

Yuwaya Ngarra-li Briefing Paper

# **Processes to enable community-led, systemic and collaborative change**

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## Context

Yuwaya Ngarra-li ('vision' in the *Yuwaalaraay* and *Yuwaalayaay* languages), is the partnership between the Dharriwaa Elders Group (DEG) and UNSW Sydney.

The purpose of the Yuwaya Ngarra-li Partnership is for DEG and UNSW to work together to improve the wellbeing, social, built and physical environment, and life pathways of Aboriginal people in Walgett through collaborating on evidence-based programs, research projects and capacity building, and to evaluate this as a model of CommUNITY-Led Development.

The Yuwaya Ngarra-li Partnership at its core is about doing things differently, and is guided by the following questions:

- What would it look like for a university to partner with an Aboriginal community-controlled organisation (ACCO) in a way that is truly community-led?
- What does it look like for a place-based and community-led initiative to influence thinking, policies and practices far beyond its own geography?
- How can we ground and grow our collaboration through embedding key values and principles?
- What does it mean to respect Indigenous sovereignty in how we research, learn and evaluate?

These questions draw us to *how* we do our work, not only *what* we do. This orientation has required the Yuwaya Ngarra-li team to invest in and experiment with a range of processes and practices to centre community leadership, catalyse systemic influence, and enable ongoing learning and adaptation.

This paper details the core practices that Yuwaya Ngarra-li has adopted, developed or tested since 2018. Some of these were already practices of Dharriwaa Elders Group (DEG), some have emerged from the work, and others were introduced and supported through Yuwaya Ngarra-li's work with advisors, in particular May Miller-Dawkins.

Reflecting on the set of more than 400 outcomes Yuwaya Ngarra-li has contributed to since 2020 at community, place-based and systemic levels, it is clear that these practices have been critical enablers of that impact and influence.

## Elder engagement and Elders Council decision-making

The most significant commitment of Yuwaya Ngarra-li is to be community-led. For us, this means that its work is led by the vision and governance of the Dharriwaa Elders Group Elders Council (ie directors). Other key principles that underpin Yuwaya Ngarra-li's approach are being culturally connected, strengths-focused, rights-based and holistic.

Yuwaya Ngarra-li's vision and long-term goals were set by the Elders and have remained constant as the work has developed. While strategies, approaches and focus may shift, the work is always contributing to the following long-term goals:

1. Greater Aboriginal community control and capacity
2. Increased numbers of Aboriginal young people in education, training and employment
3. Reduced numbers of Aboriginal people in contact with the criminal justice system
4. Improved social determinants of health and wellbeing for Aboriginal people
5. Increased sustainable management of water and Country
6. Redirection of government funding towards strengths-based, holistic, community-led initiatives.

The Elders Council is involved in decision making and governance of the Partnership, shaping and signing off on any new projects or strategies and also crafting and approving statements, pieces of research and policy statements.

One of the approaches for ongoing engagement has been regular morning teas for discussion of specific policies or issues (e.g. floodplain harvesting, policing, fines, housing, data linkage) along with Yuwaya Ngarra-li staff or advisors from UNSW and elsewhere. These have been crucial spaces for maintaining ongoing dialogue around the substance of the work and for Elders to continue to shape the work.

Elders are central to the advocacy and capability building efforts of Yuwaya Ngarra-li at all levels of engagement: local, state, federal and international. For example, Elders are spending time with the River Rangers, sharing knowledge about culture and Country, as well as authoring and co-authoring research, meeting with and advocating to Ministers, or presenting to international fora.

*I go back to talking about our stories, and storylines, and telling those stories ... It's Aboriginal culture – it's an oral system of educating people and giving people information. It's part and parcel of Aboriginal life, that's the whole gamut: you know your stories, you know where you come from. (Walgett Elder, quote from Ageing Well study reported in [Elders' perspectives and priorities for ageing well in a remote Aboriginal community](#))*

*The Yuwaya Ngarra-li core principles inform the Partnership's governance by being integrated into all research projects and activities. The DEG is a unique, leading, Aboriginal community controlled association of Aboriginal Elders in Walgett, which supports their governance and leadership in the community and promotes local Aboriginal knowledge and cultural heritage...*

*Yuwaya Ngarra-li demonstrates that successful community-driven approaches require a well-developed governance and leadership capacity within the local Aboriginal community... Fundamentally, it is about power, relationships and accountability: who has influence, who decides, and how decision makers are held accountable. (Virginia Robinson, Secretary of DEG Elders Council, in her [Yuwaya Ngarra-li Core Principles Research Brief](#))*

As part of the work of building Aboriginal community capability and control, Yuwaya Ngarra-li has also continued to invest in Elders' capability through media training and other opportunities to build skills and confidence.

## Strategy and planning

Yuwaya Ngarra-li is anchored on the Elders' vision and long-term goals, building on these to develop a range of practices to inform and adapt its action over time.

In 2018, May Miller-Dawkins led the team through a process of developing a theory of change that drew on the extensive community involvement in the development of the Walgett Action Plan for Children and Young People, Elders' engagement, and existing data and experience. The theory of

change helped to articulate the crucial role of shifting relationships of respect and levels of collaboration and coordination to improve wellbeing and other outcomes in Walgett.

In the early years, the team had a regular quarterly face-to-face meeting of staff from both DEG and UNSW that reviewed existing plans and reflected together (this will be explored further below), and also used practices such as stakeholder mapping to inform plans and strategies for the coming period.

The team used power mapping to examine individuals' level of influence over and support for Yuwaya Ngarra-li goals and to investigate where to focus efforts on influencing and shifting support. The team would return to these around 6 months later and often see significant and material shifts in support that had enabled them to achieve and influence changes in practice or policy.

*The planning and reflection sessions with May have been so vital to helping us step back from the daily frontline work at a community level and see challenges and progress with fresh perspective. It was so helpful to be able to track changes in relationships and ways of working as well as outcomes we were achieving on the way to our long-term goals. Discussing and documenting those gives us energy and momentum when we can see we're really making a difference. (Wendy Spencer, Dharriwaa Elders Group Partnership Manager)*

In 2020, due to COVID restrictions, planning meetings shifted online and moved to shorter successive sessions to bring the team together. A focus of sessions in this period was on identifying team values and working to operationalise them into specific practices and behaviours. These sit alongside the Yuwaya Ngarra-li principles and have provided a touchstone for reflection for the team in the intervening years.

As the team grew, we developed processes for planning within thematic teams (e.g. the Youth team, Caring for Country, Food and Water for Life). These remained externally facilitated by May Miller-Dawkins or, at times, by advisor Jo Taylor and helped identify goals and approaches to focus on.

After responding to successive crises—the only local supermarket burning down and subsequent food crisis, COVID, floods, and so on—we identified that we also needed a way to understand the real components of peoples' work and time and to make that visible. May Miller-Dawkins and Jo Taylor worked with Wendy Spencer and Ruth McCausland, the UNSW Director of Yuwaya Ngarra-li, in the first instance to develop a framework around the fundamentals to plan for:

- Core relationships and engagement (for example, community engagement, key relationships)
- Responsive work (recognising the reality of responding to community and crisis and the need to plan for this)
- Flexibility needed for caring obligations or other situations (e.g. for sorry business, sickness)
- Professional development (this is not only important for team development but also is part of our substantive agenda and goal around Aboriginal community capability and control)
- Team processes (our investment in these process, as discussed in this paper, are critical to the work).

May and Jo worked with each team to work out the amounts of time focused on these efforts as a percentage. This meant that team members were better able to recognise all of this work as critical, and also to make their expectations more realistic in planning about how many other activities to plan for.

## Reflection and action learning

We developed regular processes of reflecting together. Learning and evidence building is a core tenet of the Yuwaya Ngarra-li approach. This was also important for sharing the different realities and perspectives across the DEG and UNSW teams.

As discussed above, these discussions started as quarterly face-to-face gatherings in Walgett, Sydney or elsewhere (for example, one of these meetings took place in Orange) which then shifted online, and into processes that brought together teams before convening all staff.

Within these reflections we have some common practices that encourage honest sharing and engagement:

- Each team member reflecting on their highlights and lowlights since the previous session
- Sharing hopes and fears
- Collective assessment of progress against goals and plans, including reflection on outcomes
- Understanding and incorporating community feedback
- Systemic storytelling
- Sharing plans and identifying adaptations for the coming months.

These reflections have been important processes for building common understanding, giving voice to significant issues that are developing for the community, and shaping the emergent work of Yuwaya Ngarra-li (for example, on fines and housing).

They have built capability among team members to describe the context and purpose of their work, building staff confidence with clients and collaborators and in broader advocacy.

We've also used action learning to support deeper sharing and problem solving, building skills around open and curious questioning. We did this across the DEG and UNSW teams in 2018 and 2019, with the UNSW team now using the practice in their regular meetings.

*Action learning can seem like quite a simple process, but it's been incredible to see the power and insight that can come from embedding it as a tool we regularly draw on in Yuwaya Ngarra-li. For the person who's bringing their challenge, it's the opportunity to step back and reflect and reinterpret what they're grappling with in a bigger context. For others in the action learning set, it brings important practice in asking open and curious questions rather than jumping to suggestions and solutions—a real challenge when your main role has been an advisor or specialist in a particular area! We've benefited on an individual, team and impact level from the fresh ideas and action that have emerged. (Ruth McCausland, UNSW Director of Yuwaya Ngarra-li)*

This process has been incredibly valuable for staff in managing significant workloads and competing priorities involving urgent advocacy matters, opportunities for policy influence, balancing complex relationships and collaboration with multiple stakeholders across sectors at the local, regional, state and national level, along with daily management and administration tasks. Having the capability to flexibly shift focus and resourcing to respond to an urgent task or goal in a shifting policy environment (particularly to meet political and policy opportunities) has been critical. May's role as an Advisor with deep working knowledge of Yuwaya Ngarra-li's approach and work has been invaluable. Reflection and planning processes are essential in enabling staff to step back and reflect on whether their energy is being used efficiently and sustainably.

Another point of regular reflection is to look at progress against goals and also to understand Yuwaya Ngarra-li's contributions by reflecting on the analysis of outcomes on an annual basis. These practices allow the team to step back and examine where progress is being made and why, and where approaches might need to change.

Sharing annual outcomes is also a moment to recognise progress and contribution, particularly for staff that are working within community and dealing with difficult circumstances daily. It can also provide important perspectives on the nature of the work of Yuwaya Ngarra-li and what enables impact. For example, seeing that over 40% of outcomes emerge from responsive rather than planned work has helped the team to embrace their ability to respond to community and crises and opportunities in ways that materially enable progress towards the long term goals set by the Elders.

## Coaching and advising model

An important feature of the Yuwaya Ngarra-li model is collaboration between community leaders and workers, and advisors and supporters based outside Walgett.

As the team at DEG has grown, the roles of UNSW staff have adapted and shifted into more of a coaching and advising model. In some cases, this has been due to challenges around recruiting specialist staff to relocate to Walgett (including due to lack of availability of staff housing) meaning it has been necessary to draw on remote input and support from within the UNSW team, and in other cases it has become an ongoing part of Yuwaya Ngarra-li's model. For example, in 2018 and 2019 Peta MacGillivray was leading the work on youth justice from UNSW and spending significant time in Walgett. As the youth team grew, she took on a coaching and advising role to those in Walgett, as well as leading policy work and chairing the Holistic Working Group. This coaching and advising role often involves regular (weekly or twice weekly) spaces for working through issues in real time—for example, through the current weekly sessions with the Dealing with Fines team.

*To have someone like Peta be in the team to provide support is very helpful and makes the work easier to do. We go to her for any questions we have. Having her in the team allows us to be able to progress our work because if we're stuck we just reach out to her, we're able to find a solution quickly and move on.*

*When the Youth Justice Team was up and running Peta was also providing support and coaching us throughout the program. Again, if we were stuck she was there to find a solution and guide us through and also helping us plan activities. Having someone to provide support like Peta is very important especially living in Walgett where it is remote and you may not be able to get the support and answers you need. (Zoe Sands, DEG Project Officer)*

During COVID, when UNSW staff and students couldn't travel to Walgett, the team realised the value of shaping the contributions of UNSW collaborators to be able to not be reliant on being physically in Walgett and have used those insights to apply to shaping collaborations, even now that travel is possible.

The range of advisors and organisations working with and supporting DEG has continued to grow as work has both broadened and deepened. There is a growing network of supporters and advisors on water and Country issues and a set of advisors and supporters that connect DEG to legal support and advice, such as the Aboriginal Legal Service providing support to the Dealing with Fines team.

A particular model of coaching and advising is weekly work with May Miller-Dawkins. This includes two management meetings where she can play an insider-outsider role of asking questions and providing advice and examples from elsewhere as the Yuwaya Ngarra-li leadership across DEG and UNSW make decisions.

The development of these practices of coaching and advising has led directly to thinking around an ACCO capability unit as a way to support other ACCOs in Walgett and across NSW to draw on the expertise and support they need at the time that they need it.

## Outcomes harvesting and analysis

An important evaluation method that is enabled by and contributes to team processes is outcomes harvesting. This is a practice Yuwaya Ngarra-li has adopted to understand and be able to analyse both intended and unintended, positive and negative outcomes influenced by the work of the partnership over time. In this approach, an outcome is understood as actions taken by other actors (such as individuals, other ACCOs and governments) influenced by the work of Yuwaya Ngarra-li.

Yuwaya Ngarra-li collected a set of over 400 specific outcomes from 2020–2023, identifying outcomes specific to the Aboriginal community in Walgett, outcomes that were place-based beyond the Aboriginal community, and systemic outcomes (for example, influencing thinking, policy and practice beyond Walgett). An overview of these outcomes can be seen in Figure 1.

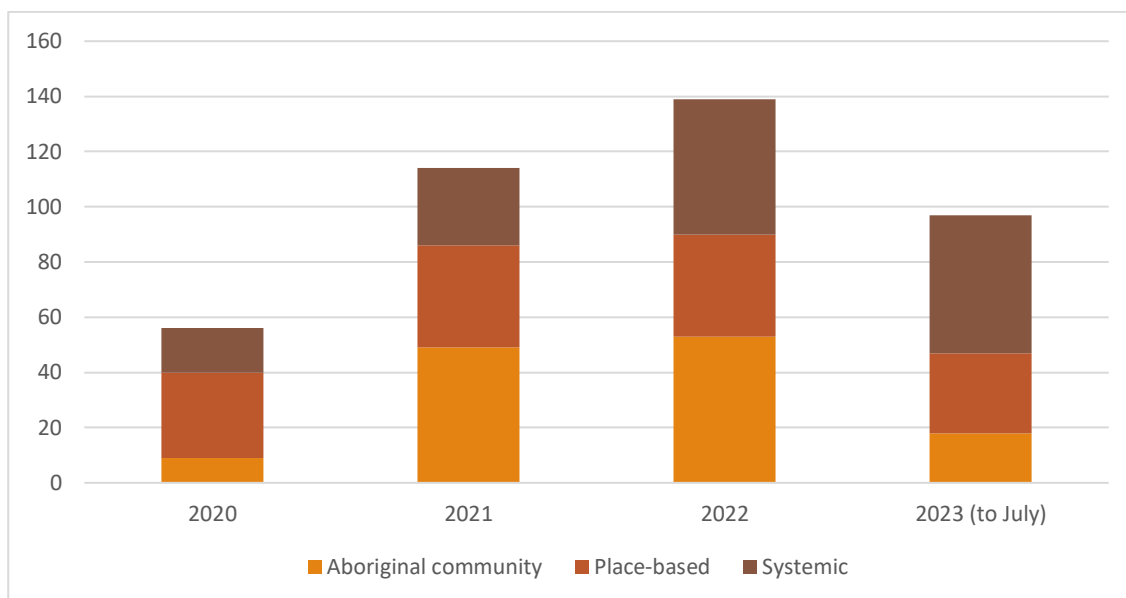


Figure 1 Level of outcomes

Team processes feed into the outcomes harvesting including through actions such as team reflections, internal logs of engagement with community members, and reporting and direct collection of outcomes by the team. May Miller-Dawkins leads the process as an external advisor, collecting and checking outcomes with the team and external sources (for example, news articles, Hansard records, emails, reports) and analysing the sets on an annual or multi-annual basis.

The team reviews and reflects on the outcomes as a whole during reflection or planning sessions and this has had direct influence over other team processes. For example, the first outcomes harvest in 2021 was able to show clearly the high number of outcomes towards the Elders' long-term goals that were achieved through responsive or unplanned work, for example, in response to crises such as COVID, floods, and food or water insecurity in Walgett. The knowledge that there was an almost equal split between outcomes being achieved through responsive and planned work helped to shape new approaches to planning, where more time and priority is given to responsive roles of the Elders' group and staff in the community.

While the outcomes harvesting's primary purpose is to understand the contribution of Yuwaya Ngarra-li to changes over time, embedding this into team processes is critical to enabling those at



the community frontline of change to step back and see progress over time as well as enabling the whole team to reflect in a grounded way on which actions and processes are enabling impact.

## What's next?

The set of team processes outlined here have been critical enablers for Yuwaya Ngarra-li to meaningfully contribute to change, stay aligned to its values and goal of growing Aboriginal community control, and to create constructive and effective partnership between DEG and UNSW.

Importantly, these processes have helped the team to reflect critically and honestly while grappling with power dynamics, trauma and the deep challenges of trying to shift racist institutions and realities.

These processes have been enabled by the leadership from staff at DEG and UNSW, and also through having an embedded external advisor and facilitator in May Miller-Dawkins, who is able to create processes and spaces for these conversations and processes with both deep context and sufficient distance.

We believe these processes or the many others like them that enable ongoing reflection and adaptation support grounded, collaborative and systemic place-based work.

Yuwaya Ngarra-li is exploring the potential for creation of an ACCO Capability Unit that could provide this kind of ongoing support to other ACCOs, along with providing access to important expertise and support in other areas of capability.

The development of these team processes was, in part, prompted by the initial advice of the Paul Ramsay Foundation in their first investment into Yuwaya Ngarra-li and has been more broadly enabled by their flexible and unrestricted multi-year support to the initiative. This is an important lesson for funders—government and philanthropic—that long-term, unrestricted funding with an explicit encouragement to invest in effective organisational processes for planning, reflection and adaptation can be a significant contribution to impact.