

LCSA

ABORIGINAL PROJECT REPORT

**BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN BLACK
AND WHITE ORGANISATIONS**

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1. Introduction

In March 1991 I visited Narrabri and Wee Waa to undertake field work for the LCSA Aboriginal Project. The aim of this project is to examine:

- * ways stronger links can be developed between neighbourhood centres and Aboriginal community groups.

Before proceeding with the report and recommendations several points need to be made. The following viewpoints and recommendations are mine. I have not attempted to represent the views of Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal groups Central to my analysis of Aboriginal community development issues is:

- * that Aboriginal unemployment and underemployment are the key issues;
- * some advances have been made in Aboriginal health, housing and welfare services but while Aboriginal unemployment remains so high there will be few advances in the future;
- * unemployment and underemployment remain so high because Aboriginal people do not have an economic base and insufficient priority is given by government policy makers to Aboriginal employment and training programs.

The visit to Narrabri and Wee Waa strengthened my impressions that many Aboriginal and non Aboriginal community workers do not share the above analysis and place great priority on the provision of traditional welfare services. This explained why more interest was shown by community members in Narrabri (Aboriginal and non Aboriginal) in obtaining funding for an Aboriginal information and referral service to be based at Narrabri Community Aid than in supporting other Aboriginal community development initiatives.

A final premise of this report is that any community workers involved in Aboriginal community development should understand and support efforts to establish Aboriginal employment and training programs (community based, private sector and government). Significant efforts are represented by the Commonwealth government's Aboriginal Employment Development Policy (AEDP) and the NSW Aboriginal Land Rights Act.

2. Aboriginal community issues and needs

As in other towns across Australia Aboriginal people in Narrabri and Wee Waa are more likely to ;

- * be unemployed or underemployed;
- * be poorly housed;
- * be of poor health;
- * have less formal education

than other people.

Narrabri has a population of approximately 7,000 people. Locals estimate Aboriginal people to number about 300. Wee Waa has a population of

approximately 3,000. Locals estimate the Aboriginal population to be about 600.

In many country towns one will often hear the claim that "race relations are better here than most other places." In Narrabri and Wee Waa this claim was made to me on several occasions. Possibly this claim has much truth. Some Aboriginal and non Aboriginal people do mix socially. Members and workers of Community Aid displayed much good will towards Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people have positions of high professional standing. For example, the Manager of the local CES Office is Aboriginal.

Ironically this may be one reason why there are so few Aboriginal specific community services in Narrabri and Wee Waa. Riding on the wave of the "race, law and order" issue shire councils in other towns of NW NSW (Bourke, Moree, Brewarrina and Walgett) have successfully helped lobby the State and Commonwealth governments to fund a large number of Aboriginal specific programs. Compared to these other towns which have government funded Aboriginal programs worth millions of dollars, Narrabri and Wee Waa have very little.

In the case of Narrabri and Wee Waa Aboriginal people expressed a strong feeling of neglect and anger that funding bodies seemed to bypass them. In Wee Waa, for example, there are two Aboriginal community organisations - the Wee Waa Local Aboriginal Land Council and Narandool Corporation. For the last two years both organisations have been unsuccessful in obtaining funds of any sort. Members of these organisations expressed frustration that they did not know which government agencies and training providers they could turn to. They did have a meeting with DEET and ATSIC in February, 1990 but there has been no formal follow up since then. Consequently there is a remarkable lack of specific community service programs for an Aboriginal community of approximately 600 people. The Aboriginal Health Nurse and Aboriginal Health Worker positions in Wee Waa were recently cut. Further details about the needs and aspirations of the Aboriginal organisations in Wee Waa follow in the next section.

Aboriginal community members in Narrabri expressed a similar type of frustration that they were not tapping into funding programs for Aboriginal specific services. For 18 months up until mid 1990 a small group of Aboriginal people ran an information and referral service on a voluntary basis using office space and facilities provided by Community Aid. This project was known as Arrabri Pinnja and had committee status and therefore the possibility of participating in Community Aid's management decision making. When a key worker of Arabri Pinnja obtained paid employment elsewhere the project fizzled out. Aboriginal community members stated clearly that they were not willing to invest more time and energy unless it were to receive funding. Unlike Wee Waa, Aboriginal people who had been involved with Arabri Pinnja expressed less frustration that they did not know who from and how to obtain funding, but more frustration that Community Aid had not done it for them.

This is an important instance which indicates the need to inform and educate people about the way neighbourhood centres work and the philosophies that underpin them. To put it bluntly, neighbourhood centres help people to help

themselves. Committee members of Community Aid did not perceive their role to obtain funding for Aboriginal people but rather to help Aboriginal people obtain funding for themselves. Whereas Aboriginal people were disappointed in Community Aid not “delivering the goods”, committee members of Community Aid were disappointed in Aboriginal members not being more actively involved in organisational decision making. This issue will be discussed further in section 4.

In Narrabri there is one funded Aboriginal community based organisation which is the local Aboriginal Land Council. A significant issue for Aboriginal and non Aboriginal community workers alike was the need for other Aboriginal community based organisations to be established. For example, a strong need was expressed for an Aboriginal Home Care Service. Aboriginal and non Aboriginal community workers had left the management committee of the existing Narrabri Home Care Service frustrated at it’s disinterest in developing special services to meet the distinct needs of housebound Aboriginal people. The Armidale Aboriginal Home Care Service is currently exploring ways to assist establish an Aboriginal Home Care Service in Narrabri.

A significant issue for some Aboriginal people in Narrabri is the perceived lack of Aboriginal representation or participation on a number of local community management committees. A desire was expressed to have active Aboriginal involvement on the management committee of the Proclaimed Place and Youth Committee. This issue was highlighted during the time of my visit because both programs had or were about to conduct interviews for paid workers. Some members of the local Aboriginal land council did not know about the interviews and were disappointed they had not been asked to participate.

This issue of a perceived lack of Aboriginal representation on local management committees has a complex nature. It is complex because:

- * Aboriginal communities are not cohesive and homogeneous units, therefore, there are disputes about who has the right to represent the Aboriginal community;
- * Aboriginal identity has not only a racial but also a historical and political character, which can be highly contentious and the consequence is that one group will claim to have Aboriginal representation while another group will challenge their Aboriginality;
- * non Aboriginal people often claim that Aboriginal people have the same opportunities to join committees as they do but show little understanding of how their use of language and the predominantly Anglo Saxon character of institutions does discourage Aboriginal people.

The complex nature of this issue in Narrabri is illustrated by the fact that there are, in fact, Aboriginal persons on the management committee of both the Proclaimed Place and the Youth Committee and there were Aboriginal persons on the respective interview panels.

If Community Aid is to develop stronger links with Aboriginal community groups it will be important to develop an understanding of this issue. This will be discussed further in section 5.

3. Aboriginal Community Based Initiatives

The purpose of this section is to describe and briefly analyse existing community based resources and programs which are attempting to address the needs and issues which have been discussed above. There is a deliberate focus on Aboriginal initiatives. This will:

- * hopefully enable the reader to gain at least a cursory overview of Aboriginal community organisations and relevant funding programs;
- * and allow a brief discussion of training needs of members of Aboriginal community organisations to be undertaken.

3.1 Wee Waa

There are two Aboriginal community based organisations in Wee Waa. They work very closely together. The Local Aboriginal Land Council was established under the NSW Land Rights Act, 1983. The Narrandool Aboriginal Corporation was set up in 1989. It is incorporated under the Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act, 1976. This means that only Aboriginal people can be management committee members and that the organisation's objectives be to promote the interests of Aboriginal people. Currently, neither of these organisations have any funds.

The Namoi Family Support Program is another community based organisation in Wee Waa. It is a mainstream organisation with 5 paid staff, three of whom are Aboriginal. Core funding is from the NSW Department of Family and Community Services.

An important locally based government community service program is the Community Health Service. Staff include a social worker, mental health worker and until February, 1991 an Aboriginal health worker and Aboriginal nursing sister.

Following are the major objectives of the local Aboriginal land council.

1. To claim or purchase and then manage land for the benefit of the Aboriginal community.
2. To create enterprises for employment.
3. To purchase and manage houses in Wee Waa for Aboriginal people
5. To seek funding from the NSW Aboriginal Land Council and other funding bodies to carry out the stated objectives.
6. To promote and maintain Aboriginal culture.

7. To identify and protect Aboriginal cultural and historical sites in the Wee Waa area.
8. To strengthen the local Aboriginal community as a cohesive group.
9. To promote self-esteem, self worth and confidence within the Aboriginal community.
10. To break down barriers between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities in the Wee Waa area.
11. To make sure that no money or property of the Land Council is paid directly or indirectly to members of Land Council as profit. (Staff and officers of the Land Council can be paid wages or allowances for their work for Council).
12. To do all things permitted by the NSW Aboriginal Land Right Act, 1983 and to work with and encourage all Aboriginal organisations and people generally to obtain Land Rights for Aboriginal people.

The stated aims of the NSW Land Rights Act are to assist Aboriginal people establish an economic and land base and to provide some compensation for previous dispossession of land. There are land councils at two levels: State and local. These land councils receive money from the NSW government - 7.5 per cent of annual land tax revenue for 15 years. With this money land councils can buy private land on the open market. Land councils can also claim unused Crown land which is not needed in the future for essential public purposes. Privately owned land cannot be claimed. Aboriginal communities have been given freehold title to all remaining former Aboriginal reserves and properties that belonged to the NSW Aboriginal Lands Trust. Both Wee Waa and Narrabri land councils own land and properties passed on to them in this way. But this title is inalienable - the land cannot be sold, mortgaged or given back. Another important function of land councils is identifying and protecting sacred sites.

The local land council in Wee Waa owns three vacant blocks of land and previously owned and managed a piggery. The piggery was a short lived venture. Problems of mismanagement led to all funds and assets being seized by the State Land Council. These problems were addressed and in 1989 the local land council was reestablished. In 1991 it will be receiving funds from the State land Council.

In 1989 a proposal was developed to build an Aboriginal multi purpose community centre. Land was available with the local land council. Funds were needed to build a new building and to establish appropriate staff positions. There has long been a perception that NSW land councils can not receive funds from Commonwealth government agencies. Therefore, in order to be able to apply for funds from these agencies (usually ATSIC, DEET and DCS&H) separate organisations are set up. In the case of Wee Waa Narrandool Aboriginal Corporation was established.

Narrandool submitted the proposal for a multi purpose community centre to the Commonwealth Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) in 1989. It is intended that the community centre will sponsor a range of employment and training, and community service programs. At the time of my visit Aboriginal people expressed a need for:

- * an Aboriginal Youth Worker
- * an Aboriginal Community Worker
- * more Aboriginal education and training programs
- * Aboriginal community managed housing.

The Aboriginal Health Worker (a local Aboriginal person) and Aboriginal Nursing Sister (a non Aboriginal from Narrabri) were very important resources for the land council and Corporation. They helped prepare submissions, organise meetings with funding bodies and liaise with Skillshare who in 1990 conducted a 6 week management skills course for the directors of both organisations.

3.2 *Narrabri*

The local Aboriginal land council in Narrabri is set up under the same NSW Land Rights Act as Wee Waa land council. It experienced similar problems of mismanagement as Wee Waa land council did. Funds and assets were returned to the local land council in 1990. In 1990 funds were used to establish office space and a position for a Coordinator. The Narrabri land council inherited six blocks of land and two houses from the NSW Lands Trust.

The land council is addressing three priority areas - housing, employment and the protection of Aboriginal sites. A submission for funds to build six houses has been sent to ATSIC. Negotiations with the NSW Housing Commission have led to the Commission building two houses on land council land. The land council does not currently have any specific proposals for employment or enterprise programs. But members have been discussing ideas including a caravan park and Aboriginal Cultural Centre. In early 1991 a short term employment program, funded by the Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) which involved landscaping and maintenance work on the local Aboriginal cemetery was sponsored by the land council.

There are a significant number of Aboriginal community workers employed in other community based organisations and in government departments in Narrabri. But the land council is the only Aboriginal community controlled organisation in town and is for many Aboriginal people a place where they can obtain information, referral and advocacy services. Providing these services takes up much of the time of the land council coordinator and trainee coordinator (DEET funded position).

From 1989 to 1990 an information, referral and advocacy service for Aboriginal people existed at Community Aid. Community Aid made a room available and supported and encouraged the Aboriginal voluntary workers who ran the service. The service had its own management committee known as Arrabri Pinnja Aboriginal Development Committee. Arrabri Pinnja continues to exist in name and continues to have service committee status

with Community Aid. This means that it is accountable to, and can have representatives who can participate on Community Aid's management committee. As mentioned above, the service was no longer maintained when a key voluntary worker gained paid employment elsewhere.

In a Community Aid brochure from 1990 Arrabri Pinnja Committee was described as follows:

This committee offers the Aboriginal community information on events and services concerning the community. Aboriginal people can come to the centre for assistance with their daily needs, to get support and to provide an advocacy service within the wider community. Assistance is also provided for families in crisis. A playgroup is in the process of being formed, which will also use the centre.

Aboriginal people expressed strong support for Arrabri Pinnja. It was stated that it was meeting an important need. The land council would like to see the service reestablished so that its staff will no longer be required to perform this service and may have more time to devote to planning other programs.

Community Aid have prepared submissions to obtain funding for a paid worker for Arabri Pinnja. The submission was sent to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC). No formal reply has been received from ATSIC. It is very unlikely ATSIC will support the submission for two reasons. Since 1987 with the introduction of the Commonwealth Government's Aboriginal Employment Development Policy (AEDP) ATSIC's funding priorities have moved away from welfare services to employment creation programs. Secondly, ATSIC will only fund organisations incorporated under the Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act or under special parliamentary acts which specify Aboriginal control.

4. What Potential Role does Community Aid have in Supporting Aboriginal Community Based Initiatives

4.1 Existing level of networking between members of Community Aid and Aboriginal community workers

While considerable interest was shown in promoting networking between Black and White community workers existing levels of networking are limited and mostly informal. No contact existed between Community Aid and members of Aboriginal organisations in Wee Waa. This is determined by Community Aid's lack of resources and inability to do work in Wee Waa which is 40 kms from Narrabri. Within the township of Narrabri, Community Aid does have Aboriginal staff and members who serve on service committees yet there seems to be little collaborative work on Aboriginal community issues. This small degree of collaboration is probably determined largely by lack of information and understanding. It is not a simple matter of non Aboriginal people not knowing about Aboriginal organisations and relevant funding programs and vice versa. A lot of Aboriginal people would not know themselves about land councils, ATSIC, DEET or an Aboriginal Home Care Service. A lot of non Aboriginal people

would not know about FACS, HACC etc. and exactly how the management structure of Community Aid works.

The result is, however, that Community Aid's involvement in Aboriginal affairs is inward looking. Aboriginal and non Aboriginal members alike are concerned with how Community Aid can expand its own services to the Aboriginal community. For example, attention is focused on how Community Aid can assist reestablish Arrabri Pinnja. There is discussion about whether a submission should be sent to FACS or /and if it should apply for incorporation under the Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act in order to attract ATSIC funding. It is not being suggested that this attention and discussion is not useful but it is important to also consider an outward looking involvement for Community Aid in Aboriginal affairs. Proposing an outward looking involvement rests on an assumption that Community Aid and other organisations like it have the resources and people with skills and knowledge who potentially could be of great use to Aboriginal community groups.

4.2 *What can Community Aid and organisations like it offer to Aboriginal community groups*

Community Aid was established 18 years ago. In that time it has achieved an impressive community development record. It has grown from an information and referral service to an organisation which has successfully lobbied a wide range of funding bodies to establish services and projects including:

- * a child care program;
- * toy library;
- * youth worker;
- * proclaimed place;
- * supportive accommodation service;
- * family support service;
- * neighbourhood centre.

Some of these projects have now become independent.

When one considers this impressive record one can not help concluding that the organisation must have resources and people with experience and skills that would be useful to Aboriginal community groups. For example, the Narrandool Aboriginal Corporation and land council in Wee Waa want support and training to learn about available funding bodies and lobbying and negotiation. Community Aid is experienced and demonstratively successful in performing both these tasks. Members of Community Aid have a range of close contacts with people in a variety of government departments. The organisation also maintains regular contact with local members of parliament. Numerous committee members and staff would have highly developed writing skills for the purposes of producing submissions, reports and business letters.

But it can also be asserted that Community Aid:

- a) does not have the resources to make the experience and skills of its staff and members accessible to new projects, let alone projects 40 kms away from Narrabri (i.e. it needs more workers before it can do anything);
- b) staff and members do not have relevant knowledge and skills for Aboriginal community groups.

The above assertion has much truth. The Coordinator of Community Aid is flat out keeping up with administrative and Centre based work. If the Neighbourhood Centre had a Community Development Worker possibly more effort could be put into resourcing other, including Aboriginal, groups. It is true that staff and most members of Community Aid have little knowledge and understanding of relevant funding programs for Aboriginal groups. This was demonstrated by the instance of the Arrabri Pinnja submission being sent only to ATSIC.

Certainly, there would be considerable detail about specific funding programs and Aboriginal organisations that staff and members of Community Aid would need to learn if they were to take on a supportive role for Aboriginal groups. But this is "content" knowledge and can be acquired quickly. The "process" knowledge is more significant. By "process" knowledge I am referring to knowing about how to learn about funding bodies, about learning who best to negotiate and liaise with, about what a funding body's submission guidelines are and so on. The skills to gain this process knowledge are acquired over many years. Such skills develop best in a social climate where confidence, self esteem and assertiveness are nurtured and encouraged.

Aboriginal people have not enjoyed the same access to formal education as other Australians. They have not had the same opportunities and access to political and institutional decision making forums as other Australians. It was only in 1967 that Aboriginal people gained voting and citizenship rights. It was only 21 years ago in 1969 when most Aboriginal people were allowed off the missions where managers made decisions about housing, employment, education matters for them. In summary, Aboriginal people have not had the same opportunities to develop the skills to gain what I've called "process" knowledge above. They have been brought up in a society in which they remain marginalised, which continues to not recognise their rights as the indigenous inhabitants of this country; which in short makes it more difficult for Aboriginal people to have confidence and self esteem and be assertive when dealing with institutions.

When viewed against this background, members of Community Aid and organisations like it have much to offer Aboriginal community groups. The reality of community services planning is that the most articulate and persistent are more likely to obtain funding than less articulate and persistent. The provision of community services in the Narrabri and Wee Waa district reflects this reality. Efforts by Aboriginal people in community based organisations and government departments to develop more community services will be realised. For members and staff of organisations like Community Aid there is a choice of watching from a distance, trying to

do it for them (inward looking involvement ?) or finding ways to support them (outward looking involvement ?).

It is my contention that neighbourhood centres and the community development traditions many of them represent can be minor but important allies for Aboriginal community groups. Traditions of community people coming and working together, sometimes taking on powerful vested interests or/and lobbying huge bureaucracies, are traditions that Aboriginal people can relate well to. I'd like to emphasise the word allie. There is a tendency for organisations to think about what they can do for Aboriginal groups. So the emphasis is placed on making their services more accessible often by seeking funds for Aboriginal programs and workers. This is what I have referred to above as "inward looking involvement". In some cases this sort of involvement is justified. The danger of too much of this involvement is that it can reinforce relationships of dependency. The last thing that is needed is a continuing situation of poorly resourced Aboriginal groups working alongside well resourced mainstream groups. Being an allie means to also develop an "outward looking involvement". This sort of involvement means, if needed, working with Aboriginal groups supporting them build their own programs.

Let us refer to a specific situation. There is a strong case for Community Aid to seek funds for a new position, that of a Community Development Worker. An important aspect of this case is that Aboriginal groups in Narrabri and especially Wee Waa need resourcing. These groups, however, have opportunities to obtain funding themselves to employ their own Community Development Worker. Whether Community Aid attempts to get its own Community Development Worker (using Aboriginal needs as part justification) or help the Aboriginal groups get their own worker is not a mutually exclusive question. Yet there is an element of choice in deciding how much energy and time to devote to the respective options.

5. Suggestions to Community Aid to build stronger links with Aboriginal community groups

- i) Establish forums for formal exchanges of information and discussion.
 - * Organise meetings between Community Aid, Namoi Family Resources Program, Narrabri and Wee Waa Local Aboriginal Land Councils and Narrandool Aboriginal Corporation; and possibly locally based field officers of the Aboriginal Employment, Education and Development Units of DEET.

The purpose of these meetings could be to learn about what each of the organisations are doing and trying to do and identifying areas of mutual support.

- * Organise a workshop for members of Community Aid about Aboriginal issues, organisations and funding programs.

- ii) Rethink the ways Aboriginal people are encouraged to participate in management decision making of Community Aid.

In addition to encouraging Aboriginal people just like any other community member to participate on management committees consider inviting Aboriginal organisations to elect representatives to serve on Community Aid's management committee.

This recommendation respects the right of Aboriginal community groups to elect their own people to represent their interests. On page 4 above the issue of a perceived lack of Aboriginal representation on management committees was discussed. Often situations arise where mainstream organisations are seen to be coopting Aboriginal people of their own choice on to management committees. This leaves organisations open to accusations of having no real but only token Aboriginal representation.

This is a complex and potentially explosive issue. What view one has possibly depends on the status one accords Aboriginal people in Australian society. Are Aboriginal people to be seen as just ordinary members of the community like any others or are they also, being the indigenous inhabitants of this country whose land and economic base has been taken away, to be granted some appropriate rights and privileges ?

- iii) Invite the Narrabri land council and other interested Aboriginal people to form a working party to produce a submission for a worker for Arrabri Pinnja.

Possibly Community Aid's Coordinator and New Projects Committee could play an active role in this working party.

- iv) In conjunction with Aboriginal organisations Wee Wee and Narrabri Community Aid could explore funding possibilities to create community development worker positions. Such positions might be based at Community Aid (FACS funding?) or at Aboriginal organisations (DEET funding?).

6. *Recommendations to the NSW Local Community Services Association*

As discussed in section 5 this report does assert that there is interest in and benefits to be had by building links between LCSA member organisations and Aboriginal community groups.

The basic recommendation of this report is therefore that LCSA prepare a detailed proposal to seek funds to undertake what might be called an:

- * Aboriginal Solidarity Project;
- * or Aboriginal Community Development Project.

The broad aim of the project would be to build links between LCSA member organisations and Aboriginal groups and organisations. The thrust of the project would be to generate what I have referred to above as an “outward looking” involvement in Aboriginal affairs.

Project objectives would be to:

- * educate neighbourhood centres about Aboriginal issues, community development initiatives and relevant funding programs;
- * educate Aboriginal organisations about neighbourhood centres - their programs, funding sources and their philosophies and traditions;
- * assist neighbourhood centres and Aboriginal organisations identify ways mutually supportive working relationships can be developed.

Project strategies might be:

- * generation of information and training materials;
- * development and delivery of workshops for LCSA members;
- * specific support for single organisations.