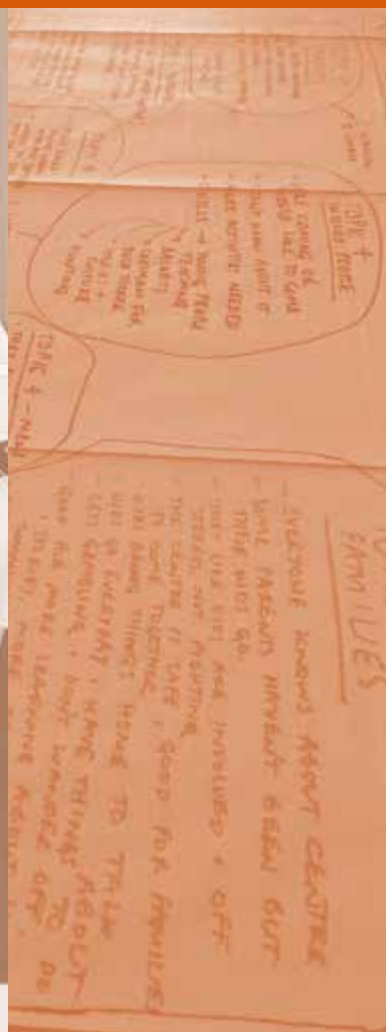
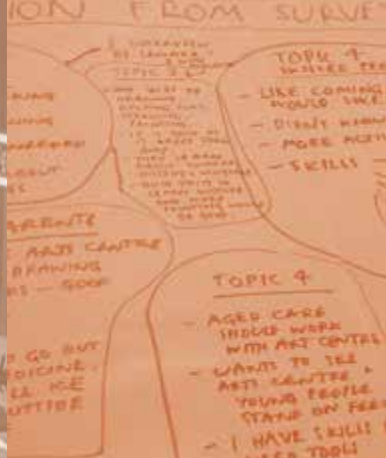




## Sabi weya wi garra gu - Knowing where we are going

Participatory impact assessment with the community of Minyerri

February 2016



## 1.0 Introduction and background

This paper describes a process of impact assessment led by Enterprise Learning Projects (ELP), an organisation based in Katherine in the Northern Territory of Australia, with members of the community of Minyerri. The purpose of the paper is to set out the methods and process that we developed with the people of Minyerri and to reflect on the lessons learned from the first experience of implementing it.

ELP is a social enterprise that supports remote Aboriginal people who want to explore, develop and grow their business ideas. The work was part of Families Learning Together, a program implemented by The Smith Family, a national organisation that exists to support a better quality of life for vulnerable families in Australia. The program received funding through Communities for Children, an initiative of the Australian Federal Government. This paper serves as a report on the project and a baseline study for the activities of Families Working Together.

Minyerri is a settlement located in the north-east of the Northern Territory of Australia, around 600 kilometres south-east of Darwin. The population of Minyerri is around 450 people who are mainly Aboriginal people of the Alawa language group. A small number of people come from outside the area and live in Minyerri for reasons of work for local service providers or through their family connections. The language spoken in Minyerri is predominantly Kriol, with most people also speaking English. Very few of the older generations maintain spoken Alawa language, but a number of words are in common use.

The approach taken by ELP to impact assessment was participatory. It used a process with a series of stages in which members of the community involved in the project played a central role. ELP's team included three people; Lillian Tait, project facilitator based in Katherine, Samara Billy, community based facilitator in Minyerri, and Steve Fisher, advisor on impact assessment. Support was provided by Laura Egan, Director of ELP. Leading individuals from the community who worked on the impact assessment process included Agnes Wilfred, Phelecia Daylight, Esther Wilfred and Samara Billy. The Families Learning Together project is based at the recently-renovated Minyerri Art and Cultural Centre.

## 2.0 The origins of the Families Learning Together project at Minyerri

### 2.1 Community perspectives on their needs

Minyerri is a community with specific needs relating to its experience of poverty and disadvantage. Geographic isolation partnered with limited opportunities for meaningful employment has left many people dependent on government welfare payments. The jobs that do exist are taken up by 23% of the community. While primary school attendance is comparatively high (93%), 60% of the population does not go further in their studies than year 8 (ABS 2011). There are significantly higher rates of diet-related disease, such as type 2 diabetes, renal failure, cardio-vascular disease and child malnutrition than in non-Aboriginal communities (Sunrise Health Services 2015, The Smith Family 2015). Houses are often underserviced and overcrowded, with instances of food insecurity affecting up to 45% of the population (ABS 2011, Sunrise Health 2015, The Smith Family 2015).

ELP is a community partner of the Katherine Region Communities for Children initiative, managed by The Smith Family and funded by the Australian Government.

#### **Thanks are due to Minyerri community members:**

Samara Billy  
Agnes Wilfred  
Phelecia Daylight  
Esther Wilfred  
and Jonathon Walla

#### **Authors of the report:**

Steve Fisher  
Lillian Tait

## 2.2 Bringing together art, culture and enterprise

Through ELP's discussions with people during 2014 and 2015, it learned of the barriers and concerns people held, including those described by members of the community as follows:

- Limited opportunities for young parents and caregivers to engage in employment
- People are busy with looking after kids
- People want to create the arts centre into a place where people can come and learn, be creative, share culture
- Parents and caregivers want to see increased opportunities for young adults
- People in the community want to create pathways for their kids and grandkids
- People want to make things happen but they don't have the skills and knowledge to do this on their own
- Food and clothes are expensive and people want to run op shops so that people can buy affordable clothing and household items

From ELP's perspective, the community face several barriers:

- An absence of consistent and accessible information, support and capacity building
- A lack of structured activities for kids and young people
- A high proportion of teenage mothers
- An absence of employment opportunities
- Geographic and economic isolation

According to the most recent census, there are 199 children in Minyerri aged 0-14 years (ABS 2011), which equates to 44% of the total population of the community.

The project at Minyerri came about through a meeting in Katherine between people from the community, especially Samara Billy, and Laura Egan of ELP. The organisation ran a workshop on small enterprise development for Aboriginal people in the Katherine region in April 2013 that led to discussions about ideas for a project at Minyerri. Laura visited Minyerri and then some ideas were developed with Samara and other local women on an initiative that would help meet a desire to strengthen arts and cultural activities in the community. The women wanted to create a space that fosters a sense of belonging and creates new economic and social opportunities. This would be a way for community members at Minyerri to work together to ensure their community is a safe, nurturing and inclusive place for children and families.

The ongoing conversations included the testing of ideas on enterprises that could be established in the community. The earliest was Gulbarn Tea, which arose through local knowledge of the use of Gulbarn leaves for medicinal purposes by Aboriginal people in the past. Gulbarn grows in the area around Minyerri, on traditional Alawa lands. The idea quickly grew into a small enterprise that is now meeting orders from around Australia.

Working together on harvesting, packaging and marketing the tea was a good way for Minyerri people and ELP to get to know each other better. Further conversations on activities that could take place in Minyerri led ELP to suggest it should make an application to The Smith Family for funding for a project that would strengthen the health, well-being, learning and confidence of children and families in the community. With a focus on activities in art and culture, great strides could be taken in bringing together different generations within Minyerri to learn and develop new skills and knowledge that would be beneficial to the wellbeing of children. The application was approved by The Smith Family in May 2015, leading to a grant of \$286,800 for the period July 2015 to June 2017.



Products of activities of the Families Learning Together project

## 3.0 Developing an approach to impact assessment

### 3.1 Grant agreement requirements for monitoring and evaluating the project

It was a requirement of the project grant under Communities for Children and Families Learning Together that a number of requirements were met, including the following parameters for monitoring and evaluation:

- An M&E framework will be developed as part of the project and will be delivered within first six months
- Baseline data will be gathered during the period January and February 2016.
- The project-specific outcomes to be measured include:
  - Children have increased confidence and improved self-esteem.
  - Parents/carers have increased knowledge and the capacity to support their children's health and emotional wellbeing.
  - Families have an improved connection to their community.
- End of project data gathering and analysis will take place during May and June 2017.

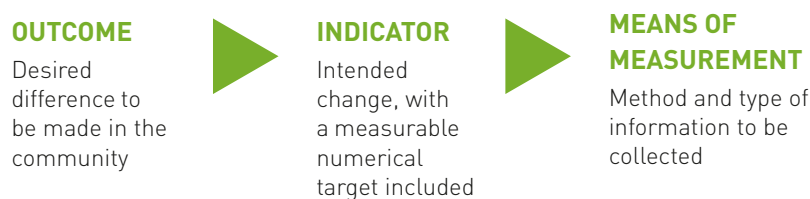
While these requirements were determined from outside the community, the focus of the work of all three organisations involved in the project, Enterprise Learning Projects, The Smith Family and the Australian Government Department of Social Services, is to support decision-making on the monitoring and evaluation of the project by people in Minyerri itself. We therefore set out to develop a framework that would enable local people who were new to the practice of measuring the results of a project, to contribute to and participate in the work over an initial six-month period of testing and learning during which a baseline survey would be conducted.

### 3.2 The role of research practice

Monitoring and evaluation involves research. It therefore uses research methods and follows the basic tenets of good practice in research, as applied to development work (Mikkelsen 2004). Given that the changes anticipated through the Families Learning Together project are changes in the quality of life of people at Minyerri, the work is essentially social research using mainly qualitative methods (Bryman 2008). Quantitative elements do exist but are confined to the number of participants in the activities and their demographic characteristics.

Our approach was informed by the progress made by Ninti One Ltd in its support role to the Stronger Communities for Children (SCfC) program in the Northern Territory. SCfC is also an initiative of the Australia Government and it operates in ten communities. Prior to the Minyerri project, Ninti One had developed and implemented an approach to impact assessment that has been shared with each SCfC community and was being implemented during the same period that our work at Minyerri began (Ninti One 2015). Steve Fisher was an advisor to the SCfC process and approached Ninti One for consent to share it with ELP, which they were pleased to provide.

Following the basic logic that outcomes require indicators to measure them and that data needs to be collected in order to determine progress, the model developed by Ninti One is illustrated below.



This approach enabled Ninti One to work with each community to convert the objectives of its local plan into a set of desired outcomes that formed the basis for the other two columns of the framework; indicators and means of measurement. The underlying principles for the impact assessment model used by Ninti One are:

- a. They should be easy for non-specialists to understand.
- b. They should balance simplicity of approach with sophistication of method.
- c. They should be orientated towards producing information that will enable decision-making groups in the community to gauge progress and make effective decisions on future directions.
- d. They should foster ownership and control of data by communities in a way that meets proper ethical, quality and privacy standards.

(Ninti One 2015)

The approach is described by the organisation as impact assessment which, although still a cumbersome term for people new to the subject, is easier to use in a community context than monitoring and evaluation, which implies a more technical discipline. ELP adopted the term in its work with the community at Minyerri.

## 4.0 Impact assessment in practice

### 4.1 Developing a framework

ELP decided to approach impact assessment through two one-week periods of work in the community, in August 2015 and February 2016, that would enable a framework to be established and then for a baseline exercise to be conducted a few months into the term of the project.

Our starting point was a conversation with a group of local women who had made a commitment to the project. We wanted to work out what they believed were the positive differences the activities to be run at the Minyerri Art Centre would make within the community. In other words, we asked what did they want to change for the better through the Families Learning Together project.

The initial planning meeting in August happened to be the same week in which the community gained access to the building to begin project activities. The space had previously been a residential home, then for a brief time an externally-run arts centre, before falling into dereliction for some years. In 2015, the building was renovated by a local building team under the Remote Jobs Community Program. It was difficult to locate the key to the building, so we began our discussions under the large mahogany tree outside the building before one of the kids was able to climb in through a narrow gap in the roof eaves to open the door from the inside and let us in. Then we continued to talk on the concrete patio area at the end of the building. There was no furniture, so we sat on the floor.

The discussion itself was not a long one. Given the content of the proposal to Families Learning Together and the previous discussions between key people in the community and ELP, the outcomes did not take long to define. Later in the week, we spent time working out what the indicators should aim to achieve. Then we described the means of measurement, which would be surveys at this stage since they would be easier to manage as a team effort, but could later involve group discussions, mind- mapping, stories, individual questionnaires or the use of video and audio recordings.

The final version of the framework is below. Translation of the outcomes to Kriol was undertaken and it was pasted on the wall of the Art Centre

Outcomes	Indicators	Method of measurement
(the differences that the project will make)	(how do we tell that we've made a difference?)	(this is how we collect information, to measure the difference we've made)
<b>Biginnini fil gud en jidan strong bala blanga olabat history en kultur blanga olabat femili en komyuniti.</b> Children will feel a stronger connection to the history and culture of their family and community	30-40% of Children will say they have a better connection to the history and culture of Minyerri.	Survey of a group of regular child participants in the activities and a group who do not participate
<b>Biginnini jidan gud bala en gud binji blanga olabat ron selp.</b> Children will have greater confidence and self-esteem	30 – 40% of Children will say they have better confidence and self- esteem	Survey of a group of regular child participants in the activities and a group who do not participate
<b>Mami an Dedi sabi ola biginnini gin dum gud bala ting iya la Art Centre blanga album olabat wuligim dei gin gro en len gudwei.</b> The community, especially parents, will know about the good things that kids can do at the Art Centre, that will help them grow up well.	40% of Parents will know that children can come to the Centre to do good activities, instead of gambling or fighting, etc.	Survey of a random group of parents in Minyerri
<b>Pipul sabi olabat blakfela wei, hau bla titjim dei biginnini bla sabi en lenim mowa.</b> People who know traditional skills will teach and share their knowledge with younger people	At least 10 skilled people will be visiting and working at the Centre	Records and reports of the work of the Centre
<b>Femili jidan gud binji blanga olabat komyuniti.</b> Families will feel better connected to their community.	30-40% of Families will say they feel better connected to their community	Survey of a random group of adults (could be the same group as above)

Aspects of the framework to note are that the indicator values are carefully chosen to be bold in their ambition, but achievable. Given the small size of the community and the level of interest of children and families, the group felt they could engage 30-40% of children and families and that the results would be positive in terms of their connection to community, confidence, self-esteem and trust in the value of the activities. Similarly, it seemed a reasonable target to expect to engage ten older people in the activities.

#### 4.2 The Arts Centre as a vehicle for Families Learning Together activities

After the first period of work on impact assessment in August 2015, the community proceeded with planned activities over a six-month period before we returned to the subject again. During this time, the Arts Centre itself was improved with assistance from Alawa Aboriginal Corporation, which provided material support. Alawa also agreed to include the work of adults at the Centre as eligible for inclusion as an approved activity under the Remote Jobs and Community Program, which is essentially a government work-for-welfare program. Separate from the Families Learning Together project, ELP continued to work with Minyerri on the Gulbarn Tea enterprise, by January 2016 receiving regular orders from throughout Australia, together with other community-based enterprises.

As a result, Minyerri Art Centre was fast becoming essential to the activities themselves since it provided the basic infrastructure in which they could take place. Activities included painting (especially of Alawa country animals), drawing, lino-printing, tie-dying, screen-printing, Gulbarn packaging, sewing cushions and photography. Lack of access to a vehicle prevented bush trips to places of cultural significance, a future aim as part of the cultural activities envisaged by people working there.

To return to Minyerri and visit the Art Centre in February 2016 was to find a busy place with a bold sign on the outside, tables and chairs, lots of materials and a buzz of adults and children using it, especially for the purpose of the activities defined under Families Learning Together. A committee of seven people had been appointed to oversee the work and the Centre had an air of greater importance and formality since the day we sat outside in the dirt wondering how to get inside.



Gulbarn Tea and merchandise

#### 4.3 A baseline study for the project

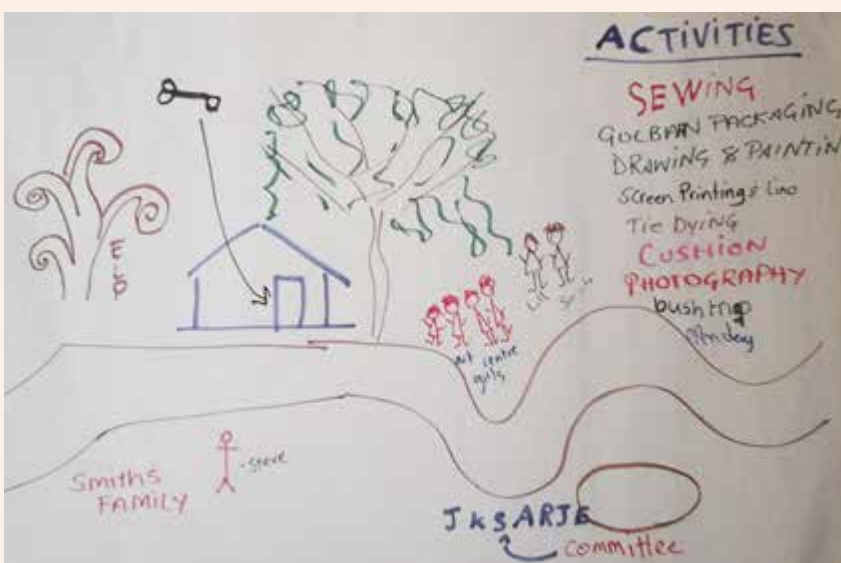
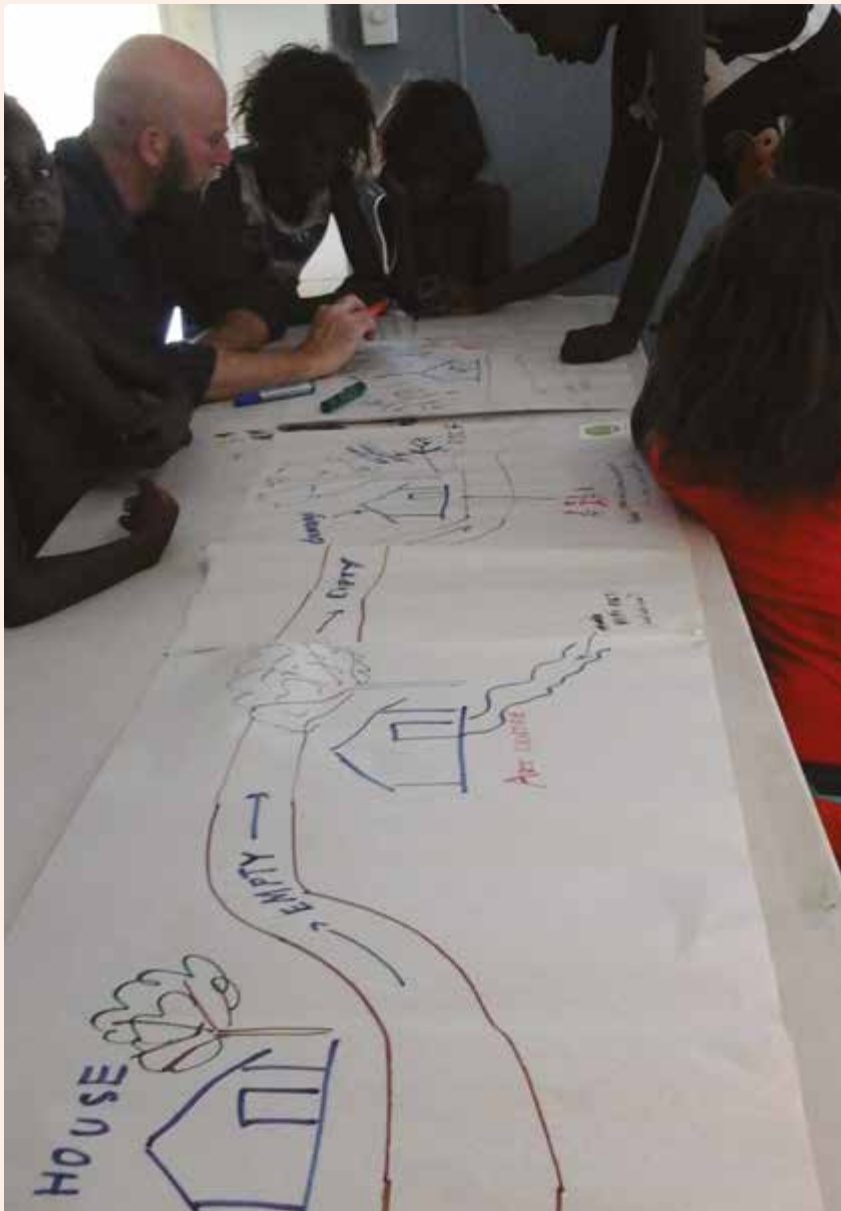
To prepare the first surveys against the impact framework, we talked through the activities with the team involved in the Families Learning Together project. The process involved a set of steps, which we presented on the whiteboard as a guide. It was important for everyone to know what all the steps are supposed to be and how far we have progressed each day.

##### Step 1: A timeline for the activities

For a group of people who don't know each other well, the prospect of sitting down to discuss a specialised subject like an impact framework is a difficult one. Community people are often shy and reserved. Some of the terms used are new and they can often feel uncomfortable if they are not able to understand straight away what is being planned. For that reason, we organised the first discussion around a practical activity.

Since impact assessment is about change over time, we started by suggesting that a timeline be drawn to show what had happened since the project began and, before that, to the Arts Centre building. A group activity to remember the key events and draw them on a set of flipchart sheets taped together is a good way to break the ice and soon we had put together a drawing with figures representing the people involved, logos of organisations, names of individuals and the various changes that had happened over time. In remembering recent history, lots of discussion is needed to make sure the details and the sequence of events is accurate. Everyone joined in and it helped that a lot of pens and paper were available, which we spread out on the tables in the Art Centre.

The last part of the timeline showed the current situation, which included a list of activities taking place under Families Learning Together. Everyone could see the progress that had been made. The question we posed was: What will the next sheet say? In other words, looking ahead, what do we want to achieve and how will we know we have done so?



Preparing the timeline

## Step 2: Checking the impact framework

The answer to the question 'What do we want to achieve in the future?' is given by the impact framework, so we stuck it on the wall and read out the indicators. Everyone said they liked them. ELP had discussed the framework more than once in recent weeks and it was now translated into Kriol, so nobody was unfamiliar with the work they had done to prepare it back in August.

If these indicators are accurate, then the next task was to confirm the method for collecting information about each one.

## Step 3: Defining survey topics

As we were doing this work for the first time, we decided not to concern ourselves with the numerical or percentage measures yet but to prepare surveys for each of the indicators that would enable the group to gauge the current situation in the form of a baseline study. Each indicator was called a topic as it would be something that would be discussed, like a topic of conversation, rather than being a strict questionnaire.

We prepared a set of sample questions under each topic. Two topics were designed to be interviews with children, one with parents, one with older people and one with families. We prepared a version of the table below on the whiteboard mounted on the wall of the Art Centre.

	TOPIC 1	TOPIC 2	TOPIC 3	TOPIC 4	TOPIC 5
INDICATOR (WITHOUT NUMERICAL MEASURE)	Children will say they have a better connection to the history and culture of Minyerri.	Children will say they have better confidence and self-esteem	Parents will know that children can come to the Centre to do good activities, instead of gambling or fighting, etc.	Skilled people will be visiting and working at the Centre	Families will say they feel better connected to their community
GROUP TO BE SURVEYED	Children	Children	Parents	Skilled people	Families
QUESTIONS	Example: What have you learned about Minyerri?	Example: How do the activities help you?	Example: What do you think about the activities?	Example: Do you have knowledge and skills you could bring?	Example: What is important to you about the activities?

Conducting a face-to-face interview is the hardest part of social research for people new to the subject. If semi-structured interviews based around topics are to be used with open-ended questions to encourage interviewees to talk about their experience of the activities, then this takes practice.

Steve and Lillian demonstrated the following aspects of interviewing:

- How to start the interview
- How to ask the questions in a conversational way
- The use of open-ended questions that encourage people to say what they think instead of providing only a yes or no response
- How to avoid leading questions that propose an answer to the interviewee (for example: 'What would improve the activities? Is it more of X?'). This is a skill that requires the interviewer to tolerate silences while the other person is thinking and to reframe questions if the person they are interviewing is not sure of their response
- Ways to pursue a subject that the interviewee raises, in order to gain more information (example: 'Can you tell me more about that. Why did you think that way?')

We wanted to encourage the team to practice by using role plays, but this was only partly successful as they were reserved and preferred not to 'perform' in front of everyone. Instead, we began the survey process itself by allocating a different topic to each person in the team. They would practice by actually doing the surveys.

#### Step 4: Conducting the surveys

Five people conducted the surveys; Samara Billy, Phelecia Daylight, Agnes Wilfred, Esther Wilfred and Jonathon Walla. We talked about a suitable title for their roles and agreed on Aboriginal Community Researchers, which is the way that Ninti One describes their research teams. Each researcher used a notebook in which they wrote the topic questions and the responses. All but one of the interviews were conducted in Kriol, with notes being made in English.

After each interview, the researchers returned to the Art Centre, where we transcribed the findings on to another large spread of flipchart paper on one of the long tables. Our target was to complete 20 surveys because we considered this to be a manageable task and would provide a reasonable sample size. A total of 17 surveys were completed on 3rd February, with the remaining three conducted on the following morning.



Interviews being conducted

#### Step 5: Working out what the information is telling us

This stage of the process is where the analysis or interpretation of the information takes place, which we called the step where we discuss what the surveys are telling us. The group used four headings to organise the insights they gained from looking at the information written on the flipchart sheets:

##### Key messages

The main points that stand out.

##### Trends

Responses that appear from more than 2-3 people. Ideas – What people are saying that is new or different.

##### Exceptions

What is missing and that people have not mentioned in their responses.

The group wrote a page for each of the headings above, which represented their collective view for each category. We noticed that the key messages were the most difficult part because many comments were made in the interviews and it was hard to aggregate those into single statements. The other components of the analysis were easier and led to full lists of trends, ideas and exceptions. Here is where additional insights were very useful to the team. For example, some of the ideas that were suggested by people interviewed showed that many people are interested in the Art Centre and the activities that go on there. To have skilled people suggest new activities was itself a step forwards in meeting the relevant aim of the project.

Similarly, to take note the aspects of the activities that interviewees did not mention was revealing. The responses showed what the community is valuing or noticing most and gives some guidance for how the activities could be designed and promoted in the future to maximise their positive impact in the community.

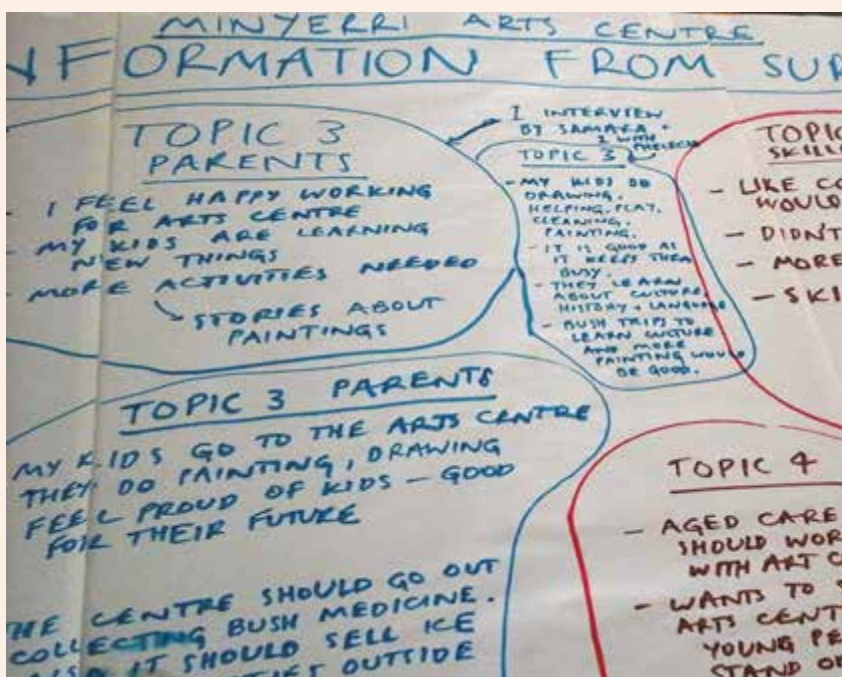


### Step 6: A measure of impact for Families Learning Together

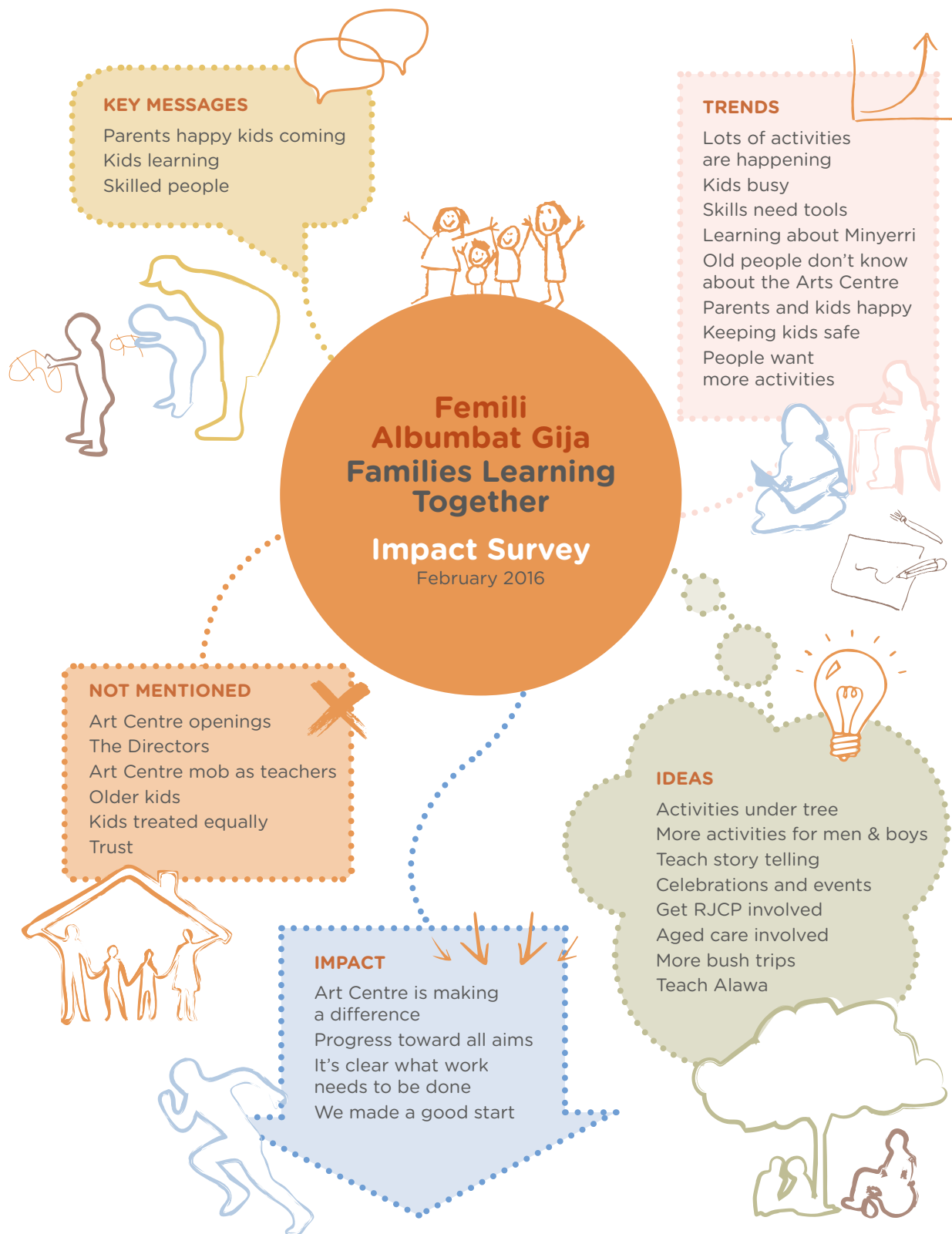
The final stage of the impact assessment process was to produce a single diagram that summarised the surveys. Producing a report would have been an option, but it is much easier to share a diagram with a wide range of people. So we drew a mind map that showed each of the four categories of analysis. Then we discussed what the main points were in terms of the measurement of impact. The statements that reflect the view of the group on the impact of the activities are:

- The Art Centre is making a difference
- Progress has been made towards all five aims of the activities in the impact framework
- It is clear what work needs to be done
- We have made a good start.

The diagram is presented adjacent. It includes statistics collected since August 2015 on participation in the activities. We have plans for a colourful and community-friendly version to display on the wall of the Art Centre. In the next section we reflect on the process and the lessons emerging from it, as well as ways to improve the process the next time impact is assessed, which is likely to be in twelve months' time.



(From left to right) Agnes Wilford and Jonathon Walla preparing the analysis and findings



**Participation for the period August 2015 to January 2016**

Number of children involved in the Families Learning Together activities:	36	Number of boys and men:	15
Number of adults involved:	26	Total number of people involved in the activities:	62
Number of girls and women involved:	47	Population of Minyerri:	441

## 5.0. Reflections

The Families Learning Together project at Minyerri was the first time ELP or the community had tested a way to measure the impact of a community initiative. We learned a lot, which is summarised as follows:

### Participatory work requires activity

The process was largely successful in engaging everyone to achieve a tangible result. The reasons were that the group of people who joined as researchers were interested and committed to the work and their expectations of being actively involved were satisfied. Work for everyone was defined according to a process set out at the beginning. This gave everyone the chance to take responsibility and to be busy and active in the process.

### Ways to judge the right level of ambition for the process

We made compromises in what we expected to be achieved through the process. As a first attempt, the work had to be manageable, not too time-consuming and lead to results of which everyone could see the value. We reached that ambition but did not insist on a larger sample, that percentage measures were made against each indicator or that the people interviewed were a representative cross-section of the population of Minyerri. These are ambitions for next time.

### The pros and cons of an impact diagram

Visual representations of complex subjects are very important in communicating across a population that speaks three languages to varying levels of proficiency and in which few people read much in their day-to-day lives. The challenge is in making the visual device, in our case a mind map, include enough precise and accurate information. In other words, it needs to be both effective as a tool and simple without being simplistic. We achieved that aim, but it is important to maintain proper standards of precision in presenting the material since this is the most important product of the work.

### Achieving wider participation

Women and young children have been the majority of participants in the Families Learning Together activities. This was also the case for the impact assessment work. A challenge for future exercises of this kind, and one of which the group is acutely aware, is to encourage greater involvement of men and other families not currently participating.

### Achieving strong results

Although the results of the process are valuable in ways we did not imagine at the outset, for example in engaging with more people and generating ideas, they have limitations. As a baseline, it provides a snapshot of progress and participation, but is not a comprehensive and rigorous measurement in the way that might be expected of a major social program. This point relates to my earlier one about numerical measures. The next cycle of impact assessment will aim to advance in its sophistication, including a larger sample and the use of proportional measures of the responses of the community to the Families Working Together project.

## 6.0. Conclusion

This paper has described a process of participatory impact assessment that represents an important milestone for everyone involved. Starting with limited knowledge of what we might achieve in measuring change at Minyerri but a strong commitment to the activities supported under the Families Learning Together project, we embarked on a two-stage process that established an impact framework and then gauged progress against it.

The tangible products of the work are the framework itself and the indicators that the group is striving to achieve, a historical timeline for the Art Centre at Minyerri, the analysis of surveys and an overall baseline measure of the impact that is being achieved at this early stage in the term of the project.

Along the way, we have learned a lot about the use of visual methods, how to work as a team in a research process and how to generate new information that is beneficial to the project and the community. The community researcher team learned new skills and built on the excitement and interest that they had generated in their work since the project began.

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Samara, Agnes and Phelecia and children after the completion of the impact diagram



