



Inquiry into Local Decision Making

This submission has been prepared on behalf of the Board of Directors of The Arnhem Land Progress Aboriginal Corporation (ALPA) and in consultation with ALPA's directors, staff and cultural leadership from the Yolŋu communities in which we deliver services.

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Who is ALPA?

The Arnhem Land Progress Aboriginal Corporation (ALPA) was formed in 1972 as a collective of seven community controlled stores. ALPA's initial member communities were Ajurumu, Gapuwiyak, Galiwin'ku, Milingimbi, Minjilang, Ramingining and Yirrkala. ALPA is financially independent, owned by our Yolŋu members and governed by a Yolŋu Board of Directors.

In the 1970s ALPA began to realise the importance of training and development for its staff, and with support from the Queensland Retail Training Institute began a program of in-house training. The Training School at Galiwin'ku was built to support these efforts. During this period ALPA also started its community support programs, using the modest surplus funds generated from store operations to benefit the community. Financial assistance for ceremonies, education, medical escorts and community events could be obtained through these programs, which have now been expanded to involve capital investment in business partnerships and business support for independent social enterprise development.

ALPA became a Registered Training Organisation in 1992 and is committed to staff training. Over 1,500 of ALPA's remote Indigenous staff have completed apprenticeships or qualifications through ALPA. This dedication to quality training outcomes saw ALPA recognised as the NT Large Employer of the Year at the NT Training Awards in both 2015 and 2016 and placing in the top three in the same category at the following two National Awards.

In 2013 the Board of Directors made the decision that it was time for ALPA to diversify from retail and work with government and industry partners to increase the economic opportunities for our Yolŋu members. ALPA commenced by taking on the Remote Jobs and Communities Program (RJCP) in the region encompassing our member communities of Ramingining and Milingimbi. ALPA's Board quickly recognised the ability to support positive change in our communities through these programs and over the last eight years our community services footprint has grown to four Community Development Program (CDP) regions, five Remote School Attendance Strategy (RSAS) teams, a self-funded community engagement team, business incubators and programs engaging with young people and families.

By 2014 ALPA had saturated the existing local labour markets so started working in partnership with local families and traditional landowners to develop new enterprises, create further employment pathways and to strengthen the economies of our communities. To date this has seen the creation of four new, Indigenous owned businesses delivering services across a variety of sectors including construction, landscaping, furniture manufacturing, automotive repair, Homelands services, hospitality, tourism, agriculture and cleaning.

In 2021 ALPA operates in 26 communities across a 1.2 million square kilometre footprint. ALPA has over 1,200 employees, 84% of whom are local Indigenous people, and last year ALPA returned over \$38 million to our member communities in the form of wages for local Indigenous staff, community governed support programs and community infrastructure.

Introduction

The ALPA Board believe that Local Decision Making (LDM), if implemented correctly, has the ability to be transformative in their communities, returning self-determination to Yolŋu people and creating increased economic opportunity.

We believe that the transition of decision-making authority and responsibility to Yolŋu leaders represents a genuine opportunity to empower and strengthen the communities of Arnhem Land. LDM provides an opportunity for the government to work collaboratively with local community members to support the

improvement of outcomes across key areas such as health, education, housing, employment and economic development. Working in collaboration and ensuring that the community is part of the process as much as the final outcome is key to supporting the ongoing successful engagement of the LDM strategy.

There is strong support for the principles of LDM of self-determination, place-based, flexible, co-design and community control as well as the LDM Community Control Continuum and the commitment to two-way learning and capacity building. The ALPA Board believe that each of these elements are important in the creation of significant, sustainable and authentic improvements in the wellbeing of the communities. They represent a shift in how challenges in remote communities have historically been approached and provide communities a chance to take control of their futures in many important areas.

ALPA is proud to participate in the LDM process and support the returning of decision making authority to communities. There is a vision and local support and commitment for regional LDM in East Arnhem Land, and much of the work in identifying the Yolŋu wards and forming of a joint vision has begun. The process is already making significant progress and is on the way to generating something great. We look forward to supporting this work and seeing it continue in our region.

Progress and Achievements to date

Although some of the milestones set out in the Yolŋu Region LDM Partnership Commitment are still in progress, there has been significant advancement since it was developed, and there are a number of achievements that we would like to highlight within the East Arnhem Region.

East Arnhem Land is a complex working environment with over 60 clans represented within the region. This means that reaching consensus on topics as complex as LDM require significant consultation and discussion. In order for LDM to succeed in the region it will require more time to finalise the agreements in comparison to those regions with fewer clan groups.

A key success has been the identification of the need to work within the local Yolŋu ward and clan-based structures. Working through *bäpurru mala* (clans) and *gurruthu* (kinship structures) is how Yolŋu reach complex, consensus on decisions within their communities. While this approach may seem to take more time initially, these structures are tried and tested, they are strong, highly functioning and are key to decision making in various areas of Yolŋu life. In the long-term, working through these structures will create robust and sustainable outcomes that have the genuine buy-in and endorsement of communities.

In more recent times, Yolŋu leaders have been dispersed across many different reference groups in order to work with government and other agencies, which has often created overlap, duplication and sometimes confusion. Reverting back to working through *bäpurru mala* will ensure that community are partners in the decision making process and improve the outcomes of programs delivered in communities. We believe this is key to LDM being genuinely achieved in each of the wards.

There have been two successful LDM consultations that have been undertaken in both the Miyarrka and Gatjirrk wards. Although neither of these consultations resulted in the creation of a subregional agreement, there were significant learnings taken from the workshops that will inform the approach for the remaining Yolŋu wards.

The second key success that we would like to highlight is the engagement of ARDS Aboriginal Corporation in leading the facilitation and consultation at the workshops in Miyarrka and Gatjirrk. Their expertise has allowed for meaningful discussion and consultation to be undertaken in first language and has shown respect to the strength of Yolŋu people in East Arnhem Land. The pre-consultation and multi-day

consultations show that the government is allowing the time for the process to be meaningful. This is crucial in securing quality engagement and commitment from the mala leaders and clans. Having these workshops facilitated by ARDS means that a significant proportion of the conversation is in first language, ensuring LDM is able to be discussed fully and all leaders have a clear comprehension of the concept that is being presented. The high levels of attendance and participation in these consultations demonstrates that the LDM process has started in the right way.

Challenges

The delivery of LDM to date has not been without its challenges. A concept such as LDM requires significant discussion to ensure that all parties understand the premise, prior to discussions within the communities themselves being undertaken. The initial agreement amongst partners on the way LDM should move forward in East Arnhem Land did take a longer portion of time than initially anticipated to negotiate.

The process has also been significantly impacted by COVID 19, with a large proportion of the work being placed on hold for most of 2020. There had been key works undertaken since the signing of the partnership commitment, which articulated a particular way of working. With the impact of COVID 19, this meant that the model for the region had to be re-assessed, which ultimately led to something more fit-for-purpose.

We have highlighted in the Achievements section that it is important that the LDM process should be conducted at a Yolŋu ward level, meaning it is the bāpurru mala who must be the leaders in determining the way forward and setting the parameters of the agreement. There has been some confusion highlighted by the community leadership on who they are working with to negotiate an agreement, as well as by whom it will be implemented. LDM is a Northern Territory Government (NTG) initiative and the engagement of the “three levels of government” has generated some confusion around the process. There is an opportunity to make this clearer in future consultations.

Future potential

The ALPA Board sees great potential for LDM in East Arnhem Land, with agreements such as the Groote Archipelago LDM agreement serving as an excellent example of what can be achieved and worked towards. The details of which services should become a part of an LDM agreement in East Arnhem Land, and well as when and how this should happen, are best to be discussed with the mala leaders in each of the Yolŋu wards.

It is important that this process continues to progress at a speed that communities and leaders are comfortable with. The process is as important in building the trust and engagement of the community as the end goal of the drafted agreements. Working at a speed in which the community is able to engage with will ensure that outcomes achieved are mutually shared and the agreements will have been co-designed with high levels of consideration and ultimately be fit-for-purpose for each community.

There are, several areas that the ALPA Board of Directors believes LDM has the ability to positively engage with and impact within the region;

- By working at the Yolŋu ward level, LDM represents a unique opportunity to form vastly improved and more appropriate consulting channels. Unlike current bodies, clan-based groups/committees will be able to accurately and authoritatively speak to government or other agencies on behalf of their communities, as well as reducing the overlap/duplication mentioned earlier.

- There are opportunities for new or existing Aboriginal corporations to support government and non-government agencies to appropriately and effectively conduct consultations in East Arnhem Land communities.
- Potential for Yolŋu communities to make decisions on schooling and education. These could include bilingual education, strengthening cultural frameworks, working with families, focus on Yolŋu assistant teachers/principles, curriculum design and strengthening school councils.
- The strengthening of Yolŋu cultural frameworks to support young people in the communities through Raypirri (Discipline) healing camps and working to identify alternative sentencing options for young people.
- Provision of healthcare in remote communities and the structures and frameworks in which they are engaged and delivered.
- Community engagement in the review and awarding of tenders by the NTG on housing, community infrastructure, roads and other programs such as youth, sport and recreation and municipal services.

Key to supporting LDM to reach its full potential in East Arnhem Land is to ensure that funding is available in order to implement the agreements once they have been executed. It will also be important that the departments of the NTG work closely and collaboratively with these groups in relation to funding that is awarded to organisations, ensuring that the LDM group of leaders are key decision makers in these discussions. We recognise that funding agreements are often awarded for significant periods of time, and understand this process may take a number of years to complete as current agreements reach their conclusion.

Fostering Interest and Commitment

There is a strong interest and commitment towards LDM among Yolŋu leaders within the wards. This can be evidenced through the high levels of engagement and attendance at the two consultations already undertaken in the region.

The communities and leaders are committed to LDM, however in order to continue to build a trusting relationship between the community and the NTG, and for the community to feel confident that this is a serious undertaking, there needs to be a continued investment and high levels of regular engagement at a community level from the NTG. Without this ongoing engagement, there is a risk that communities will feel as though there is 'lots of talking but no action', something that they have experienced historically during consultations.

An investment into the capacity building and governance training of the Yolŋu leadership will support them to continue to engage in LDM and be confident in their abilities to negotiate, implement and then manage the agreement with the NTG, while ensuring their voices are heard and valued.

Opportunities to demonstrate this commitment could include;

- Trialling brokerage funding for certain projects, such as what is currently being done with the East Arnhem Land Youth Model. This provides an important distinction with communities/groups taking ownership of at least part of their funding, rather than seeing the funds as belonging to government/organisations. In our experience, this has been shown to increase engagement and commitment from communities.
- Providing increased and ongoing support to brief relevant people on policy discussions, developments and decisions. This will ensure people are able to actively engage in conversations from a position of knowledge and authority.

- Paying Yolŋu leaders for their time to attend necessary governance/public policy/administration training and professional development.
- Supporting leaders to sit on government tender committees and provide feedback on contracts being awarded in their communities. This will strengthen the confidence of leaders that LDM is going to give them choice and decision making control.

Impact of technology, Treaty, Truth-Telling and Voice on LDM Development

With the NT Treaty Commission, Truth-Telling and the Commonwealth's Voice to Parliament consultations still in their initial stages, the impacts on LDM development have thus far been limited. Similarly to the LDM consultations, the NT Treaty Commission's consultations revealed desires for decisions to be made at a local, Yolŋu ward level.

In future, groups formed through the LDM process could provide excellent consultation channels for the NT Treaty Commission, and we believe there would be positive overlap in many areas that both LDM and the NT Treaty Commission may want to examine. Similarly, groups formed through the LDM process could represent an authentic and important channel for community opinion to be escalated to any future Commonwealth Voice to Parliament process.

Earlier in our submission we spoke about numerous groups being required to meet and discuss similar topics with a large proportion of meetings overlapping. There would need to be consideration to how Treaty, Truth-Telling and Voice interact with these groups in the community as they have the potential to pose the same problem.

Regarding technology, there exists huge potential to support and enhance the LDM process. Restrictions on travel throughout 2020-21 due to the COVID-19 pandemic meant that many Yolŋu became proficient in videoconferencing and other communications technologies. With the number of groups involved across dispersed regions, videoconferencing for meetings and consultations could greatly enhance the LDM process over time.

While they cannot replace the value of face-to-face meetings and consultations, they will certainly be able to support them to ensure continued engagement. Furthermore, videoconferencing will support the future administration of LDM groups once they are established, as community leaders will be able to participate from any location. It will also support leaders to engage in the process when they are required to travel from their communities for various reasons such as cultural or business commitments.

Conclusion

The ALPA Board thanks the Public Accounts Committee for the opportunity to contribute to this important inquiry. We believe that there are many opportunities in which LDM can have significant, transformational impacts on the communities in East Arnhem Land.

There have been some great steps taken in the LDM process, with initial conversations providing opportunities for meaningful discussions. We would like to see this work continued within the region with a recognition that it will require more time and consultation to ensure the best possible outcomes for Yolŋu people.

Further information:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission and contribute to this important strategy. If you have any questions or require further information, please do not hesitate to contact me directly via (08) 8944 6444 or emma.kelly@alpa.asn.au.