

## CHAPTER 3

### Community Working Parties as Agents of Change

The first Community Working Party under the regional agreement was formed in the Namatjira community located in Dareton in south western NSW, near Mildura, on the Murray River in 1993. The Aboriginal people in the Namatjira Community are mostly Barkindji people. The situation at Dareton was a microcosm of conditions within the region.

A newsletter issued at the time said that 'life in the Namatjira community was characterised by unreliable and poor quality water supplies, broken sewerage systems, and overcrowded housing in need of repair. The place was dusty; the roads unsafe; and there were no recreational facilities.'<sup>1</sup>

Progressively Community Working Parties were established in most towns and communities in the Council region under the guidance of a Regional Housing and Infrastructure Implementation Manual.<sup>2</sup> A project officer supported each Community Working Party.

Community Working Parties became effective agents of change as they assumed responsibility for coordinating and managing housing and infrastructure work in their communities.

In promoting Community Working Parties, the Murdi Paaki Regional Council strongly contended that:

... program development and delivery must react to community identified needs. Giving the community primacy in the planning and delivery processes is the only means to achieving sustainable outcomes.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time there needed to be greater flexibility in program management, pooling of funds, and cooperation among government departments.

The Murdi Paaki Regional Council argued that the evolution and development of the CWPs, in conjunction with single stream funding delivery for multi functional projects, would enable communities to develop and implement programs that addressed their self identified needs.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Newsletter extract, South Western NSW: Murdi Paaki Regional and Local Organisation, <<http://www.icat.org.au/documents>> (Centre for Appropriate Technology), Our Place Articles, relevant to community facilities, pp 17-9.

<sup>2</sup>Murdi Paaki Regional Council, submission to the *We can do it: The needs of urban dwelling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people*, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, 2001, Canberra, p.4.

<sup>3</sup> Murdi Paaki Regional Council, submission to the *We can do it: The needs of urban dwelling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people*, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, 2001, Canberra, Murdi Paaki Regional Council, submission, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Murdi Paaki Regional Council, submission to the *We can do it: The needs of urban dwelling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people*, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, 2001, Canberra, p.4.

In a submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, the Council identified a set of principles informing its approach to Community Working Parties.<sup>5</sup> These included:

- Council's approach is to fund communities and not organisations. Organisations are often service providers and may only represent a small section of the communities;
- A CWP typically includes representatives of all local community controlled Aboriginal organisations; non-affiliated members of the community representing young people, elders, women and others; local government; ATSIC; the New South Wales Department of Aboriginal Affairs; New South Wales Health; and other state and Commonwealth agencies as relevant;
- Agency representatives do not have voting rights;
- Representation on each CWP is designed to avoid undue influence by particular sectional interests; and
- Each CWP identifies the needs of its community, how to meet the needs, whom is to benefit, the priorities for funding, the order of work, the suitability of solutions and how results can be measured.

Representing a large spectrum of voices, membership of the working parties was a dynamic mix of youth and elders, government and service providers. The voting and decision making was reserved strictly for community representatives. This, according to Smiley Johnstone, was 'a major change for the better because it helps the young people learn to take over and forces the government and the CDEP to present their proposals to just one group.'<sup>6</sup>

Under the impetus of the regional agreement, over the next four years the Namatjira Working Party came to successfully complete many housing and infrastructure projects. Most of these projects had a strong training component.

The annual report of the Murdi Paaki Regional Council for 1994-95 recorded as one of the achievements for the year within its goal to improve health, housing and infrastructure funding of \$3.4 million for works and services in Namatjira Avenue, Dareton, under the Housing and Infrastructure Priority Projects program (HIPP).<sup>7</sup> The project provided for 20 dwellings, upgrading of drainage, improved water supply and sewerage, erection of street lighting, power supply and landscaping.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Murdi Paaki Regional Council, submission to the *We can do it: The needs of urban dwelling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people*, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, 2001, Canberra.

<sup>6</sup> Newsletter extract, South Western NSW: Murdi Paaki Regional and Local Organisation, <<http://www.icat.org.au/documents>> (Centre for Appropriate Technology), Our Place Articles, relevant to community facilities, pp 17-9.

<sup>7</sup> Murdi Paaki Regional Council, *Annual Report*, 1994-5, p.13.

<sup>8</sup> Murdi Paaki Regional Council, *Annual Report*, 1994-5, p.16.

With the help of The Mildura and District Education Council, the Namatjira Working Party and their apprentices achieved:

- Construction of a Works Depot to store materials and tools;
- Building 20 occupant designed houses;
- Cleanup of all community land (75 hectares); and
- Dust control through the replanting of 35 hectares with more than 15,000 trees and other plants grown onsite.

Key success ingredients of the Namatjira program were identified as:

- *The Regional Agreement* set a new benchmark for giving Aboriginal people a greater say in how, when and where funds were spent in a staged and sustainable way;
- *Community Working Groups* were a dynamic mix of voices and maintained enthusiasm for community projects;
- *Training* resulted in career paths for trainees, mentoring systems, and the development of small businesses being prioritised;
- *The living environment focus* with its emphasis on building tangible improvements to housing, water supply, roads, and dust control helped to build community confidence; and
- *Onsite project management* meant that all projects were completed by a single project manager, allowing for the staging of projects and lessening the possibility of duplicated effort.

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs later cited the regional infrastructure agreement as a model providing a framework under which Indigenous communities have a central role in setting regional service priorities.<sup>9</sup> The Namatjira Working Party at Dareton, among other things, had demonstrated it was possible to successfully engage disaffected young people through sport.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *We can do it: The needs of urban dwelling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people*, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, 2001, Canberra.

<sup>10</sup> *We can do it: The needs of urban dwelling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people*, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, 2001, Canberra, p.150.