

Microenterprise in remote communities

The untapped social and economic dividend

The landscape of work in remote Australia

In remote communities in Australia, employment options are often limited. At the same time, people have skills, interests and passions. The problem is that the world of work and the personal interests that inspire people are mutually exclusive. Jobs that are available for Aboriginal people frequently fall into the narrow categories of manual work in the community or clerical work in local organisations. Work in the mining and pastoral industries often requires travel away from family that may not be suitable for many individuals. There is no opportunity for people to turn what they love doing into meaningful employment.

Remote communities are characterised by high rates of unemployment, and a scarcity of jobs accessible to local people. Managerial and professional positions are predominantly filled with non-Indigenous people from outside of the community. Current employment services and programs are largely working to prepare people for employment; however, employment opportunities, where they do exist, do not necessarily align with the passions and skills of people.

Currently, training is largely based on the supply of standardised solutions, rather than being driven by a broad understanding of needs and by demand. It is often constrained to generic courses delivered by training providers who are not funded to assist students to go on to apply the skills developed during the training. When training has occurred it frequently becomes 'training for training's sake' as there are no clear directions that individuals can take to apply the skills they have acquired. Individuals often end up with certificates but no capacity to make the transition to employment.

This paper argues that microenterprise offers a means for people to engage in work in a way that acknowledges the realities of remote communities and harnesses skills and passions to tackle unemployment.

The realities of remote communities

A high number of Aboriginal people living in remote Australia are second or third generation unemployed. There exists a pattern of unemployment that means that children grow up in households where few people have worked and, where they have, the work was essentially unrewarding and unsatisfactory. In addition, programs that emphasise education and training have frequently led to no improved employment prospects. Instead, many people have sunk into a routine that makes the possibility of returning to regular work increasingly distant.

Government policy towards Indigenous people has frequently recognised this problem, giving rise to waves of initiatives including Indigenous economic development forums, training and cadetship programs. In academic and research circles, similar agonising has occurred over the 'lost generation' of people who are missing out on the benefits of Australia's extended boom, leading to ongoing analysis of the problem and how thirty years of policy failure has only exacerbated it.

While worthy efforts have been made, often the policy response to long-term unemployment as experienced in remote communities is a familiar one made up of a mixture of modest case management, Centrelink rules and more training. But the effects of long-term marginalisation and economic exclusion will not disappear as a result of participation in Certificate I in Work Readiness. Education may be important, but too many young people disengage from school at 12 or 13 years of age, not because they lack appetite for learning but because they cannot see the relevance of what they are learning at school to their lives. As a result, low levels of formal education result in limited competency in English literacy and numeracy and a lack of confidence in navigating formal workplaces. Because the current system works from a deficit model, drawing attention to people's lack of capacity, individuals in remote communities have had limited opportunity to identify their existing skills and abilities. This results in low self-esteem and people become increasingly dispirited in their search to find a way to meaningfully contribute to meeting the aspirations of their families and the development of their communities.

New ways to economic participation

Understanding the realities that people face is the first step towards new thinking on economic participation. There is a desperate need for initiatives that are accessible and interesting to enable people to engage, learn, build on their existing skills and develop the confidence to identify and pursue work opportunities. The interests they already have can be an entry point into meaningful work.

After all, people want to learn. It is part of the human condition. But learning has to be relevant and purposeful. We need to move away from a 'training for employment' paradigm, to one that prioritises learning and enables Aboriginal people living in remote communities to develop the skills, experience and confidence to engage in economic participation. At the same time, jobs in remote communities need to become defined in much broader terms than they are at present. There are multiple pathways to economic participation and these must be recognised and valued.

Microenterprise as a journey to enterprise participation

Project-based approaches to enterprise offer relevant, appropriate and flexible community-based learning opportunities. This approach recognises that remote residents have creative ideas and plans for themselves, their families and their community. The missing ingredient that could turn their aspirations into reality is access to support to explore, develop and try out their ideas. This support often amounts to the presence of a suitable person to work with local individuals and groups to design projects that help develop the skills, confidence and experience to realise their goals.

This approach is an effective way to encourage participation and engagement because it starts from the place where people have reached. It makes no assumptions about what is best for them and takes a facilitating role in enabling them to strive for their own creative and occupational goals. The project outcomes are not predetermined and the decisions are made and owned by those involved. The learning is experiential and applied to real life tasks. This helps those involved to continually see the relevance of what they are learning to their lives. The end result is often a microenterprise, which is a commercial activity involving a single or small range of products or services operating by one person or a small team. We will come to examples from the experience of Enterprise Learning Projects later in this paper.

These kinds of projects encourage responsible experimentation on the basis that there is no right answer. Instead, the process is a learning journey towards the kind of enterprise that the participants want. It is guided by a process of inquiry, where facilitators use questions as prompts to ensure ideas are explored thoroughly. Learning through enterprise projects is not isolated or separated from the community but is embedded within community life. Often, the projects offer opportunities for the wider community to participate in the project as consumers of the products and services that are being produced. Wider community involvement reinforces the value of the learning that is taking place. Enterprise projects demonstrate that learning does not have to occur in a classroom.

Principles for enterprise project facilitation

The process of facilitation of microenterprises is underpinned by the following principles:

- 1. The ideas and aspirations of local people inform the project design**

The facilitator should not behave as an expert to whom the participants in the project look for advice. His or her role is to ask action-oriented questions, encourage the group to explore options and support them to explore all aspects of the project.

- 2. Community members make and own decisions**

It is critical for people working in the project to work out their own direction and to make decisions together. In other words, the project belongs to them and they are actively leading it.

- 3. Start small and grow**

Projects work best when they are manageable from the outset. An op shop might start with a single bag of clothes and a jewellery business with a single necklace. Once the group has worked out the basic process of sourcing materials, producing, marketing and selling, then the enterprise will grow in a way that is managed and presents low risks.

- 4. Build on assets**

Conversations that focus on problems and needs can be attritional to the confidence of people involved in a project. In remote Australia, many assessments of communities, people, infrastructure and prospects use a deficit view. In enterprise facilitation, identifying and respecting the skills and knowledge of people is critical.

5. People learn as they go

A strength of microenterprise development is that it explicitly recognises that everyone involved is going to learn something about teamwork, marketing, product development, the customers, how to maintain quality and many other aspects of a business. Learning takes place as the project develops.

6. Low start-up costs

Where resources are limited, people are often not in a financial position to make a big investment in a project. This is another reason for starting small and picking ideas that have low costs to get them started.

7. Rapid prototyping for practical and early learning

Projects often depend on maintaining the excitement and commitment of people at an early stage. So the value of actually starting quickly and testing out ideas is clear. Risks are usually low and so setbacks along the way are not serious if they lead to new ideas and methods.

Creating new economic opportunities through enterprise

There is a need for new economic opportunities to be created in remote areas to enable people to engage in meaningful occupation. People tell us that they want to remain on country, but they also want to have opportunities to learn and to work.

This means that fixed notions of what remote community work and enterprise looks like should be set aside in favour of greater openness to a diversity of small and enterprising initiatives rather than large industry investments alone.

Media and social commentary in Australia often portrays communities as economic wastelands. But when viewed through the lens of microenterprise, previously unrecognised opportunities present themselves. Promising examples that Enterprise Learning Projects has seen include arts-based enterprises, cultural tourism and cultural awareness training businesses, catering and food-based initiatives, multimedia enterprises, retail enterprises and businesses producing face and body products. These can be successful and viable remote area enterprises.

We are also seeing increasing opportunities for people to generate income through the provision of services. Examples such as Waltja's Nintiringtjaku and Ninti One's community-based researcher initiative are demonstrating viable ways to build local skills to deliver services previously generated from outside remote communities. They are a way for people to use and be remunerated for their knowledge and expertise. There exists great potential for enterprise development in this area providing suitable support is available to work with communities to identify and pursue these opportunities.

Policy frameworks

Microenterprise has a strong contribution to make to current policy frameworks on economic development for Indigenous people. The Indigenous Economic Development Strategy 2011–18 identifies four levels of progress towards full economic participation:

1. strengthening foundations
2. individual capabilities and resources
3. jobs, business and entrepreneurship
4. financial security and independence.

For people living in remote communities, microenterprise is a valuable opportunity to build their skills and competencies in a work situation that they may not have experienced before. In this way, the process is a form of early-stage business skills development and therefore fundamental to people living in remote communities being able to connect with economic opportunity, as described in the Strategy. Microenterprise is therefore not a lesser form of economic development, but a basic building block.

Responding to issues through enterprise

Enterprise is a powerful vehicle for community development. It not only creates new economic opportunities but it enables people to develop creative and sustainable responses to the problems they may be facing, such as lack of income and meaningful occupation but also vulnerability to isolation and fears of poor prospects.

In Yarralin community, community members are operating an op shop enterprise to respond to the need for affordable and accessible clothing and household items. In Warakurna community, the community plan to pilot a 'bush café', which will sell healthy take-away food. This is in response to the health issues the community are experiencing as a result of poor diet. The bush medicine soap enterprises that are emerging in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands and Yarralin are enabling the community to share their culture with a wider audience in a new way. They are also creating a space for traditional knowledge and plants to be used to respond to modern health issues such as trachoma.

These initiatives are fostering a strong sense of community pride as people come together and work collaboratively to address issues of importance to the whole community. Increased self-efficacy and self-determination leads to improved health outcomes. People's own lives can be transformed as they develop a strong sense of purpose, confidence and self-worth through doing what they enjoy and are good at doing.

Looking forward

The ELP approach is a viable model, but to have a true impact it requires replication in many places and that means that the business and policy environments need to be enabling. For this to happen, some developments would be welcome:

Firstly, all levels of government need to recognise and value the role enterprise can play in creating opportunities for people living in remote communities to learn, work and contribute to the economic and social development of their communities.

Secondly, people working in employment and economic development programs, and Aboriginal people themselves must acknowledge that community members are best placed to lead their own economic development. They possess a deep understanding of how their community works, and where the needs and opportunities are. There is no need for blanket training programs and macro-level economic prescriptions. Individuals simply need access to the tools and support to develop and implement their ideas.

And finally, increased support for and investment in building individual and community capabilities are needed so that communities have the ability to lead their own development. It is imperative that enterprise education is available to community members to enable enterprise initiatives to be truly community driven.

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