices, including an aged care program, a partnership with the Malabam Health Board, a disabilities service, and a program to tackle substance abuse. There is also the Maningrida Progress Association, which runs a take-away, another large supermarket, an airline charter service and a ten-room motel, while the local Maningrida Council provides a range of municipal services. Training for the labour force is also provided locally through the Maningrida Jobs Education Training Centre, which has links to registered training organisations across the Northern Territory.

The key to the functionality of all these activities is that each is directed by a highly localised management structure, usually comprised of Indigenous managers or board members and non-Indigenous managers with longstanding connections to the community. Making enterprise succeed in a place like Maningrida is a challenge — there are over one hundred clans and ten distinct languages in use, and striking a working balance between the interests and aspirations of each group and
the demands of development growth can be fraught. Contestation over development resources and direction is robust. These complex arrangements, including who decides what and when, are determined in the Indigenous domain, while non-Indigenous development expertise and higher order administrative skills contribute to producing a distinctive and effective enterprise model. In this way, Indigenous aspirations form a central operating force in the town’s development design. Any intervention aimed at ‘normalising’ these arrangements runs a great risk of fragmenting the existing governance-for-development base, denying the complexities of the intercultural mix, and an ultimately destructive outcome.

The nature of Maningrida’s governance structures also allows for strong, local responses to deep-seated social issues. Using the diversity inherent in their institutional arrangements, the community has eradicated petrol sniffing and implemented a unique management plan successfully curbing alcohol abuse. More recently, a unit dedicated to the protection of children has been developed, which the *Little Children are Sacred* report cites as a best practice initiative. Maximising and harnessing the potential of structures that have been developed locally and shown to work is crucial if the social problems of the town are to be addressed in a sustainable way. It is important that existing strengths, not imagined futures, be the drivers of change.

An example of what is possible when local governance structures are aligned with Indigenous development aspirations can be seen in Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation’s Djelk Ranger program. The Djelk Ranger program was established in its original form sixteen years ago and was extended to include a marine ranger program in 2003. A women’s ranger group was started in 2002 and, importantly, nearly half of the current Djelk Rangers are under twenty-five. The program combines Indigenous knowledge about land and sea with Western scientific conservation, and aims to contribute to local economic development. The successes of this approach can be seen in the variety of work undertaken by the Djelks.

In 2007 the Djelk Rangers won a lucrative contract with Australian Customs to provide regular border security patrols along the 180 km coastline in the area. The contract is recognition of earlier unpaid work in which the rangers regularly detected and intercepted illegal foreign
fishing vessels from Indonesia. In 2006, for example, the rangers were instrumental in the interception of twenty-six illegal foreign fishing vessels. Partnerships with other agencies include a fee-for-service arrangement with the Australian Quarantine Inspection Service for reporting and monitoring potential threats from foreign debris and mosquito born disease. In a similar vein, the NT Fisheries Department has a longstanding contract with the rangers whereby they regularly report on illegal domestic fishing activity, monitor marine pests and provide a quasi-policing role on the water.

Contractual financing of the rangers is augmented through a growing range of innovative enterprise activities. Much of this work is based around sustainable commercial use of natural resources harvested from the local Indigenous estate. A good example of this is an established and successful crocodile industry, which includes incubating eggs and selling hatchlings to crocodile farms in Darwin. Similarly, turtle hatchlings and tropical fish are sold to the pet trade, a wildlife centre for the sale of selected animals has been established, crab aquaculture is being trialled, and a commercial crab licence has been purchased and is now operating. Other enterprises include a plant nursery that collects and germinates native seeds, and an award-winning tourism enterprise that has been running for the past two years. All this manifests in a daily work routine of land patrols, weed eradication, feral animal control, strategic burning, marine debris collection, ghost net monitoring, turtle nest monitoring, sacred site recording, and flora and fauna surveys, as well as targeted training.

Programs like the Djelk Rangers are critical in engaging a rapidly growing youth population in educational and employment endeavours. A ranger job is seen by many young people as a real and desirable employment destination because it is legitimised in Indigenous cosmologies of land and sea management, is financially rewarding and is held in very high esteem by the greater community. Competition for positions is fierce, and comparatively high levels of education are a prerequisite for gaining employment. Importantly, this education must also be underpinned by a strong Indigenous knowledge base gained through experience and acquisition of skills on the local Indigenous estate. For example, the two latest recruits to the Djelk program spent most of their schooling in outstation schools learning ‘on country’. They
are two of only eight Year 12 graduates in the community last year and are now engaged in important work in their community. Youth unemployment is high in Maningrida and educational engagement is low. Increased investment in programs like the Djelk Rangers should be seen as instrumental in tackling these issues. With a renewed emphasis on education and youth, local programs such as these can also provide exit points into work and continued economic growth for the community.

The Australian Government’s emergency response has already shown that it will disrupt this existing development base through the abolition of CDEP and the appointment of ‘government business managers’. Local organisations have been advised that they must comply with any and all directions given to them by the still to be appointed business manager or risk the withdrawal of funding. These directions effectively usurp local authority based on negotiated consensus and local development aspirations. Many of the 550 people currently involved in the work outlined above will now ‘be required to participate in basic cleanups of community areas and community housing on a Work for the Dole basis’. They will also have 50 per cent of their pay quarantined for expenditure on approved items for a twelve-month period. This approach not only runs the risk of undermining a successful and growing development base, but also of demeaning and alienating a competent and increasingly confident Indigenous leadership and workforce.

While the professed aim of the government’s emergency response is the protection of children, disrupting the current development base in Maningrida may have the paradoxical effect of jeopardising the existing programs that provide hopeful futures for children. It must be remembered that the community was artificially created as a government settlement through the centralising policies of the assimilation era. After only fifty years of contact with non-Indigenous economic and social structures, Maningrida is still in transition. The stresses of this contact history, such as the rapid transformation of Indigenous traditions, have caused a great deal of dislocation and social dysfunction in the community. More top-down policy prescription risks accelerating this dysfunction and disengaging the community at a time when its members are focusing on the process of resolving social issues and creating better futures for
themselves. A far safer intervention would involve directing investments into areas of existing success and innovation, redressing historical under-funding in key social areas, and maximising the prospects for local socio-economic solutions. The continued success of enterprise in Maningrida is also dependent on maintaining local governance arrangements. Great care must be taken by the Australian Government during its so-called normalisation phase to ensure that local development goals and the successes inherent in existing programs are not irreparably damaged by its intervention.

The hope here is that a normal Monday morning in Maningrida will provide even more activity in the future. The risk in the Howard Government’s current approach is that Monday morning in Maningrida may be much less productive and anything but normal after ‘normalisation’ is complete.

ENDNOTES

3. This is exemplified in publications on Indigenous development from the Centre for Independent Studies, <http://www.cis.org.au/>, such as: H. Hughes’ Lands of Shame: The Deprivation of Australian Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, Sydney, Centre for Independent Studies, 2007.
12. In 2003, John Ah Kit noted, ‘there has been a consistent failure to focus and design government policies and programs that effectively respond to realities at the local and regional levels’: in ‘Crisis or Opportunity? Indigenous Governance in the Northern Territory, Parliamentary Government Under Threat?’, Contemporary Challenges to Liberal Democracies, Australian Study of Parliament Group, 25th Annual Conference, Northern Territory Parliament, 18–19 July 2003.