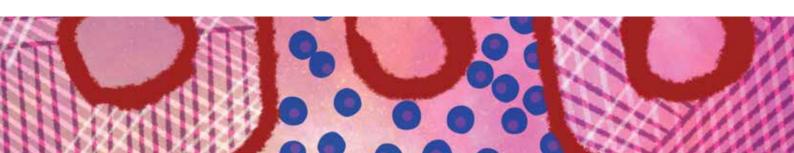# On **perspective, trust** and **allyship.**

Conversations with Indigenous Social Entrepreneurs from the Social Enterprise Summit for Northern Australia, 2021.

Acknowledgement of country

Impact North acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the unceded lands on which we work and come together. We recognise their enduring connection to land, sea, culture and community, and we pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging. The Larrakia people are the original custodians of Gulumirrgin, where the Impact North co-working space is based. We are grateful for their continued generosity in sharing their Country.

We recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been founding and running purpose and people-focused businesses—what we now term 'social enterprise'— for thousands of years.

Context and framing

We'd like to extend a warm thanks to the Yunus Centre for developing this report.

GriffithUNIVERSITY
Queensland, Australia
Yunus Centre

The insights in this report have emerged from a series of conversations held in November, 2021. The catalyst was the convening of the online Social Enterprise Summit of Northern Australia (SESNA) themed *The Beating Heart of Social Enterprise.* The objective for the summit was to bring people together, share stories and knowledge, and provide an opportunity for the broader social enterprise sector to hear from First Nations social entrepreneurs and leaders.

The Yunus Centre team was invited to compile an 'insights' report as an output from the Summit and was pleased to undertake the project on a pro bono basis. All four team members attended the event as listeners, through which emergent themes were identified. Directly following the Summit, interviews with presenters were conducted, where the initial themes were explored in greater detail and depth. Summit participants were also invited to provide input through responding to questions included in the post-event survey.

This report reflects on and explores what we heard and understood during this process. It is not in any sense a complete account of First Nations perspectives on business and social enterprise, nor is it intended to directly represent the views or perspectives of those involved. Rather, it is a small contribution to an ongoing dialogue. In particular, as

the Australian social enterprise sector prepares for hosting the Social Enterprise World Forum in Meanjin / Brisbane in 2022, we feel that now is an important and pivotal moment for the sector to take time to listen to the voices and perspectives of the First Nations people who have nurtured people, culture and country for millennia.

In order to respect the privacy and requests of the interviewees, this report includes just a few selected and de-identified quotes from those who participated. We thank the interviewees for sharing their perspectives freely to support this research. The full list of contributors, along with links to their enterprises, is included as an Appendix.

In addition to the event-specific inputs outlined above, the report draws on ideas and concepts from a few key resources: Tyson Yunkaporta's book Sand Talk, (2019) and his podcast series the *Other Others*; Charles Eisenstein's book *Sacred Economics: Money, Gift and Society in the Age of Transition* (2011); and Fritof Capra & Pier Luigi Luisi's *The Systems View of Life* (2016).

Through the following discussion we aim to create an opening within an ongoing discussion, an opening through which possible actions around the four key themes could be explored.

1 Shifting the lens: centering Indigenous sense-making and knowledge

Despite the best of intentions, non-indigenous collaborators can often fall into the pattern of viewing Indigenous knowledge systems as cultural artefacts, historical curiosities, or inanimate objects of study. This mindset, which can be traced directly back to the kinds of thinking which justified and validated colonial occupation, leaves little room for mutual learning and collaboration - and often leads to non-Indigenous people doing a lot of 'taking' under the guise of 'collaborating'. As Tyson Yunkaporta writes: "...Indigenous Knowledge is not wanted at the level of how, only at the level of what, a resource to be plundered rather than a source of knowledge processes" (2019, p.49).

In our work with SESNA, our team heard of living, vibrant, and ongoing relationships between people, culture and country that can't be summed up and put in the box of 'cultural practices', but which represent ever-evolving, complex and place-based systems of knowledge creation and sense-making. We heard that, in many cases, the impacts of colonisation are experienced through displacement, loss of language and connection to Country, intergenerational trauma, and disrupted systems of Law, Lore and Knowledge.

At the same time, we heard of the ongoing work of healing, often performed with limited visibility and recognition, and the capacity to adapt, defend sovereignty, re-learn, and recreate what was interrupted by colonisation. We also heard of the frustrations and challenges experienced by First Nations entrepreneurs and leaders when they encounter colonial attitudes, processes and systems which continue to dominate the processes of interaction between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

We offer this overarching insight as a call-out to the wider social enterprise sector in Australia to start shifting the lens through which we view the world, so as to centre Indigenous sense-making and knowledge into our practices, beyond just when building cross-cultural partnerships and collaborations.

It is not for us to attempt a description of what 'Indigenous Knowledge' systems might involve, since they're going to be different everywhere we look and many of these are sacred to the Owners. However, for non-Indigenous Australians, a first step is to recognise that the mindsets and world views which led to and justified colonisation are still present in today's Australia, and that they influence everyday actions and practices in ways that are not always obvious.

Furthermore, an often imperceptible way this mindset works is by presenting itself as rational, natural or inevitable - and in so doing, marginalises how different knowledge systems produce different but valid truths. It is time other world views become part of the discourse - not as cultural curiosities or interesting stories, but as valid and legitimate sources of truth.

This opening-up of perspectives is especially critical for the social enterprise sector, which – broadly speaking – is largely focused on creating and sustaining economic activity that makes positive contributions to people, place and planet. As we will explore in the rest of this report, genuine and committed partnerships and collaborations with First Nations Australians, founded on mutual understanding, respect and trust, can and should be central to these efforts.

"If you want to have some rigorous and some wonderfully beneficial conversations, you've got to do it the proper way."

"Reciprocity, reciprocity, reciprocity. That's what we're all about. And I think the social enterprise environment could learn a lot from the way we've always done business... there needs to be that really strong balance of typical business models and impact . . .[and] thinking about generations - not only in the future, but in the past as well."

"Our voices need to be heard. Our voices need to be in that discussion. Not someone else speaking on our behalf."

"Social enterprise - it isn't a new thing. It's just a new phrase that has been coined to create this label to make people comfortable about this type of work that they do... I'm yet to meet an Indigenous entrepreneur that isn't a social entrepreneur by default. So for me, that really says everything. At the core, everybody is trying to impact their community. And that impact looks different to everyone."

2 Seeing clearly: building understanding and visibility of First Nations' approaches to business and social enterprise

The second key theme identified was the need for non-Indigenous Australians to better understand the nature of First Nations businesses and social enterprises. We heard that the concept of conducting business for reasons other than nurturing people and Country was relatively foreign, with many participants expressing that First Nations people have been practicing sustainable and ethical forms of consumption, trade and organising for thousands of years. We also heard that First Nations-led social enterprises and businesses tend to be deeply connected to place, operating primarily for the benefit and empowerment of local communities.

We heard that this 'grassroots empowerment' model of social enterprise has enormous potential to support First Nations Australians in creating their own destinies and building community self-determination and self-reliance. As such, the work of social enterprise takes on additional meanings and dimensions for First Nations people; it is not simply a type of business model chosen to create positive impact, but a way of continuing to practice care for people, culture and Country while remaining engaged and empowered within the broader Australian economy.

Another prominent theme that emerged was the complexities and challenges inherent to 'walking in two worlds'. In particular, we heard that Indigenous businesses and social enterprises face significant frustrations around needing to meet strict legal requirements, engage in bureaucratic processes, and 'prove themselves' as legitimate participants.

At the same time as being asked to meet these requirements, First Nations leaders are typically situated within a complex network of family, cultural, and social obligations which require time, energy and attention to sustain. Other external pressures were highlighted too, in particular: the tendency of non-Indigenous people to seek the input, advice, and insights of the same leaders over and over again; the expectation that advice and insight will be provided without compensation; and the many unique challenges faced by regional and remote enterprises (including, for example, scarcity of basic office supplies, unreliable phone and internet connections, and infrequent mail services).

We highlight these challenges in order to help non-Indigenous and city-based social enterprise practitioners understand that the sector's norms and expectations regarding priorities, working hours and growth ambitions remain heavily informed by a relatively narrow cross-section of the sector. Also, to highlight the importance of understanding and respecting the particular constraints, obligations and barriers faced by First Nations social enterprises across Australia.

In order to build understanding and visibility of First Nations' approaches to business and social enterprise, a potential starting point could be the recognition that what is typically defined as 'social enterprise' is a recent development. Furthermore, social enterprises in Australia have developed for several decades with limited - if any - commitment to the laws, cultures and constraints of the lands where they operate. Rather than viewing the additional responsibilities and commitments faced by Indigenous entrepreneurs as a necessary 'chore', non-indigenous social entrepreneurs could contribute to shaping more nuanced framings through asking what it might look like to engage - respectfully, appropriately and where invited - in the networks of commitment and reciprocity that define the people, culture and Country where they live and work.

"We always feel like we're living in two worlds, because we have the Indigenous protocols, respect, laws, and our own spiritual beliefs of our country... and then when you go into a Western business model, and you look at all the things you have to do... it's like a really big maze that you've got to go through."

3 Building trust: creating the conditions for co-leadership and intercultural collaboration

Considering Australia's colonial and settler history, there is a real need for dedicated effort and commitment to trust-building as a precondition for building genuine collaboration and appropriate co-leadership opportunities. The importance of trust was highlighted throughout the listening process, with participants noting that trust and relationships need time, energy and commitment to succeed, particularly when embarking on intercultural collaborations and partnerships.

The need for projects and initiatives to move 'at the speed of trust' might be an adjustment for some social entrepreneurs, who are often encouraged to adopt the 'lean startup, fail fast' approaches commonly found in mainstream business and innovation contexts.

The sovereign rights of First Nations people to determine their own destinies have been hard-won in some areas. Leaders are rightly skeptical of imposed 'solutions', however well-intentioned. In order to create the conditions for collaboration, non-Indigenous social entrepreneurs need to be willing to put First Nations communities firmly in charge of initiatives and enterprises that impact them - to do otherwise echoes the historical injustices of colonialism.

Of equal importance to knowing how and when to participate, is knowing how and when to step back. We heard about the importance of First Nations people having the space and opportunity to develop their own pathways and understandings, and to heal and work in spaces without non-Indigenous collaborators. We heard stories of boundaries not being respected, of people feeling that they needed to give beyond their capacity, or to share knowledge without limits. We heard about the extractive mentality of colonialism, and the ways that non-Indigenous people have created profit and value from First Nations intellectual property without appropriate reciprocity or recompense.

We also heard about the delicate tensions involved in choosing how and when to share stories, knowledge and other cultural Intellectual Property, and the need for First Nations entrepreneurs to have space and time to make these decisions at their own pace, and with their own communities. At the same time, we heard real hope for the potential of intercultural partnerships and collaborations done the 'proper way', with respect for the time, processes and boundaries that protect scared knowledge and keep it from being misappropriated.

Another important thread that emerged was frustration with 'consultations' that attempt to present the opinions of one person, or one community, as representing those of a much broader group, or of Indigenous people in general. We also heard that being Indigenous is not the sum total of a person's identity, and that consulting and collaborating with First Nations people only when an 'Indigenous perspective' is needed, does a grave injustice to diverse skills, identities, interests, and passions.

Intercultural collaboration is challenging work, particularly when negotiating the ongoing operations and impacts of colonialism. We heard that relationships of trust, mutual respect, and genuine reciprocity are an essential precondition - and that there are no simple and straightforward answers, but that through the ongoing work of listening, learning, and learning to listen, new foundations can be established.

"My answer to everything is you've really got to come and spend some time with us, you've really got to become good friends, allies, whatever the word you want to use."

4 Walking together: building a culture of allyship and mutual support

A clear message we heard is that the term 'social enterprise' only gestures towards the depths and nuances of First Nations-led community economic development. First Nations social entrepreneurs and business owners are running sustainable social enterprises, fighting for land rights, sovereignty and self-determination, working in collaborations to protect and value cultural Intellectual Property, caring for Country and culture, re-discovering and re-dreaming cultural knowledge, advocating for access to basic services, paying school fees for nieces and nephews, mentoring young leaders, educating non-Indigenous Australians about all of the above, and much else besides. Considering all this, here we suggest some possible ways for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians to work in solidarity and collaboration on a shared objective of creating forms of economic activity that make positive contributions to people, place and planet

We heard there is a lot of interest in the emergence of non-hierarchical and place-based approaches to social enterprise development. There was a clear sense that it is time to move past top-down, monopolistic approaches to community economic development (including those enacted by and with the non-profit and social enterprise sectors). True partnerships hear and amplify the voices of communities, and act in ways that strengthen capacities.

Whilst social enterprise and community-owned business models offer particular strategies to achieve this, they may not necessarily be the best or only strategies. For non-Indigenous social entrepreneurs to engage in a relationship of allyship with First Nations communities, it is important to recognise that there are a diverse range of strategies, organisational forms, and political priorities that will shape choices.
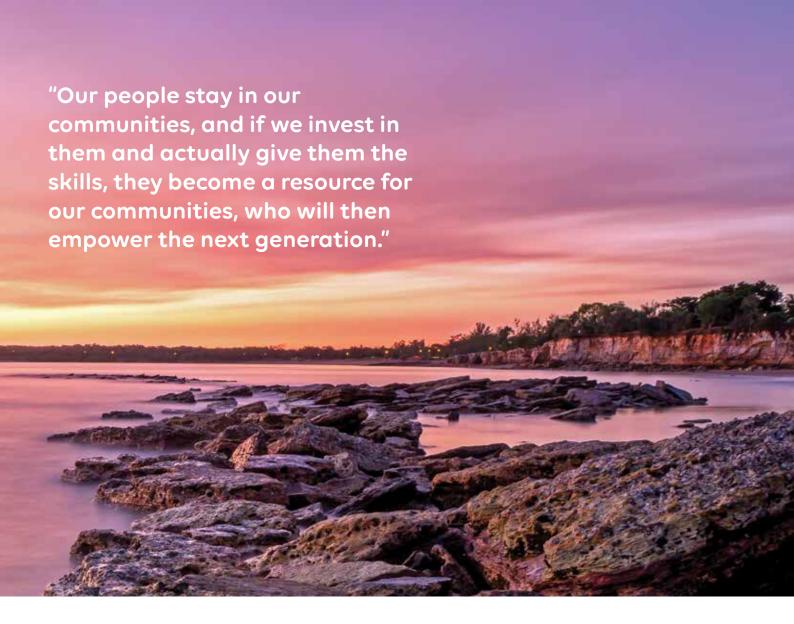
That said, we also heard there is a clear and pressing need for appropriate business development support and infrastructure, including: grant programs and funding streams that place a value on supporting cultural practices; financing structures that reduce bureaucracy and support local enterprise development; and reformation of Intellectual Property regimens to ensure communities remain in control of their natural, intellectual, cultural and spiritual resources.

The social enterprise sector positions itself as a better model for economic activity and is vocal about the need to 'level the playing field' around the supports available so it can effectively compete and thrive within the current economic system. If social enterprise is going to be part of a genuinely healing, restorative and decolonised future for Australia, the sector needs to also consider and act on the differentiated needs and values of First Nations businesses and social enterprises (some of which are described in this report).

As a growing sector with increasing visibility, the social enterprise movement as a whole has the opportunity to publicly champion equity agendas for First Nations peoples, including but not limited to those which directly relate to economic empowerment. We heard that those who come with humility and respect, who are ready to do the work, and who are willing to listen and hear, will be welcomed and taken care of.

"We're always there wanting to share, wanting to grow together... best to look for people who've got similar ideas to you, common-minded people, and work with them..."

> "Our people stay in our communities, and if we invest in them and actually give them the skills, they become a resource for our communities, who will then empower the next generation."

The outer edge

If we imagine this report as a spiral, which has begun at the center with a call to look inwards at the mindsets which need to be shifted, and ended with some suggestions about how the social enterprise sector could walk in solidarity and partnership with First Nations social entrepreneurs and businesses, then we find ourselves here at the outer edge of the spiral, at the point where the line meets with empty space, and where the next steps begin.

Reports like the one you are reading typically begin with an introduction, and end with a conclusion - they are a closed system, perhaps finishing with a call to action or some suggestions for further research. We hope that where these written words end is where many new conversations can begin, and that we can continue to be a part of those conversations, and the actions that those conversations will generate.

One of these conversations will take the form of a longer discussion paper on the topic of 'decolonising social enterprise', which will be co-created in the leadup to the Social Enterprise World Forum in 2022, and we are looking forward to having further challenging, provocative, and inspiring conversations as that paper is developed.

We would like to gratefully acknowledge the time and energy of everybody involved in delivering SESNA 2021, and the willingness of participants and organisers to spend time with us and share their knowledge, wisdom, stories, and visions for the future, and we would like to extend that acknowledgement to the families, communities, kinship networks and elders past, present and emerging, without whom none of this would be possible.

Appendix

The conference organisers and compilers of this report would like to thank those who contributed their time and perspectives to the event and to this output document. Those who gave permission to be listed are included below.

Name	Organisation	Website
Bianca Stawiarski	Managing Director & Counsellor Warida Wholistic Wellness	https://www.warida.com.au/
Terri Waller	Managing Director Sevgen	https://www.sevgen.com.au/
Jye Cardona	Founder and Managing Director Brother 2 Another	https://www.linkedin.com/in/flo-ra-j-warrior-0b82a830?originalSub-domain=au
Ms Flora J. Warrior	Founder and Coordinator of Mabuiag Island NILS Program, and Owner Director of Saltwater Blue Consultancy Services	https://www.linkedin.com/in/flo-ra-j-warrior-0b82a830?originalSub-domain=au
Lateesha Jeffrey	Director and Consultant Wave of Change Consultancy	https://www.linkedin.com/in/latee-sha-jeffrey-275a12174/
Elena Wangurra	Founding Director Queenmode	https://www.queenmodecollective.com/
Liandra Gaykamangu	Founder and Creative Director Liandra Swim, co-CEO Enterprise Learning Projects	https://liandraswim.com/ https://www.elp.org.au/
Daryl Lacey	Indigenous Mentor, Gulkula Mining Company	https://www.gulkula.com/
Tracy Menon	Environmental Advisor, Gulkula Mining Company	https://www.gulkula.com/
Nicole Brown	Indigenous Engagement Specialist	https://www.linkedin.com/in/ni-cole-brown-maicd-64b91b11b/?-originalSubdomain=au
Pat Torres	Founder Mamanyjun Tree Enterprises Pty Ltd trading as Mayi Harvests	https://www.mayiharvests.com.au/
Natasha Short	Managing Director, Kimberley Jiyigas	https://kimberleybirds.com.au/

Who attended?

130 tickets sold

>80 online attendees throughout the day

Attendance by regions:

75 Northern Australia (WA, NT, QLD)

53 Rest of Australia (All other states)

2 International (Canada and Ireland)

Responses from the audience

78% said 'experience was excellent'

74% said 'we blew away expectations'

96% will tell their friends to come next year

Why did people attend?

Most people attended the event to **listen and learn.**

74% to listen + learn

21% to connect + be inspired

What should we do more of next time?

- Thematic conversations
- More panels around strong topics (i.e. when women lead)
- Showcasing more Indigenous businesses
- Interactive discussions on specific issues relating to Indigenous-led social enterprise

What stuck with people?

- Adding 'led' to community-led development
- Boundaries, protecting your energy
- Be authentic, share opportunities and encourage others
- Celebrate the small victories
- Time has different meanings in our two worlds
- Indigenous business exists to create community wealth

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