

DILEMMAS IN SUSTAINING COMMUNITY PROGRAMS IN FUNDING CRISIS

MAGGIE KAVANAGH*

When we were asked to speak on this topic our initial response was to laugh hysterically as we thought this topic could be the subtitle of the Women's Council. Indeed it is sadly the case for most remote communities and organisations. We have become so used to lurching from one funding crisis to another that it is considered totally normal. I would like to talk about some of the dilemmas we have had in trying to sustain programs, look at the practical problems and, offer some suggestions about how you can better support indigenous communities and organisations.

Our organisation currently acquires 59 grants for our 17 programs. We receive funding from 6 separate government departments and 7 other bodies – including if we are very lucky the odd philanthropic grant. We are not unlike a town council managing multi-funding sources.

Most funding agreements are lengthy, verbose in bureaucratese and usually totally irrelevant to remote communities. They are based on mainstream services delivered in the cities. Most often we get one off funding, or annual funding and if we are really lucky from time to time a 3-year funding cycle. We are required largely to provide quarterly financial statements and 6 monthly written reports. Regardless of the grant being for \$5000 or \$150 000, very often the same amount of work is needed to acquit the grant.

Because of this unwieldy system, in many of our programs individual staff positions are funded from different sources. What this forces you to do is to spend inordinate amounts of time and energy trying to work out how to juggle it all. After a while this becomes the skill you need to make funding work for you. Many of us have gained HD's in doing this.

It's a ludicrous system, unnecessary, and government must seriously consider changing their policies in this area. This current system is not cost effective and it ultimately costs governments more. I understand that currently one of the CRC's is doing a project analysing what it does in fact cost to deliver programs in this ad hoc manner. This would be worthwhile looking at.

It is important that there be better strategic thinking in how to integrate funding and be more cost efficient. And when we say integrated this truly must be the case.

One of our funding bodies has established an integrated funding agreement but ultimately the only integrated thing about it is that we get the money at the same time. Once again we attempted to get government to try and assign money in a more realistic way and by the time they got around to doing it - it took them 4 years – the department had split up and so now only eight of our programs are included.

* Coordinator, Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's Council.

Despite our obvious growth and requests over the years, we still do not have a funded financial manager or bookkeeper, no human resource manager, no funded Aboriginal director and no supervisory positions within the organisation. We have never been funded to produce an annual report. Like most other organisations we make do without these crucial infrastructure positions.

When you don't fit into a neat little package, it is particularly difficult. We are not a health service per se, not just an advocacy agency, not just a service provider and not a local government authority. We have had a significant expansion and diversification of our project base since the early nineties. As we have grown we have worked hard to develop a framework for the delivery of services that is both culturally appropriate and informed by effective contemporary Western models of community development and health service delivery.

Even more difficult is the government's ability to get their head around us being a cross border organization. Over the years we have faced enormous pressure from government to comply with their state/territory based jurisdictions and their rules. Very often our funding agreements stipulate that funds must be only be used for activities in a particular state. This thinking obviously has no regard for the reality of Anangu's lives where the borders mean absolutely nothing. Ironically one of the few groups that are thinking more laterally is in fact the police who are currently actively developing a tri state agreement about cross border policing in collaboration with communities and organisations.

We face constant challenges dealing with the vagaries of trying to get cross border funding. With ATSIC for example we must lodge 3 separate applications to 3 different regional councils in three separate towns for the same programs. This of course means more work for us and it is difficult to understand that the system won't allow us to lodge our applications with one office it be considered a multi-regional program. Our attempts to instigate this have failed.

We have had the ludicrous situation of being knocked back by one office for funding as we did not fit their guidelines and yet the other 2 offices did fund us for exactly the same application. We have also had one office tell us we were in breach of our funding because we had lodged a financial statement using cents instead of dollars only. Once again the other 2 offices had no objections with exactly the same statement.

This then raises the problem of how dependent you are on individual project officers. Sometimes you are lucky and you get a supportive person who is pro-active, goes into bat for you and does the troubleshooting. Others, if they take a set to your organisation, can make life as difficult as possible. A few years ago as example we had a project officer who did not like us and she actively argued us getting funding for a program in WA while the same program had no difficulty in SA; was considered highly valuable, as we were able to deal with a different project officer who did support us. This illustrates the 'hit and miss' reality of how you can acquire funding. So often we must put

loads of time and energy into these staff about our value, our worth and then they leave and we must start all over with the next person and so it goes on.

Anangu are extraordinarily patient and when people have an idea about work they want to do - it can take years for an outcome to be realised. Often there is a complete unwillingness to think outside the box. We believe it is necessary to think of more innovative ways to deliver programs out bush – but many times this does not meet with funding requirements. Too often you feel you have to jump through hoops to get money.

For example, we are currently dealing with a cigarette company about funding for youth programs regarding substance abuse and health. After much debate by the women to accept this money and struggling with the ethical issues, they said yes, we desperately need funds for youth programs. So one suggestion was to fund a brokerage fund. This is a system set up by the women whereby individuals can obtain funds to support young people in a flexible and quick way. So, for example, families may want to take young people out hunting for the weekend and may need some assistance with fuel and food costs so they can ring up the Women's Council and if it meets the guidelines they can get access to the support immediately – they do not have to wait months for a reply after writing a lengthy form. We have helped a whole range of small and interesting proposals such as repairing a swimming pool over the summer holidays so it can operate; purchasing saddles so men could do horse work with young fellas; supplying band equipment so young people could play music on their communities; providing emergency swags when people lost them in fires and had nowhere else to sleep – the list is quite long and the range of requests are quite varied and innovative.

So the tobacco company said no to this request, as it did not fit their guidelines. They said they would only fund “mainstream type workshops” but only up to \$60 000 is available and it has to be spent in the next 6 months or we have to hand the money back. Here are some other examples of difficulties we have had over the years in dealing with funding bodies:

- One group sending us a 40 page funding agreement and asking us to have comments back in 2 days later – for \$11,000;
- Delaying the release of funds for 6 months for our IFA because one section in the Department could not accept changes for project performance indicators for a particular project. The fact that we had to pay our staff out of our reserves totally contravened the requirements of other funding bodies' requirements didn't come into it;
- Not accepting a submission because it was faxed twenty minutes late; and
- For one of our youth projects – having to submit a 17-page “expression of interest” proposal. If you were successful it then earned you the right to put in a 45-page submission. We were unsuccessful in the first round. It then became considered in the second round and was approved. Last week it was still not “signed off” by the Minister. Because of the new financial year they tried to hurry through a one off “letter of variation”

and give us some of the money through another one of our programs, which ironically does not look like getting continued funding. I could not get an image out of my head of a Minister sitting in a room behind her desk, you open the door, walk in and place the letter and she “signs off”. I do not really get it but I do know this process has taken us over two years so far and we still do not have the funding, even though it has been “approved”.

We are remote, isolated and, like a lot of Aboriginal communities, we feel out of sight and out of mind. The week before last at the SA Drug Summit an address was given by the Premier about how they had consulted widely in the state around drug issues and that the “Social Inclusion Unit” had conducted community consultations. This included going as far north as Coober Pedy and consequently leaving out 100, 000 square kilometres of the state – the AP lands. In talking to the chair of the unit he had absolutely no idea about the extent of petrol sniffing or any knowledge about what communities still don’t have. He looked quite stunned to learn that there were communities in SA that do not have a high school.

What tends to happen in our remote communities is that we start to accept the rhetoric that you are doing all right and getting bucket loads of money for our programs. Just a few weeks ago the SA Coroner held an inquest into the deaths of 3 petrol sniffers. In the course of the evidence being presented by various government departments about what funding was provided to communities and organisations, the Coroner made the comment that indeed what was being allocated for youth programs “was only a drop in the ocean – in fact we are just talking peanuts here”. To us this was a heartening comment as we are so used to having to justify seemingly large amounts of government funding in our region.

He was right – when you analyse it, the amounts for the region we are meant to cover is not great. Fuel costs up to \$1.50 per litre, distances are vast, it is all dirt roads and the cost of everything is much higher than in the towns. This always needs to be factored in when considering funding for programs on remote communities. And yet still we have government departments saying to communities – “oh no you can’t get any money for petrol sniffing because the Women’s Council is getting the money!” Anyway here is some practical advice we offer you:

1. **Allow communities and organisations to present their information in their own way.** Don’t keep asking people to fill out lengthy and often irrelevant submissions and application forms. So often we have to put in so much effort and work at the initial stage only to be knocked back. It is unnecessary, counter productive and disheartening. It is much better if we can tell you succinctly – in one page – what we want and then you tell us if you can fund us or not.
2. And when you do give us money, **make it long term sustainable funding.** We are sick of getting these one off amounts or money for

- “pilot projects”. It sets up people’s expectations and can possibly be more damaging.
3. Also please **don’t be too bureaucratic** and overload us with onerous reporting requirements. We absolutely, totally accept that we must acquit grants properly and report on our work – but let us do it in a way that allows communities and organisations to tell their story. So this may take other forms through visuals, videos, photos, and audio. It can be simple. I used to say ‘it’s not rocket science’, but now I’m beginning to think it is!
 4. It is absolutely crucial **that you give us infrastructure support**. We absolutely have to have administrative components built into the program funding as a matter of course. The reality is that staffs are already doing demanding, difficult work and overloading them with extra administrative work just makes no sense – it takes them away from what they are meant to be doing.
 5. **Let there be flexibility**. Don’t be like ATSIC and say if you haven’t spent your \$ by 30 June you can’t carry it over into the next financial year. This doesn’t take into account the realities of peoples’ lives – when work may not take place or is delayed, as roads become impassable in wet weather or because of funerary or ceremonial obligations. It is crucial that there is an understanding that in our region it takes a much longer time to set up programs, to recruit staff and for the work to happen. It can’t be emphasized enough the absolute need for flexibility and sustainability.
 6. **Think outside the box**. Very often the ideas people have for work programs is totally different than the mainstream or in the cities. In fact working in more innovative ways allows communities and organisations to find solutions that are far more appropriate. Anangu know what needs to happen, their ideas must be listened to and supported.
 7. **Show interest in what we are doing** – but without breathing down our necks! Again it is easy to forget about us being so isolated, so far way from anyone. We can write a thousand submissions to you, but there is nothing like visiting us and seeing it for yourselves. In fact this has been the way we have received some of our r funding - an onside bureaucrat who visits and suddenly gets what the needs are. It then means that you as funding organisations have a much clearer idea about what people are trying to achieve; it means you take more responsibility and it means you have a partnership with us.
 8. **Please give us your expertise**. Your organisations are full of people who can help us – say in the areas of submission writing; helping staff to set up good and useful and relevant data collection systems; or training workshops for staff to assist their professional development. You have such a wide range of skills that it would greatly assist us if you could think of seconding staff to us for periods of time. Again it builds on better collaborative efforts.

In conclusion we would have to say that the task of getting funding, keeping it and how you acquire it is getting more onerous. It is in fact a miracle we have maintained community programs and yes it is a funding crisis scenario. It only works for us because of the dedication of long term committed staff and sound financial management.

There has to be a greater will on the part of the government to take some responsibility for the impossible situation we are placed in. It is too convenient to keep dumping more and more requirements on communities and organisations in acquitting grants, to comply with unrealistic project performance indicators, to not offer support and to not fund these infrastructure positions that are vital in order to enable the programming to take place.

Too often we feel like we are just treading water. The will is there the commitment is there. But you can only ask for so much of people. Getting funding, keeping it; the whole process is a nightmare. It's one off, it's hit and miss, it is a lottery and it's a game, and it is disempowering to Indigenous people.