Indigenous entrepreneurship: Closing the Gap on local terms
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Abstract
Within the federal government ‘Closing the Gap’ policy context this paper reports on local entrepreneurial activities by local Yolngu people in East Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. Particular attention is directed to members of the Rirratjingu clan in the town of Yirrkala. We describe how the activities of a local social enterprise offer pathways for the creation of income, employment and social capital within the local community and where the protection of cultural vitality and integrity is axiomatic. The findings point to the need for more flexible policy approaches, to enable the establishment and growth of Indigenous business activities outside the economic mainstream. We echo the calls in the literature for policy support for what has been described as the ‘hybrid economy’, which allows for participation in both economic and cultural activities.

Introduction
Since white settlement Indigenous Australians have suffered socio-economic disadvantage under the rule of their white colonisers (Attwood 1989). Historically and currently Indigenous Australians rate as the most economically and socially disadvantaged and culturally disenfranchised segment in Australian society (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision 2009). Despite the end of 140 years of so-called protection under the ‘missionary project’ of the 1970s, which marked the advent of Indigenous self-determination under the Whitlam Labor government (Markus 1994) followed by self-governance in the 1990s (Fletcher 1994), Indigenous disadvantage still proves pervasive. From the mid-1990s onwards there was renewed political interest in ‘Closing the Gap’ between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Under the Howard Coalition government (1996-2007) this goal was pursued under the banner of ‘practical reconciliation’ to reduce Indigenous material disadvantage (Altman 2004; Altman 2007b) in areas such as education, employment and housing as opposed to ‘symbolic reconciliation’ involving treaties and the like. The Rudd and subsequent Gillard Labor government (2007-2013) maintained this policy focus, specifically targeting social inclusion from 2007 onwards. Yet, it remains to be seen whether this policy focus will be retained under the newly elected Abbott Coalition government.

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Closing the Gap\(^1\) is a political attempt at achieving statistical equality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in areas such as health, life expectancy, employment and education. While the need for equality is beyond dispute, the Closing the Gap policy framework is criticised, however, for being neither new nor promising (Pholi et al 2009). This is because similar policy initiatives were attempted under previous governments in the late 1980s (see the Hawke government's (1983-1991) Aboriginal Employment Development Policy\(^2\)). Moreover, policy frameworks such as this have commonly failed to address the causes of Indigenous disadvantage in the past (Altman 2009; Pholi et al 2009). One key objective of the Closing the Gap framework is to halve the Indigenous employment gap within ten years by way of fostering Indigenous participation in the formal economy. While this approach is purported to afford Indigenous Australians a choice between mainstream work and welfare, the uptake of mainstream work may not only necessitate migration from home communities it may also run counter to Indigenous cultural goals and aspirations (Peterson 2005). This is especially the case in remote parts of Australia where Indigenous communities have adapted strategies to blend market engagement with customary practices with the assistance from the recently reformed Community Development Employment Program (CDEP)\(^3\) (Altman and Gray 2005). The current push for normalisation under the Closing the Gap framework has the potential to disrupt local efforts to build economically sustainable and culturally germane livelihoods (Sullivan 2011). Notwithstanding the support of some Indigenous leaders (e.g., Pearson 2000) for a push towards economic mainstreaming, such attempts are criticised by others for homogenising cultural diversity through the creation of economic sameness, leaving little room for alternative approaches to Indigenous economic participation (Altman 2009; Altman and Hinkson 2010). Statistical equality is thus seen to come at the expense of cultural difference. We thus argue in this paper for the need to facilitate the growth of Indigenous entrepreneurial activities occurring outside the economic mainstream, especially in remote parts of Australia, for they offer culturally safe and appropriate pathways to economic participation.

Against this policy background and the larger debate about achieving Indigenous equality in Australia this paper reports on one example of Indigenous entrepreneurship in East Arnhem Land in the Northern Territories.

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\(^{1}\) In 2008, in response to the Social Justice Report (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner 2005), the Australian government committed formally to The Closing the Gap policy seeking to achieve Indigenous health equality within 25 years.

\(^{2}\) The Aboriginal Employment Development Policy was introduced in 1987 promoting Indigenous self-determination and cultural preservation. Indigenous people were meant to shape the objectives of labour market programs under the policy to ensure their alignment with Indigenous values and aspirations. Yet in the end, the objectives (e.g., mainstream employment outcomes) seemed more consistent with those of assimilation and to run counter to the stated objectives of self-determination and cultural maintenance (Dockery and Milsom 2007).

\(^{3}\) The Community Development Employment Program has been in operation throughout Australia since 1976 designed to give Aboriginal people an opportunity to gain skills and work experience and to further their employment prospects. Program participants work a two-day week and are paid the equivalent of social service payments, but do not collect unemployment benefits. A review of CDEP arrangements in 2008 led to a reduction in CDEP-funded positions. The CDEP scheme transitioned into the newly established Remote Jobs and Communities Program (RJCP) in mid-2013.
The venture described here is a social enterprise operating in Yirrkala near the mining town of Nhulunbuy, which provides opportunities to local community members for economic engagement on Indigenous terms. The venture blends semi-formal employment with customary practices and local traditions. The case is treated here as an exemplar of what are described as hybrid economy models (Altman 2007a), which overcome the economy-culture dichotomy by way of blending social inclusion and economic participation. In early 2014, Rio Tinto announced its decision to mothball the alumina refinery in Nhulunbuy predicted to result in over 1200 job losses and a potential mass exodus of mining and non-mining related business from the Gove peninsula (Hope 2013). This recent development highlights the ephemeral nature of mining-based employment and the need for economic diversification. It also lends support to arguments in favour of the kinds of community-generated employment described here and stresses the need for policy attention directed at how these ventures can be supported. Based on the social entrepreneurship example discussed in this paper we call for more flexible policy delivery to achieve Indigenous equality and offer prompts for more targeted policy support.

**Indigenous disadvantage and political responses**

Overall, statistics on disadvantage in Australia compare poorly to the OECD average in light of widening gaps in income, wealth and opportunity (Leigh 2007; UNICEF 2007; OECD 2009a), affecting particularly the country’s youth (Boese and Scutella 2006; UNICEF 2012), its seniors (OECD 2009b) as well as people with disabilities (Emerson et al 2009) and ethnic minorities (Australian Human Rights Commission 2010). Above all, however, Indigenous Australians rate as the most disadvantaged population group in Australia (Foley 2003). This is due to many factors including a long history of discrimination, dispossession, assimilation and ‘protection’, which led to the subjugation as well as social and economic exclusion of Indigenous people (Markus 1994). Despite a policy shift in the 1970s toward self-determination and subsequently reconciliation, Indigenous Australians continue to face socio-economic disadvantage and discrimination; a stark reality that the national statistics reflect (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision 2011).

Indigenous people make up only 2.5 per cent of the country’s population, yet as a population group they are overrepresented in the country’s welfare statistics (New South Wales Department of Education and Training and Charles Sturt University 2009; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2011; Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision 2011). In expounding, Indigenous Australians have a lower life expectancy, dying 10 to 12 years earlier when compared to the rest of the country. They earn just over half the country’s average weekly income, are three times more likely to be unemployed and twice as likely not to complete high school compared to non-Indigenous Australians. Indigenous adults are also twice as likely to suffer from psychological distress and are more than twice as likely to be hospitalised as other Australians. Indigenous people are also overrepresented in the national crime and prison statistics, being 17 times more likely to be arrested, 15 times more likely to be imprisoned and 16
times more likely to die in custody than non-Indigenous Australians.\(^4\) Overall, Indigenous people make up 20 per cent of the prison population in Australia today. In light of these statistics it seems reasonable to suggest that the political reforms of recent decades have proved ineffective thus far in overcoming the disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians and the associated social exclusion and social tensions.

The Closing the Gap framework is the most recent political attempt by the Commonwealth Government at addressing Indigenous disadvantage. In 2008, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG)\(^5\) committed under the National Indigenous Reform Agreement (COAG 2008) to six Closing the Gap targets and allocated $4.6 billion in Indigenous-specific funding over a ten-year period to implement reforms in remote housing, health, early childhood development, jobs and improvements in remote service delivery.

The Closing the Gap framework is built around the following targets:

- close the life expectancy gap within a generation (by 2031);
- halve the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five by 2018;
- ensure access to early childhood education for all Indigenous four year olds in remote communities by 2013;
- halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievements for children by 2018;
- halve the gap for Indigenous students in Year 12 (or equivalent) attainment rates by 2020; and
- halve the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and other Australians by 2018.

As a means of focusing government efforts towards achieving the above targets seven inter-linked areas have been devised as building blocks for the Closing the Gap framework; these being:

- early childhood;
- schooling;
- health and healthy homes;
- economic participation;
- safe communities; and
- governance and leadership.

The most recent Commonwealth Closing the Gap interim report (Commonwealth of Australia 2013) has shown improvements against select indicators, and the government received praise for progress in areas such as access to health services and early childhood education (Holland 2013). At the same time, the government was being criticised over its statistical treatment and presentation of data pertaining to Indigenous housing,

\(^4\) The statistics contain both age and gender differences, and there is also a degree of variance between Northern Territory data and national statistics.

\(^5\) COAG is Australia’s peak intergovernmental forum comprising of the Prime Minister, State and Territory Premiers and Chief Ministers and the President of the Australian Local Government Association.
employment and life expectancy areas in which the government is seen to be failing in making progress and in meeting the Closing the Gap targets (Altman 2013; Denness 2013; Hughes and Hughes 2013). In the area of employment, in particular, the data indicate a worsening of Indigenous employment figures, showing an increase between 2006 and 2011 in the Indigenous unemployment rate from 15.6 per cent to 17.1 per cent and an overall growth of the employment gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (Altman 2013).

The employment statistics are of particular concern as the lack of formal economic participation by Indigenous people is seen to be responsible for the low socio-economic status of Indigenous Australians and their comparatively poor health statistics. The challenge in this regard is seen to be the creation of employment prospects for Indigenous people, especially in rural and remote areas where despite many years of economic boom in the resources sector, Indigenous participation remains low whilst welfare dependence continues to be high (Altman et al 2005; Brereton and Parmenter 2008). The remote regions of Australia, which are the focus of this paper, present a special socio-economic challenge due to the unique combination of geographical remoteness, sparse populations and the absence of mainstream employment. In addition, in these parts of the country the dominant, market-based worldview often clashes with Indigenous people’s relationship with the land, their strong ties to customary life and livelihood approaches (Altman 2007a), making difficult attempts at the economic mainstreaming of Indigenous communities in Australia’s remote regions (Thompson and Hil 2008).

Over many years, a high proportion of Indigenous Australians benefited in social and economic terms from participation in CDEP-funded programs. The CDEP was originally designed to provide a bridge between welfare and mainstream employment (Altman and Gray 2005). The late 1990s saw much political enthusiasm under the federal Howard government to reform Australia’s welfare system, focusing also on the CDEP scheme due to the growing perception of its role in the maintenance of Indigenous welfare dependence (Spicer 1997). Despite evidence of social and economic improvements in the lives of Indigenous people through participation in CDEP-funded projects (Altman and Gray 2005; Morphy and Sanders 2002), the fear of ever-expanding demands for welfare support that was voiced also in countries such as the US, UK, New Zealand and Canada (Henman 2002) led to a review of the Australian welfare system by the Reference Group on Welfare Reform in 1999 (McClure 2000). This culminated in the design of a so-called ‘new participation framework’ under the banner of mutual obligation (Commonwealth of Australia 2001) and triggered the dismantling of CDEP funding (Morphy and Sanders 2002). The aim of this new policy approach was purported to help Indigenous people lessen their reliance on income support and achieve economic self-sufficiency. This objective was to be achieved by way of Indigenous people seeking to improve their chances of obtaining employment, actively looking for work and ‘giving back’ to the communities that support them (Newman 1999). This approach, however, raises a series of

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6 The social security and unemployment reforms of the early 1990s already employed the language of ‘reciprocal obligation’ (Henman 2002).
concerns not only because of the coercive character of policies of mutual obligations (Edwards 2003) but also in light of the aforementioned challenges of remoteness, sparse populations and lack of opportunities for mainstream employment.

**Social inclusion and Indigenous disadvantage**

This climate of policy change in Australia saw the ushering in of social inclusion initiatives commencing with the creation of the Social Inclusion Initiative by the then Premier of South Australia in 2002. The purpose was to fuel opportunities for social and economic participation. Later the Australian Government inaugurated the Social Inclusion Board (ASIB) in 2008 (Hayes et al 2008) implementing a new policy approach to breaking cycles of disadvantage through social inclusion. The Australian Government’s social inclusion policy approach specified that ‘to be socially included requires opportunities for: securing a job; accessing services; connecting with others in life through family, friends, work, personal interests and local community; dealing with personal crises, such as ill health, bereavement or the loss of a job; and being heard’ (Gillard 2008).^7^  

While social inclusion has been a common goal globally for some time, it is relatively new in the Australian policy context. While in countries across Europe the dominant discourse has shifted from the notion of work to an emphasis on ‘opportunity’ to climb out of poverty, in Australia there clearly remains a heavy emphasis on employment as the cure to poverty (Commonwealth of Australia 2009).

Social inclusion interventions are understood according to underpinning ideologies: those interventions focusing on economic benefits are generally informed by neoliberal economic theory, whereas, social inclusion interventions focusing on social justice are underpinned by critical social theory. The neoliberal perspective starts from the idea of deficiency,

> […] social inclusion is about investing in human capital and improving the skills shortages for the primary purpose of economic growth as part of a nationalist agenda to build the nation’s economy in order to better perform in a competitive global market. In this theory the disadvantaged will eventually be included in global wealth distribution through what is called the trickle down effect (Gidley et al 2010: 132).

A more holistic application of social inclusion, which focuses on ideas of participation and engagement, is grounded in social justice ideology. Thus, from a social justice perspective, to increase social inclusion involves human rights and equal access to opportunities. Whether it is linked to economic interests is not the focus here, because its chief aim is to empower all to participate fully in society (Gidley et al 2010: 134).

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^7^ In September 2013, the incoming Abbott Coalition government disbanded the Social Inclusion Unit and devolved its responsibilities to the Departments for Social Services and Human Services. As such, it is very much in question whether a political focus on social inclusion will remain.
However what is not necessarily so clear is that prevailing neoliberal policies also very much underpin social inclusion interventions premised on social justice by displays of positive discrimination and through the discourse of opportunities. The focus on social inclusion is primarily through economic participation (via work) and is supposed to provide opportunities for Aboriginal people to improve their livelihoods and lift *themselves* out of poverty. The problem is that the system designed to benefit mainstream Australia, those with the power to progress their own interests, does not advance the social inclusion of Aboriginal Australians living in remote locations who in fact continue to suffer as a result of their inclusion and participation in the free market capitalist system. This is precisely because economic participation is difficult to achieve because work is hard to come by in remote, disadvantaged locations. Both social inclusion ideologies articulate normative assumptions where “work is seen as the best form of welfare, not only because work pays better than welfare but also because it promotes wellbeing […]. Therefore, one of the key goals of Australian social policy, particularly with the introduction of new regulatory work-based welfare measures, has been to help people get off welfare benefits and into work” (Deeming 2013:10). However, despite policy measures such as Closing the Gap, progress in tackling Indigenous disadvantage remains slow.

The purpose of a social inclusion approach is to change how we define disadvantage as income poverty; to instead emphasise the complex and multifaceted nature of exclusion; highlighting the place-based nature of disadvantage and understanding the cumulative nature of disadvantage, including across generations.

The key to social inclusion agendas globally is that interventions must respond specifically to the needs of particular groups. Intergenerational cycles of disadvantage are closely related to the notion of locational disadvantage. Thus in Australia social inclusion policies are typically aimed at breaking cycles of disadvantage through place-based interventions and critical points in the lifecycle. Through social inclusion approaches, breaking the cycle of disadvantage necessitates the use of early intervention and prevention methods at influential stages in the lifecycle. Social inclusion strategies also attempt to mitigate the influence of locational disadvantage through place-based interventions. More often than not, the most severe forms of social exclusion are highly geographically concentrated. With approximately 5 per cent of Australians experiencing multiple disadvantages in the areas of income, work, health, education, safety or support, those living in a highly disadvantaged location, particularly remote Indigenous communities are more likely to experience place-based disadvantage (Commonwealth of Australia 2010: 25). Living in a disadvantaged location can lead to inferior outcomes for children in terms of learning, behavioral, and physical health outcomes (Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2000); poorer health in adults, in terms of infectious diseases, mental health, poor nutrition; and reduced employment and educational opportunities (Commonwealth of Australia 2008).

One of the Australian government approaches to social inclusion was to build on individual and community strengths, particularly the strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. A set of early priorities for

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8 See the Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006 Socio Economic Index for Areas (SEIFA data).
social inclusion in Australia was identified that includes Closing the Gap for Indigenous Australians.

**Closing the Gap on non-Indigenous terms**

There is little disagreement about the role of economic participation in the improvement of people’s socio-economic status, their health and well-being per se (Sen 1999). However, in the Australian Indigenous context, especially in rural and remote parts of the country, there is dispute about the adequacy of mainstreaming attempts which target Aboriginal people who have strong cultural ties, engage in customary practices and have strong cultural obligations and attachments to their land. The government’s mainstreaming efforts are driven by a belief that the free market philosophy can succeed in rural and remote Australia and bring about growth and development as experienced across the rest of the country (Altman 2007a). Such an approach assumes the adequacy of this development blueprint in both geographical and cultural terms. However, attempts at addressing Indigenous employment by successive governments over many years, especially in remote Australia, have been unable to raise Indigenous economic participation figures markedly, underscoring the view that universal mainstreaming approaches are ill-suited for communities whose cultural and economic circumstances are very different from those of mainstream society (Altman 2007a; Dockery and Milsom 2007). Overall 20 000 new Indigenous public and private sector jobs were created between 2002 and 2007 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008), between 71 000 and 106 000 new jobs would need to be created to meet the policy target of halving the employment gap by 2016 (Biddle et al 2008). Not only is this an ambitious policy goal, it will also be a particular challenge to meet this objective through job creation in rural and remote parts of the country; hence, the growing calls for regionally differentiated policy responses to address Indigenous unemployment and disadvantage (Altman et al 2008).

The Closing the Gap policy framework aims at so-called ‘work readiness’ and seeks the creation of ‘real jobs’ for Indigenous people. However, not only does this demean the good work undertaken under CDEP schemes it also ignores the fact that finding mainstream employment in remote Australia has particular geographic limitations. Thus far, over 22 000 CDEP-funded jobs have been lost resulting in the decline of Indigenous employment by between 20 per cent and 47 per cent across remote Australia, which as mentioned, has few alternate forms of employment (Hunter and Gray 2012). In recognising the absence of commercial opportunity in remote Indigenous communities, policy-makers promote the idea of people moving to places where such opportunities exist. The uprooting of Indigenous people that this policy approach envisages is problematic, however, for it requires Indigenous people to leave their ancestral lands in search of mainstream employment. In this regard, their low educational status and economic marginality do not bode well for successful labour migration. In addition, orthodox forms of employment harbour the risk of undermining on-going Indigenous involvement in cultural practices and customs due to the inflexibility of the dominant, non-Indigenous approach to paid employment (Altman 2007a). Indigenous economic mainstreaming, as pursued under the Closing the Gap policy framework, is thus being criticised for driving cultural
shifts by way of imposing requirements for geographic dislocation and mitigating against on-going cultural engagements. It also risks reducing culture to a matter of ‘individual choice, the kind of activity people might participate in after they have secured an education, a job and a mortgage, as a lifestyle option rather than a form of ontological anchorage’ (Altman and Hinkson 2010: 101 (original emphasis)).

The logic of the market, which the Closing the Gap framework promulgates, tends to undervalue traditional Indigenous practices and gives little attention to their market and non-market values, which explains a government focus on policy prescriptions that favour non-Indigenous forms of employment. In the face of mounting mainstreaming pressures there is growing recognition, however, of the value of what Altman (2007a) describes as hybrid economic activities in Australia’s remote regions. These blend cultural, customary and economic practices, which serve the protection of social, cultural and environmental values whilst also providing economic returns in areas such as land management, health and the arts (Russel 2011). Importantly, it is the protection of these socio-cultural values that are seen as instrumental in achieving and maintaining health and well-being (Pholi et al 2009). These values are thus indispensable for Closing the Gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia and fundamental to achieving greater social inclusion for Indigenous Australians. In this context, the case reported on in this paper will illustrate further how Indigenous approaches outside policy parameters for Indigenous mainstreaming not only help protect Indigenous values but also offer alternative pathways for Indigenous economic participation. As such, the Indigenous approaches described may help overcome the culture-economy dichotomy the Closing the Gap approach is seen to create.

**Indigenous entrepreneurship**

The dominant policy discourse in Australia over recent years with its focus on Indigenous economic participation may lead to the erroneous conclusion that entrepreneurial activity is foreign to Indigenous people (Banerjee and Tedmanson 2010). Conclusions such as these may also arise in view of the seemingly non-materialistic and collectivist nature of Indigenous lifestyles (Schwab 1995). In the same way wealth accumulation and private ownership are not necessarily seen as sources of success or social status in the way they are framed by the dominant, non-Indigenous culture (Altman 2000). This seeming lack of aspiration for mainstream symbols of success is thus prone to be interpreted as profligacy, recklessness, laziness or lack of pride and self esteem; misperceptions such as these only serve to drive social exclusion and vilification (Brenner and Theodore 2002).

Aboriginal enterprises and entrepreneurial activity, however, have a long tradition. In fact, Aboriginal enterprises are known as some of the world’s oldest recorded business undertakings (Foley 2011). This dispels the myth that Aboriginal communities can solely be understood in hunter-gatherer terms as is often suggested (e.g., Broome 1994). East Arnhem Land, for example, which is the focus of this paper, provides good historical evidence of the business and trading activities of local Yolngu people, dating back to the 17th century. For hundreds of years there was a flourishing trade between

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Yolngu and the Macassans from southern Sulawesi, Indonesia of goods such as trepan, sea cucumber and tools (Berndt and Berndt 1999; Worsely 1955). In the early years of the 20th century, however, these trading activities were legislated against by the South Australian government, and further commercial and trading restrictions were placed on Aboriginal people by the Australian government; restrictions that were in place until the 1960s (Smith 2006). In other words, not only have Indigenous Australians a long history of entrepreneurial and enterprising activities, these very activities were suppressed by their colonisers who only in recent decades have been trying to revitalise and stimulate Indigenous economic pursuits.

Despite a discernible void in the literature in the area of Indigenous entrepreneurship in Australia, there is growing interest in, and academic focus on Indigenous entrepreneurship, which has been evolving into a discrete area of inquiry (Hindle and Moroz 2010; Hindle 2010). Even though definitions of Indigenous entrepreneurship today remain fragmented (Paredo and Anderson 2006), enterprising activities by Indigenous people are largely perceived as a means of overcoming economic disadvantage and social exclusion (Hindle and Moroz 2010) and as means of liberation and self-determination (Foley 2003). In addition, many definitions of Indigenous enterprise highlight the centrality of social and cultural norms relating to Indigeneity (see Dana and Anderson 2006). Thus, Indigenous entrepreneurship can usefully be understood in terms of pursuing economic opportunity for the purpose of diminishing Indigenous disadvantage through culturally viable and acceptable forms of wealth creation (Hindle and Moroz 2010). Such understanding of Indigenous entrepreneurship highlights that the generation of profit and income is vital to achieve financial autonomy, while culture, family and community form equally central dimensions of Indigenous enterprise (Hindle and Moroz 2010; Moylan 2008) when working towards greater social inclusion.9 In other words, there is a focus on the delivery of socially inclusive benefits to Indigenous communities (Lindsay 2005). Yet, these go beyond, albeit important, socio-economic improvements. It is this social orientation evident in Indigenous entrepreneurship that led to theorising about its close alignment to social entrepreneurship (Brueckner et al 2010; Pearson and Helms 2010a). This social orientation regards social value creation as a measure of entrepreneurial success in contrast to profitability in the conventional entrepreneurial sense (Nicholls 2006). The entrepreneurial activities described below will serve to illustrate further the foregrounding of social, community-focused aspects and the role these aspects play in addressing key target areas of the Closing the Gap policy framework through a social inclusion lens.

An East Arnhem Land experience

The case presented here is based on on-going research efforts seeking to document and analyse Indigenous entrepreneurial activities in East Arnhem Land (Brueckner et al 2010). Attention is directed at the entrepreneurial activities of members of the Rirratjingu clan in the town of Yirrkala, located 20

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9 The social inclusion focus is not exclusive to Indigenous enterprises as the small business sector in general is seen to provide opportunities for social inclusion and economic participation (Blackburn and Ram 2006).
km south of Nhulunbuy in North-East Arnhem Land. Specifically, the focus here is on Nuwul Environmental Services (trading as Dudunngurr Nursery prior to 2012), a not for profit enterprise, which at the time research commenced was part of the local Bunuwal Group overseen by the Rirratjingu Aboriginal Corporation. Since late 2009 efforts have been underway to revitalise the operations of the nursery, which ceased operation in 2007, following the abolishment of CDEP funding and the dismantling of the National Landcare Program.10

Gareth Wise - a non-Indigenous ethno-botanist - was invited by Rirratjingu clan members in 2009 to re-establish and manage the nursery. Apart from Mr Wise Nuwul Environmental Services are community-owned and staffed by local community members. The key activities of the operation are the collection, storage and propagation of native seeds and plants used for landscaping and revegetation work (see Figure 1). Nursery activities are self-funded primarily through ground maintenance and landscaping contracts with local authorities, businesses and residents and through the sale of native and exotic plants. Additional work is funded through government transfer payments such as CDEP and RCJP monies. In 2009, the re-opened nursery was run by Gareth Wise and a group of around 13 volunteers. Today, the nursery has 40 staff of whom eight receive weekly wages, eight receive money through the old CDEP scheme, and 24 staff are currently on RJCP income. With the expansion of the nursery more nursery staff are expected to move from government income support to receiving weekly wages.

The nursery provides a platform for community members to become involved in semi-formal economic activities that serve social, cultural, environmental and economic goals. To illustrate, the nursery deliberately ‘overstaffs’ to ensure that a critical mass of workers are present each day, recognising that not all nursery staff will attend work daily. This practice provides flexibility to nursery workers and eliminates the pressure from a rigid ‘nine-to-five’ work routine by running on ‘Indigenous time’ (Smith 1999). Therefore, non-attendance merely results in non-payment but not reprimand. This approach provides opportunities for attending cultural events or participating in customary practices such as local arts, hunting and fishing. At the same time, the work at the nursery is itself a form of cultural expression. The aims and nature of nursery operations are well aligned with locals’ connections to the land and their sense of custodianship. Plant and seed collection activities ensure the keeping alive, passing on and recording of local knowledge of native flora, which are intrinsically linked to local customs and traditional laws. Traditional healing practices, for example, rely on traditional knowledge about native plants, which places the nursery at the very centre of local culture. In economic terms, nursery work provides a source of income and helps staff acquire technical skills not only in botanical work but also in areas such as numeracy and literacy as well as project and time management (e.g., landscaping contracts, plant watering regimes); thus improving local opportunities for mainstream employment.

10 The National Landcare Program was established in 1992 to develop and implement resource management practices to enhance Australia’s soil, water and biological resources. The Natural Heritage Trust started in 1996 and supported the National Landcare Program, which ended in June 2008.
To illustrate, a number of former nursery staff members have been successful in securing ongoing employment with local employers including the Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre (local arts centre), Gumatj Aboriginal Corporation and the Dhimirru Aboriginal Corporation as well as government agencies such as Northern Territory Department of Housing. Skill sets acquired whilst working for the nursery proved vital for future employment. For example, plant identification skills and a familiarity with occupational health and safety procedures were particularly relevant for work with the Dhimirru Rangers and for the woodcutting operations of Gumatj Aboriginal Corporation. But also more generic skills such as the development of self-discipline around regular, albeit flexible, work schedules have aided the transition of former staff into mainstream employment.

Staff attending work at the nursery also receive training in managing their financial affairs, advice on lifestyle, and have access to counselling. The nursery also provides an in-house banking service, which is a voluntary initiative enabling staff to have part of their income quarantined to achieve personal saving goals. This reduces the potential for ‘humbugging’\(^\text{11}\) from family and other clan members and can ensure that tea, coffee and food are provided during breaks (smokos) at work. For some staff members food provided at work constitutes the only regular meals of the week. Upon successful project completion nursery staff also receive rewards in the form of group activities that help build team cohesion and maintain a group focus. These rewards are often structured around customary practices such as camping, hunting and fishing, which also help maintain the connection to the land and traditional practices, especially for the younger generation.

The nursery also offers a platform for other community-focused programs, which \textit{inter alia} target health education. In conjunction with the local school and Indigenous local health services the nursery provides education for local primary school children in areas such as botany and chemistry as well as gardening and nutrition. In class, school children maintain garden beds on school grounds, receiving hands-on education and a blend of prescribed curriculum content together with healthy living skills. Also, the school and the nursery jointly offer older students formal vocational education and a pathway to a Certificate II in Conservation and Land Management. Other activities include the rollout of local gardens across homelands\(^\text{12}\) in the region for which the nursery provides the labour, plants and expertise. The homelands gardens are aimed at improving residents’ nutrition, enabling all-year-round access to fresh fruit and vegetables drawing on the nursery’s ethno-botanical experience with suitable plant varieties. As individual families will have control over their own gardens (in contrast to community gardens) the project also seeks to hand responsibility to individuals instilling a sense of autonomy and pride.

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\(^{11}\) ‘Humbugging’ broadly means “to annoy or to win something to one’s own advantage at the expense of someone else” (Gerrard 1989:99). Typically, the term connotes the harassment and pestering of family relations for money often targeting, at times violently, vulnerable family members (McDonald and Wombo 2006).

\(^{12}\) The homelands movement dates back to the 1970s. Back then, Aboriginal people started going back onto country from mission-run larger communities not only to escape the social dysfunction which became increasingly prevalent in these communities but also to protect sacred sites, maintain customary ways of living as well as care for, and manage the natural resources of their land and seas.
The non-Indigenous management of the nursery – whilst a temporary measure – enables staff to traverse cultural norms thereby exposing them to non-Indigenous ways of working in a culturally safe place. The nursery functions in this regard as a third space enterprise (after Bhabha 1996), providing a space for crossing between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures and building a bridge between Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledges. The sharing of knowledge in this third space creates room for mutual learning. Non-Indigenous ways of knowing are enriched through insights into traditional and cultural knowledge whilst Indigenous exposure to the non-Indigenous economy and ways of knowing offers opportunities for, and increase chances of, success in mainstream economic participation. Non-Indigenous ways of knowing here also refers to the skills and expertise nursery management has brought to the organisation. These include identifying funding opportunities, grant writing capabilities, capitalising on formal and informal networks or simply being able to temper some of the organisational goals and visions to ensure financial feasibility or compatibility with the rules and customs of the formal economy. Skills such as these have been critical in the formative stages of the re-opened nursery, especially as ‘soft money’ and government agency support were needed to grow the venture. Arguably, these skills can be seen as a strength of the nursery at present but these can also prove to be its Achilles’ heel in future. Thus, succession planning and training of local Yolgnu in these skill sets can be seen as a priority for the nursery to ensure that these capabilities remain in the organisation long-term.

Whilst non-profit in orientation, the nursery also harbours the potential for growth in commercial terms in that opportunities exist to tap into areas such as tourism, traditional healing, education and bush food, only to mention a few. Efforts are currently underway to explore these options. Formal arrangements are already in place between Nuwul Environmental Services, the local primary school to deliver educational content, provide expertise and labour for gardening projects in homelands and assist with the design and running of nutritional programs in the community (e.g. local surf club (Walngawu Djakamirri). Also, the establishment of the Gong Djambutj Healing Centre is envisaged by late 2014. This will not only offer a platform for traditional healing practices and the maintenance of traditional knowledge, but will provide economic scope for the nursery to broaden its botanical focus.
This broader focus will occur by branching into bush medicines and by affording pathways for community members to become engaged with local traditions thereby offering a culturally sensitive complement to dominant, non-Indigenous health service provision. Noteworthy in this regard is the observation that such an expansion would not compromise the socio-cultural functions of the organisation but instead serve to increase its capacity to fulfil these roles as they are mutually reinforcing. Any expansion and economic success of the nursery would enable the growth of staff numbers and the diversification of nursery activities. In turn, this would lead to added community benefits due to the nursery’s socio-cultural and economic multiplier effect as skills, knowledge and income are spread more widely among families and the community as a whole. The growth of the nursery to date has resulted in higher levels of specialisation with designated work teams around tasks such as irrigation, weed management and grounds management. At the same time, flexibility remains for nursery staff to move between different work teams and thus change daily routines. Figure 2 below provides a summary depiction of the multiple roles and functions of the nursery’s functions and operations.

![Figure 2: Model of Nuwul Environmental Services](image-url)
Discussion

The entrepreneurial example detailed above sheds light on the potential of alternative Indigenous business models, which currently fall outside orthodox mainstreaming attempts. As demonstrated, Nuwul Environmental Services offers promising pathways for Indigenous economic participation, allowing for culturally safe ways of learning about the non-Indigenous, economic way of life with its focus on accumulation (e.g. budget discipline, financial savings) and commodification (private ownership, self-discipline). This approach is in contrast to the dominant policy approach, which envisages Indigenous labour migration to places of economic opportunity with all the concomitant risks explored previously. The case reported here illustrates how economic opportunities were created locally, which eliminated the need to sever local ties to culture and land but instead built on these. These findings are congruent with a growing body of evidence on Indigenous hybrid economies in remote Australia where economic and cultural activities were found to coexist and to be blended (Altman 2007a). This blending not only provided livelihood opportunities for participants in these business ventures, it also fostered the provision of social cultural and environmental services that are largely unnoticed (Altman and Whitehad 2003) within the so-called ‘real’ economy (after Pearson 2000). Therefore, much care should be taken so as not to mandate Indigenous mainstreaming into the ‘real’ economy by policy decree if the paternalism of the past is not to be repeated (Pholi et al 2009) but also to ensure that the real value of work already undertaken is accounted for and recognised.

As shown in Figure 2, the Nuwul nursery meets Altman’s definition of a business enterprise operating in the hybrid economy, blending customary practices with formal economic activities, providing public benefits and seizing commercial opportunities. The venture delivers a wide range of benefits to staff members and the wider community.

Natural resource management (NRM) work carried out by nursery staff can be seen to deliver national benefits while also aiding the preservation of local knowledge and drive local economic development at the community level (see Altman, Buchanan and Larsen 2007; Altman 2007a). Plant and seed collection, for example, are carried out ‘on country’, allowing nursery staff to monitor and respond to environmental changes such as weed and pest infestation. Services such as this draw on Indigenous knowledge and practices (caring for country). These are passed on to younger nursery staff and thus provide both cultural training as well as valuable NRM skills, which facilitate the transition of nursery staff into formal employment. At the same time, nursery activities such as these produce valuable public benefits in a remote and environmentally significant part of the country.

In economic terms, the nursery currently supports the wages of eight employees and their wider family networks. Additional staff members are supported through government transfer payments. As such the business represents an interdependent enterprise model (see Altman and Jordan 2008), which over time can develop into a fully self-supporting venture. The successful transition of former nursery staff into employment in the formal economy also attests to the valuable skill transfer and socio-economic stepping-stone function the nursery fills. Further, the Nuwul offers a degree of...
economic diversification in a region dominated by mining and refining bauxite. With the proposed closure of the Rio Tinto refinery in Nhulunbuy, while never a key employer of Indigenous people in the area, economic opportunities in terms of indirect employment are bound to contract. While the non-Indigenous private sector (especially mining) has often been described as the vehicle to improve Indigenous employment and drive Indigenous mainstreaming in remote Australia (see Hooke 2013), it cannot be relied upon (see Dockery 2014), especially in the Gove region as evidenced by recent events. This underscores Altman and Hinkson’s (2010) call for support of hybrid economy models for they help reduce risks associated with a lack of economic diversification.

By way of providing economic opportunity to local community members and due to the very nature of its business activities the nursery provides both direct and indirect health benefits to its staff members. Adherence to work schedules and the self-discipline it requires of workers has a positive impact on individuals’ lifestyle choices (e.g., alcohol and substance abuse), reinforced by the information and training provided in-house in areas such as nutrition and financial management. The focus on medicinal plants and their planned use in traditional healing practices in a soon to be operational healing centre will also give impetus to healthy living. Nuwul’s approach of preserving, drawing, and passing on of Indigenous knowledge and cultural practices enables the pursuit of traditional economic activity, recognised also by critics of hybrid economy models as facilitating good community health (Pearson 2009).

Nuwul Environmental Services are a social and cultural hub in the community. The venture provides in addition to income and training also a safe venue for staff for to meet, engage and share, creating a sense of belonging and community. Nursery activities are an expression of local culture, knowledge and tradition, allowing the blending of income generation and traditional life. Work schedules and routines are structured so as to provide flexibility and enable participation in cultural obligations outside the nursery. Design features such as this foster well-being and cultural and spiritual life while at the same time offering opportunity for engagement in the formal economy. In this sense, the nursery is a locus for the ‘convergence of economic and cultural values’ (Altman and Hunter 2005). In the relative absence of the market in this part of the country the customary economic activities the nursery pursues is particularly significant.

In terms of policy implications, it is notable that the success of the venture described here hinges, to varying degrees, on the skills, expertise and social capital of the non-Indigenous nursery management. While access to these skills currently helps attain the goals of Nuwul Environmental Services, they may not be relied upon in the long-term. In other words, there is a vulnerability concerning the longevity of this venture. This also relates to the question of organisational leadership and the task of keeping visions and aspirations alive. In many ways, nursery success at present is dependent on the ability of nursery management to meet bureaucratic requirements. Access to current government support measures for Indigenous entrepreneurial activities requires skills such as the ability to write business plans and produce cash flow forecasts (Pearson and Helms 2010b). As such, targeted policy measures that provide assistance to Indigenous enterprises in
overcoming structural impediments for access to funding and operational support may prove effective in fostering both the uptake and survival of Indigenous business ventures. Below consideration is given to what such policy measures might entail.

Firstly, longevity of assistance and funding support is vital. The now discontinued CDEP and Landcare programs were examples of long-term schemes that were successful in their engagement of Indigenous people in work programs. In this sense, long-term government commitments are required to address Indigenous disadvantage matched by funding commitments that offer program continuity and help eliminate the need for regular time and resource-intensive applications to obtain government funding. Research highlights that support needs to be provided long-term if cycles of disadvantage are to be seriously addressed, a fact that is recognised at government level. Much of the ASIB literature highlights the importance of continuity and relationships for underpinning effective support services to the most disadvantaged.

In the current policy and service delivery context, the focus tends to be on supporting individuals with the most acute need. This generates crisis-driven services instead of people being supported out of cycles into a more stable and secure environment. The inability of services to promise continuity and ongoing support is a significant barrier to their establishing trust, as well as to their retaining valuable, trained staff. It is a key problem with the short-term nature of service contracts and funding cycles (Commonwealth of Australia 2011: 50).

Secondly, location-specificity is another vital aspect of effective government policy for it helps overcome the 'locational disadvantage' faced in Indigenous remote communities; a structural barrier that continues to create and reinforce cycles of disadvantage for many Indigenous as well as non-Indigenous Australians. In its 2010 Annual Report, the ASIB (2010: 25) stresses that policy and program success are critically dependent on “initiatives that are location-based, location-managed, flexibly funded, and provided over a longer timeframe”. Such location-based initiatives can target the impact of reduced employment opportunities, transport, infrastructure and services based on an understanding of local conditions and familiarity with people and place. With the Gove region destined to experience serious economic dislocation and turmoil in the wake of the announced refinery closure, attention to regional context is particularly vital.

Thirdly, overcoming social exclusion and disadvantage requires cross-departmental and cross-sectoral collaboration. The issues underlying Indigenous disadvantage are complex and often a combination of interconnected problems such as racism, unemployment, poor skills, low income, poor housing and bad health, require a joined-up approach. In this regard, past and current government approaches are seen as too siloed due to ‘the reluctance of government agencies to give up power to others outside their field of activity’ and thus are regarded “unsuccessful in creating long-term solutions” (Australian Social Inclusion Board 2010: 25). Recent attempts have been made by the Australian government to bring about improved cross-
sectoral and cross-departmental collaboration through its social inclusion policies to design new ways of working together, focusing on disadvantage and barriers to inclusion as well as the interconnections between them. New initiatives could bring together local people, community and voluntary organisations, public agencies, local authorities and businesses with a view to work jointly on solutions for local issues and address community-specific needs.

Finally, a cultural shift may be required away from perceptions that render hybrid models less vital, real or relevant. The ‘real’ economy and its ‘real’ jobs have proven illusive in many of Australia’s rural and remote areas, despite long-running attempts at mainstreaming communities in these parts of the country (Thompson and Hill 2008). Thus, there is a need to recognise the diverse range of values hybrid models such as the one described here can offer beyond economic returns. In addition to fostering the socio-economic advancement of individuals and their communities, the case of the Nuwul nursery has illustrated the social, cultural and environmental multiplier effects local enterprises such as these can deliver. A new appreciation for the blended values hybrid models can offer may stimulate government policies that support, for example, cultural and natural resource management (CNRM) on country (Altman and Whitehead 2003) or help extend existing government programs such as Indigenous Protected Area and Working on Country.13

Overall, initiatives that are long-term and location-based as well as joined-up and premised on an appreciation for the contribution of alternative economic models could help maintain and build local capacity and drive social inclusion. Such initiatives could facilitate better life outcomes through improved economic and social engagement for individuals to the benefit of individuals, their communities and society. In these ways, the creation of, and support for business ventures such as Nuwul Environmental Services locally can be prioritised in contrast to attempts that seek the migration of talent to places of economic opportunity away from local Indigenous contexts (Altman 2007a; Foley 2008).

**Conclusion**

This paper provides insights into the activities of a social enterprise operating in a remote location in East Arnhem Land. Nuwul Environmental Services were shown to facilitate the development of local people and their communities, playing a vital role also in the maintenance of culture and land. The venture was found to serve primarily socio-cultural and environmental goals, and while potential for a more active economic engagement exists, the organisation is likely to maintain its customary emphasis. The variety of approaches within this single operation is indicative of the potential in remote parts of Australia for the establishment of business ventures that not only help meet policy goals for Indigenous social inclusion through economic

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13 The Indigenous Protected Areas program supports Indigenous landowners in the management and the conservation of their lands as part of the National Reserve System. Currently, 60 declared Indigenous Protected Areas exist across Australia. Working on Country is an ongoing Australian Government program that currently employs around 700 Indigenous rangers to pursue environmental protection and conservation outcomes (Department of the Environment 2014a,b).
participation but also serve vital environmental and socio-cultural functions. The East Arnhem Land experience relayed here also underpins the need for policy formats that cater for a variety of different business models some of which may well remain outside the bounds of the formal economy. Rather than viewing these ventures as economically deficient and in need of mainstreaming, reflection is needed on the contributions these ventures make and the cost their normalisation would entail.

Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge the invaluable feedback received from Prof Sherry Saggers and two anonymous reviewers, which helped greatly in improving the quality of this article.
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