

RE-IGNITING HOPE: HOW DONORS CAN REALLY MAKE A DIFFERENCE

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I will succinctly summarise some of the things that we are doing as the Fred Hollows Foundation in partnership with the Jarwin Association in the Katherine region just to give you a bit of overview about some of our work, because I guess for many people you probably remember or think about the Fred Hollows Foundation with respect to eyes and eye programs and that in fact is not what we are doing in those Jarwin communities. The work that we are doing I suppose I could broadly describe as being community development with a health and education focus and to that end, we have been involved with community nutrition programs, a program of financial literacy called the money story. For people who have been around central Australia or the Northern Territory you might be familiar with the work that Hugh Lovsey does by using pictorial representations of an actual budget which is able to explain to people graphically their year to date expenditure so you can actually track real money figures if you want in a pictorial way for people who are basically illiterate and innumerate. It is in fact a tremendously empowering tool and its one of those things that I say gives people hope. Because by giving people information in a format that they can actually understand and in a way which actually gives them real information people can be in position to make informed decisions and in theory make informed decisions. It is one of those classic programs that is an incredibly useful tool, but it is incredibly difficult to get funding for it. In fact none of the government agencies are particularly interested in funding it, despite the fact that when these community organizations have actually used this tool with respect to their financial management whether its been councils or health boards you find that those organizations tend to operate within budget and that there is very little difficulty in terms of people complying with their grant conditions and so on. Yet, despite the fact that it is tremendously successful it is something that never gets funded.

The two or three other areas where we are working, one is around community stores. I guess anybody who has ever been to remote parts of the country know the perennial problems with stores and store managers. Incredibly difficult situation I think for a long time stores have been seen as a potential for generating additional income so that this has had a really negative impact on communities in terms of peoples capacity to be able to purchase food. Quite often, the stores are badly run, you know the notorious stories we have heard of people making off with hundreds of thousands of community dollars. Over and over it goes. And part of that I think comes back to the problem that people who are

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actually tasked with the responsibility of managing and running those stores don't have good education, don't have the skills to be able to do these things themselves and unless you actually find the tools and the ways to work with people to be able to effectively understand store management which is an incredibly complex business activity at the best of times for most people, people remain dependent and vulnerable and really I suppose relying on those non Indigenous people who come into communities to be honourable, to be trustworthy and to be competent and I think a lot of mis-management we hear about in Indigenous Australia is not due to fraud because people deliberately set out to rip off people or organizations, although that does happen, I think it happens because people themselves the non Aboriginal people who come there to work just don't have the skills themselves.

The third area we work with is the arts and craft centre and I guess Maggie touched on that this morning by saying that these arts and crafts centres now are finding it very difficult to get funding but those activities are perhaps the only other potential source of possible income for Aboriginal people. If you think about it there is no other way that people can actually generate an income. The arts industry is incredibly well publicised, well recognised and well respected, but again it doesn't have the kind of support that it needs. The benefits of working in the arts and crafts area are not just simply one of an economic benefit but it is also one of a social and cultural benefit. And I don't think those can be underestimated either.

The last project that we are trying to get off the ground is one, which is to focus on community literacy and learning. And just by way of some background, I think if you have read the paper this morning I commented about the very poor literacy outcomes of people in the territory. There is no secondary school in any Aboriginal community in the territory yet 40% of our population in any of these communities is aged 15 years or under. Most communities don't even have pre-schools. If you add to that the fact or reality that people don't speak English at home, lingo is either Creole or another indigenous language, the first time those kids go to school will be their first experience of being involved in an all Englished speaking classroom situation. So, if you add all those things together it is no wonder that the kids fail at school. I think this is an area that the philanthropic particularly and the corporates can do a lot to help us work on developing good models of education certainly for the early years, which I think will make an absolute difference to the outcomes for Indigenous Australians.

To summarise I guess the approach that I had taken to first coming to work in those communities was not to go out there with some prescription in mind of what it was that we could do for those people in those regions and in fact they found this a really difficult proposition because I wasn't there like ATSI or like the government saying this was the program and these are the guidelines and expecting people to fit in with that. I in fact actually turned it on its head. It was as broad as saying well you tell me what are the area's of health and education that we might be able to work together on. What are the things that you are currently

doing? Before even making any kind of attempts to get things of the ground and to happen quickly, from my own background and experience it was very clear to me that before we preceded with any real activities that there had to be extensive community dialogue and discussion. Too often, we hear the terms thrown about about community consultations and I beg to ask the question how many times does it actually happen? Government agencies tend to think that community consultation is having one meeting with the council members and maybe sending you a letter. That is not community consultation. That doesn't encourage community participation and it certainly doesn't give people any sense of community ownership. So if you are serious about engaging communities and you want them to own whatever the project is you may in fact have to go down to a multi levels. Don't just deal with the council or other peak organization that is in that community, you may have to talk to people on a family or a clan basis. And you may have to come back two or three times. And you may need to use interpreters or translators. And you may well have to use diagrams. So, I think that is some of the reality of how you work with Indigenous people particularly in those remote areas. I think we should start small. The next point is to start from where people are at actually. Not to come embarking on these major mega programs or projects thinking that this is going to transform the place. I don't think that this is the way to go. I think you need to start where people are, not where they should be. The next point is to go at a pace that people are comfortable with and to where they have progressed. If you try to move things too fast and too quickly, and I will give you an example, if you are trying to provide training or capacity building for people you might think that that program should be achievable in terms of delivering the course and the training and to reach those confidence levels and the time frame should be six months but if you actually think of the reality of where Aboriginal people are at that training may take you not six months but it may take you eighteen months and what's more is that you may need to do it more than once. The likelihood is that the very people you are training or providing those skills to may in fact not even be there in five or ten years time. People are actually dying at age forty so the fact that you have done a training program once in a community is not in itself enough. You may have to come back time and time again within the next ten years. So, I think setting some of those realistic understandings.

The next point that I think is critically important is about empowering as many people as possible. That you don't just go and seek out those people who are deemed to be the stars of the community or the talent if you like because what happens is that people like Alison and Mary and others because they are high profile, because they are capable and dedicated and confident people, people load them up with everything and they become like donkey's with these burdens on these backs which are a mile high. Its not fair to them, and I think what has to be encouraged is that you actually share the development of that talent around. There

may be people at different stages and levels but you actually have to share it around so as empowering as many people as possible.

You have to take a culturally appropriate and sensitive approach and in central Australia they are fantastic in that sense of understanding that they are really bosses of their own destiny and for an outsider or for whitefellas coming to tell them what to do and how to do it will find that, and particularly the women will say hey take a back seat. This is ours, this is our problem and we are quite capable of doing this on our own. That may not be the perception that many non-Indigenous people have of Aboriginal people but Aboriginal people can be quite powerful and quite strong and if you don't listen when you have been told once you might get told a second time and if you still haven't heard the message by the third time you are likely to wear the consequences of it. So don't be slow learners.

I'm optimistic and hopeful that things can be different, that things can be better. One of the things that struck me during a recent visit to the territory with Dr. Daniel Etya'ale, who is from the World Health Organization and is an African historian from Cameroon, I think the thing that struck Daniel, this is a man that has travelled the world, worked in most parts Africa and has seen material poverty from all over the place, I think that the thing that struck him the most, that he found very difficult to deal with was that sense of a loss of hope, in talking to the kids for example when he said he was a Doctor they looked at him in horror, started to laugh and the first response was 'yeah gammon' which basically is right, with absolute cynicism. They in fact said that they never knew that a black person could become a doctor. When he asked them what are the sorts of things you would like to do when you have finished school these young kids, who are bright, vibrant, and fantastic, said 'oh I might get a job on the council' 'I might get a job on CDEP' their aspirations are so low, people have become CDEP expectant. Somehow, I think it is up to us as non-government organizations, as the corporates as the philanthropics actually to maintain that sense of hope in kids, that you are capable, competent people with enormous talent and to give people the confidence that they can do it. Maybe it's the Nike logo – 'just do it'!