Indigenous Governance and Leadership:

A case study from the Thamarrurr (Port Keats) region in the Northern Territory

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Introduction

In 2003, the Aboriginal residents of the Thamarrurr region formed a local government council based on principles grounded in their culture. In order to provide services to their people that many other Australians take for granted, they require the strength, commitment and leadership to achieve their goals. This paper briefly explores how the governance structure evolved and how far the community has progressed.

1. The Research Focus

Community

My research focus is on Indigenous leadership and governance.

The ‘community’ where I am conducting research is a region with services provided by the Thamarrurr Regional Council. The main town, Wadeye, is surrounded by 20 rural outstations. Wadeye is 320 km southwest of Darwin, in the Northern Territory. It has a total service population of 2,373 people and an area of about 3,000 km$^2$.

The Thamarrurr region is often referred to as Port Keats. The term Thamarrurr is derived from the local Murin-patha language and generally means ‘coming together as one people’.

The land within the council boundaries is inalienable freehold held under the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976. A statutory land trust, known as the Daly River Land Trust, holds the land on behalf of the traditional owners. The 20 clan groups within Thamarrurr are the traditional owners with separate estates. The place of main settlement, Wadeye, is on land of the Kardu Diminin clan group.

Demographics

Almost half of the population (45.7%) is less than 15 years of age. An average of 80 babies is born per year. It has an infant population (0–4 years inclusive) of 350. The school age population is almost 630. The working age group numbers 530. According to Taylor (2004: 31), the relatively small size of the aged population is ‘striking’.

By 2023, it is estimated that there will be an 88.5 per cent increase in the total population to 3,833. The working age group (15–49 yrs) will increase by some 1,338 over the next 18 years. The practical reality of this growth is that in 20 years, if the current trend continues, we are looking at the development of a town.

There are 178 Aboriginal people employed (133 by CDEP). The unemployment rate is 83.9 per cent. However, this does not take into account Aboriginals engaged in the
‘informal sector’ and using other work such as hunting or art to boost their livelihood (Altman & Allen 1992; Altman & Taylor 1989).

Formal schooling is offered in the Thamarrurr Catholic School. The regional school-age population is 626. An average of about 56 per cent was attending in the latter part of 2003. In 2005, attendance rates peaked early in the year to almost 500. However, due to various factors including a lack of proper planning to cater for the influx, inadequate facilities, and a drop off in interest by students, it has since fallen to about 160.

Thamarrurr Council manages 217 dwellings in the region, however only 148 of these are classified as habitable. If the sub-standard houses are excluded from the stock, the occupancy rate is 16 persons per house (it is 11 if they are counted in). An extra 206 dwellings would be required to ‘normalise’ the situation at seven persons per three-bedroom dwelling. Using the projected population figures, an extra 122 dwellings would be required by 2023 to maintain occupancy at the current high level.

The median age at death for Aboriginal people in the Daly SLA is only 46 years. In excess of three times more Aboriginal deaths occur in the region compared to the average Australian population. Many of the deaths can be classified as ‘lifestyle’ deaths attributed to heart disease, kidney, diabetes, and other problems.

An estimated 20 per cent of children are stunted, 21 per cent underweight, and 10 per cent wasted. Surveys of food costs indicate that a basket of food at Wadeye costs 40 per cent more than in Darwin. There has been no resident doctor for years, however one will take up an appointment shortly.

Wadeye (2004) has the highest per capita juvenile offending rate in the NT. The most common type of offence was property damage (34%) and assault (27%) in 2002.

**Classical structure**

There are six languages and seven sub-dialects spoken by residents from within the Thamarrurr region. The languages (in bold) and dialects (Dixon 2002) are as follows: Marri Tjevín, Marri Amu, Marri Ngarr, Magati Ge, Emmi, Menhdhe, Murrinh-patha, Murrinh-kura (with ‘loan’ words from Murrinh-nyuwan), Ngan.gitjemerrí, Ngan.giwumeri, Ngan.gikurunggurr, Ngan.gimerri, and Murrinh-nyuwan (also known as Djamindjung).

Murrinh-patha is the main language spoken probably because most people reside on this language group’s land. Some of the languages only have very small numbers of speakers. English is a second, third, or fourth language for most residents.

Patrilineal land-owning groups, sometimes referred to by Aboriginal people as clans, are a key structural unit in the Thamarrurr region. There are 20 clans with estates and boundaries delineated.
Ceremonial activities centre around three ceremonial groups and their songs. They are the Tchernba/ Wultjiri/ Mulgarin, Wanga, and the Littiga. Political, economic and social alliances exist in various ways between families, clan, and ceremonial groups depending on particular situations. Such relationships link people beyond the Thamarrurr region including towards Darwin and Western Australia.

**Governance history**

Prior to the 1890s, the only visitors to the area were fishermen from Malaysia and Indonesia and explorers. Intrusion onto country by non-Aboriginals increased during the early 1900s in the form of prospectors and others. On occasions these people were driven off, killed, or interacted with.

The violent reputation was bolstered by the killing of four non-Aboriginals from Bradshaw Station at Docherty Island in 1905. Further, in 1933, another notorious incident took place that resulted in the death of four Japanese fishermen. The local killers, known as Nemarluk and the Red Band, kindled a reaction that would affect the governance of the area from this time on. People from the area today say that those killed were ‘trespassing’.

The violence triggered a reaction by the Commonwealth government to invite missionaries from the Catholic Church to commence a mission.

In 1935, Father Docherty and others landed at Wentek Nganayi, and encouraged Aboriginals in the area to come in and make contact. Docherty ran the mission in an autocratic fashion with himself as Superintendent and other priests, brothers and nuns in positions of responsibility. They established over time, dormitories, gardens and industry. At the same time, much of the previous responsibility for governance of people held by local leaders was taken over by the missionaries, who in effect acted as custodians.

In the 1960s, Minister Hasluck presided over a period when there were calls for more Aboriginal organisations to be formed in Australia, particularly in the form of councils. Mowbray (2005: 7–8) argues that: ‘Councils of some sort were directly appointed or elected in most Aboriginal settlements and these became vehicles for at least tokenistic consultation and expression of Aboriginal opinion on circumscribed issues’. Wilson (in Desmarchelier 1975: 40) wrote that the official head of the community ‘is still the priest-superintendent’, and whilst there was a town clerk and housing manager, they were ‘still recruited and held in office by the ecclesiastical hierarchy’.

In 1978, the Kardu Numida Council was incorporated through the *NT Associations and Incorporations Act*. However, over time it lost legitimacy and was seen as being the instrument of a selected few. In 1994, the only people who nominated for positions on the council were those who belonged to the local landowning group. In addition, in 1994, the Kardu Numida Council had overspent approximately $1m. This was due to a combination of reasons including under funding (for the size of the service population).
In 1999, the people of Wadeye began to ask whether there was an alternative governing structure that:

- was legally recognised in the non-Aboriginal world; and
- properly recognised all the resident’s rights.

Certain catalysts were influencing the need for change. These included a general desire to create a more representative governance structure. People could see a rapidly changing world that offered economic opportunity but they did not have the means to engage. They needed a structure that would be able to assist them in this process. They could see their young people grasping the more negative elements of Western culture and they were powerless to intervene. It was time for the re-emergence of the classical form of governance referred to as *Thamarrurr*.  

*Thamarrurr* is a Murrinh-patha word with complex meanings. Sometimes people may describe it simply as ‘our way of life’. It includes aspects of social, economic, educational, health and family relationships. The philosophy crosses borders and is articulated by other language groups using other words. It provides a means to resolve issues and to move ahead. It is based on a classical method of interaction, cooperation and respect between individuals, families, clans, and tribal groups. Some of the knowledge is open whilst other aspects of it are held by the elders. Today, aspects of *Thamarrurr* are also being used in a contemporary sense to provide the foundation for the Thamarrurr Regional Council.

The discussions about the need to change commenced in the mid 1990s. Discussions about whether the *Thamarrurr* philosophy could be incorporated into a local government scheme commenced in 2001. Over 100 meetings with individuals and clans ensued before it became a reality. The Thamarrurr Regional Council was formally established by the Northern Territory Parliament on 21 March 2003. The Minister for Community Development, Sport and Cultural Affairs, Mr John Ah Kitt, appointed the forty-member council on 7 August 2003. The council is incorporated through the *NT Local Government Act 1978*.

**2. Key Governance Issues**

**Leadership and control**

At a local level the re-emergence of the *Thamarrurr* concept of governance continues. It should be remembered that initially the concept had only been retained by the clan elders. Since then it had gradually permeated back through the wider community, however, this process is still not fully complete, particularly with the younger generations. As it continues to re-emerge, the concept of landowning groups/clans strengthens as well. We have found that clans are finding a new energy and are very keen to engage in workshops to discuss their own development. The clans are organising themselves and many groups are talking about ‘returning to country’ and developing opportunities for their own clan’s people.
At a council level, the agenda and issues are still largely set by council employees and this will probably continue as the building of local capacity is realised. The council clerk in this respect is a key player and has been responsible for a lot of support to the people as they change their governance environment.

Locally between organisations there is, most of the time, a lot of cooperation. This can particularly be seen between the council and the school. This partnership is very important when considering leadership development, training for jobs, and visualisation toward the future of local children.

**Rallying the agencies**

The Thamarrurr situation is a COAG trial. However, this process commenced after Thamarrurr had been established. There have been opportunities for Commonwealth, Northern Territory, and other agencies to be involved with the project. Some agencies have engaged. Others have tried to but not been so successful. Perhaps the heart of such engagement lies with the calibre and experience of the officers they employ.

Government facilitators that fit the Thamarrurr mould and are accepted by council staff and the community have great opportunities to assist the governance initiative. Those that for whatever reason do not—and it might not be their own fault—are very quickly declared as irrelevant, and disenfranchised or not included so that they finally leave. This process can be fairly ruthless and unforgiving at times.

The notion of *Thamarrurr* also seems to hold a need for outsiders to come with an open mind and a willingness to learn. Newcomers are often regarded with apprehension as local people observe them and then make their own judgment. Perhaps qualities that best describe what the people are looking for are the ability to be fair-minded, keen, and rational, with skills to match.

In 2004, the Thamarrurr Regional Council, the Northern Territory Government and the Commonwealth initiated a survey of social and economic conditions in the Thamarrurr region. The findings were published as ‘Social Indicators for Aboriginal Governance: Insights from the Thamarrurr Region, Northern Territory.’ It was conducted by John Taylor of CAEPR, ANU, with the assistance of others. This report in many ways has provided advantage for the leadership of Thamarrurr to push their case. Further capacity in this regard was provided by a further report on opportunity costs to the status quo (Taylor and Stanley 2005).

**State and federal involvement**

It was announced on 15 March 2004 that ATSIC was to be wound up. The people from the Thamarrurr region had mixed feelings toward this body, however, the majority seemed to think that ATSIC was more concerned about the urban situation or select communities rather than with remote communities in general. People were not too concerned about the demise of ATSIC but were concerned about where their funding (particularly for homeland development) will now sit.
On 1 July 2004, new structures were put into place at the Commonwealth level. The Government’s Indigenous programs are now administered by mainstream agencies, but under a ‘whole-of-government’ approach that has clearly been influenced by the COAG approach. In the Territory, multi-agency Indigenous Coordination Centres (ICCs) have been established (as they have in other states and territories).

‘Shared responsibility’ was to be the new term for these relationships. The new policy as announced by the Commonwealth fitted very closely with that of Thamarrurr. Thamarrurr had adopted early in their development a motto of ‘Give kids a chance’. For example, they intended that if the governments supported them, then they would take the responsibility of getting their kids to school. Hence, there is an alignment of philosophy and expectation.

The pressure on the Thamarrurr structure to perform has been enormous. If the COAG agreement was not in place, there might be a more natural evolution of governance arrangements. However, on the other hand the goals that people desire may have occurred much more slowly. There is no doubt that the COAG agreement and focus supplied by exercises such as the Taylor base data report has provided the council with leverage and advocacy tools to put pressure back on government to assist with issues such as housing and education.

**Land and resource management**

A situation has arisen where a legal and planning vacuum for individual stakeholders and communities exists with regard to land. There are tensions in terms of tenure and the ownership of assets. The Thamarrurr Council, traditional owners, government agencies and the Northern Land Council are currently in talks about possible long-term lease arrangements in order for the town to develop in a planned, coordinated and normalised fashion. This issue is perhaps the biggest that the community has to face at the present time. But at least it now has a relatively more capable representative local government to represent its community.

### 3. Factors Supporting and/or Impeding Good Governance

**People development**

One of the initial challenges for those working on this project was to assist the people of the region to see for themselves what has happened in the past, what the situation is today, and where they can take their people if they so desire. This process commenced nine years ago and continues.

The facilitators during the early phase assisted people, particularly the elderly in the first instance, to talk about and rediscover what classical governance was operating before non-Aboriginals visited the area. This process was not easy. Various terms were used before the leaders were satisfied with what was there. In fact, this process took probably five years, as many different people and groups had to be consulted.
The understanding of what has happened and how they have been disenfranchised now seems almost universal. Tensions that sometimes occurred during the consultations amongst the people have almost gone. However, frustration comes in occasionally with the slow pace of change in the area of basic need; particularly with things like improved services (water, power, and sewerage) and housing.

The organisation’s control and power

The Thamarrurr Council in a non-Aboriginal context has local government functions. Local government in the Northern Territory, particularly community governments, are often pressured to perform beyond their means simply because no other organisation is around.

Thamarrurr provides the following services:

- Corporate (including community development, Centrelink, Australia Post, accommodation, cleaning, and other agency services)
- Infrastructure, Housing, and Industry (including municipal hygiene, transport infrastructure, buildings and facilities, swimming pool, cemetery and morgue, fuel, civil, mechanical, security, homeland support, and building construction)
- People services (including aged care, meals on wheels, respite centre, health, education, tutoring, youth, family and children, broadcasting, cultural heritage, library, and sport and recreation services)
- Employment, Training and Enterprise development (including employment and training board, CDEP)
- Natural and cultural resource management.

Mainstream councils do not perform many of these services; however, councils in remote areas are expected to deliver an extremely wide range of such services. Thamarrurr provides these services—sometimes well, sometimes not so well.

The source of its power and authority goes beyond its local government functional responsibility. At council meetings, not only do elected members attend, often senior unelected leaders attend, male and female. The reason for this is sometimes to oversee what is happening, and sometimes there may be an issue of their own that they wish to bring up. Therefore, there is a formal base and legitimacy derived from classical support by community leaders.

This goes back to how and why the Thamarrurr structure was set up. It was the elders who recognised what had happened to their original power base and it was they who could see how it could be retrieved. Often they say ‘this is our last chance’. That is, the last chance in their eyes to have a system of governance that is able to straddle both domains and hence retain important principles of their culture.

The limits are at times difficult to define. The Thamarrurr Regional Council has formal local government authority responsibilities and then goes beyond that regularly because of the lack of other organisations. For example, it will get involved in land tenure issues
with the land council. Sometimes if clan groups are in dispute, it may create an environment or call a meeting to resolve the issue. It is expected, particularly by the police, to intervene and ‘fix’ gang disputes. It ‘dabbles’ at times in areas that are strictly beyond its formal functions.

However, there are some things particularly in the sacred area such as ceremonial activities that it leaves to other local authorities to work in (although it may assist the relevant authority group, say ceremonial leaders, with resources and other assistance). So in terms of authority the governance authority deals in most things profane, and ritual leaders handle the sacred realm, with cooperation between both at appropriate times.

**Contemporary leadership and succession**

The structure of leadership in the region emanates from descent to country, kinship and personal rights and traits. There is a network of leaders and leadership. Certain *kardu pule* (senior clan leaders), but not all, may progress in prowess to other higher level leadership categories based on ceremonial knowledge and other factors. Leadership develops as follows:

**Rites of passage**

Males and females progress through life in specific age-gradings. Some of these terms, particularly during childhood, refer to physical capacities. In later life, they may refer to ceremonial progression or accumulation of prestige and status through other factors. These factors can include physical changes e.g. grey hair. It sometimes can also occur when individuals take more responsibility for people and country.

**Classical leadership**

Strong leadership in pre-mission and early mission times was essential for clan survival and identity. Clans pre-mission were in a constant state of vigilance and warfare. Elders tell of how clans with strong leadership would sometimes dispose another group from their estate. Leadership in classical times was founded not only on wisdom, ceremonial and age factors, but on ability as warriors, fighters and defenders of their people.

**Contemporary leadership**

It appears that leaders emerge today partly through inheritance factors—particularly if one’s father was a strong leader—as well as through special qualities that an individual may display as they grow up. Current leaders have said that when young people are growing up they are constantly observed. One man said; ‘We look at them … look at them’.

The highest category of ceremony men (with a restricted title) is still present in community decision-making today. They are like ‘executive directors’ ensuring that the ‘ship stays on course’. Nelson Mandela (1994: 20–21) wrote about his favoured style of leadership: leading ‘like a shepherd’ from behind and ensuring ‘consensus’. This is the forte of the Port Keats leaders and one of the most used tools in their box. Even the most heated meetings generally resolve into a consensus mode. The consensus may not be
final, but it appears generally to confer respect to all concerned, particularly the traditional owners whose land they are on. People also have complex relations and dues to many of those present and they are probably cautious of continued divergence.

There is another way that it appears men may have gained power and leadership attributes since the 1930s. It occurs if someone has ‘gone away’. A person may go away to work as a stockman, a crocodile shooter, or the railway or in the armed services. Unfortunately, for some of the younger generation ‘going away’ today may mean a stretch in prison and this presents challenges for the Thamarrurr system of governance. Senior men and women are keen to explore ways for these younger generations to re-engage.

Good leaders are judged and emerge because of things like ‘they think about everybody [in the region]—not just themselves or their family’. Other factors such as level-headedness, fairness, honesty, generosity also play a part. There is a tendency particularly amongst the middle-aged to launch oneself into a particular issue, see resolution, and then break for a short time from the pressure of leadership. Often another leader(s) will then carry the burden until that person comes back for the next stage.

The pressures on these leaders are immense. They have to work in both domains. Thamarrurr being a COAG trial, leaders are constantly being requested to meet, present, engage, and articulate to government officials, media, politicians and the like. However, there is little respite at times because there are cultural matters to be considered, community politics to engage in, and countrymen to appease. Despite the dual role, most people seem to be fairly resolute.

In about 2002, the classic leaders of the clans and ceremony informed Thamarrurr management that they were aware that there are areas of governance that require a certain level of education, energy, and knowledge. They advised that they wished certain areas of their leadership to be delegated to the middle-aged emerging leaders and this occurred and continues to emerge.

A trial (3 sessions) involving the senior boys from Thamarrurr school aged about 12–15 years, and training sessions conducted by senior leaders, were relatively successful during early 2005 and may lead to more structured development in this area. The sessions involved classical governance issues being work-shopped in conjunction with contemporary governance issues. There is some discussion now about this being incorporated into the curriculum, with assessment carried out utilising senior elders.

Prior to 2002, many of the clans only had their own affairs to conduct because they were disenfranchised with regard to leadership and involvement. This has changed and they now have equal membership and say within the governance structure. It is fair to note, however, that some appear to have struggled with how they become involved and further development work is required. Therefore, the opportunities are there and the leadership may evolve to more sharing of contemporary governance in the future.
Two ways

The people of the Thamarrurr region use a combination of work benefits, welfare, classical hunting and other methods to survive today. Politically, the clans’ leadership and members speak about the aspirations of their members and their clan estate issues much the same as how it may have happened in the past. On bigger scale issues, that might possibly be described as ‘policy’ issues for the sub-region or region, clans may form alliances, or even join as a language block to present a particular argument or position.

The ‘tribe’ today may, in non-Aboriginal eyes at least, form more of a political voice than it did in the past. This may also be due to the fact that most of the people in the Thamarrurr region, particularly the young and middle-aged, speak Murrinh-patha as their main language even though their country in the classical sense belongs within another language group.

In a classical situation, the ceremonial leader of a clan would have intimate knowledge of ceremonies, stages, sequences, and objects. He would also have to address gathered clansmen if a situation or problem arose. He would lead the meeting but the final decision would be made in conjunction with those others present. Today in council meetings sometimes the ceremonial leader might speak to an issue (if he feels particularly strong about it), however, a case is mainly presented by clansmen who have been delegated the right to do so. The final decision, however, is usually made by consensus of all present.

Challenges to the classical system have developed during the past 15 years with the evolution of gangs of young people loosely based on classical affiliations. Their activities are often violent, indiscriminate, and damaging to the community. The anger they direct to each other may be a reflection of their own situation.

With the re-emergence of Thamarrurr, has also come the strengthening and recognition of the clan as an entity and building block of strong governance. Clans when they meet individually now talk about a desire to utilise their land, get jobs for their people, have their children regularly attend school, and have a viable economic future for their people.

Legitimate governance

Legitimacy appears relevant to the people whether it is in the classic sense or contemporary. The people see good legitimate governance as crucial to a better life for themselves and their children. The people of Darwin would possibly not be aware of all decisions made at Darwin City Council meetings. With Thamarrurr, word gets around very quickly. For people living in cramped conditions, legitimate governance that is recognised as legitimate by other governments is very important to the people.

This is not to say that sometimes individuals or groups don’t do things that go against the spirit and mores of the society. However, because the governance is legitimate, they are quickly brought back into order. As time goes on, and the perception of legitimacy expands to external quarters, other agencies make more use of the Thamarrurr structure.
The police are a good example as they now channel many of their community activities through the auspices of Thamarrurr.

As mentioned, ‘two-way’ legitimacy has improved and continues to. There is now a reasonable healthy regard between the governance layers, both internally and externally. They have gained this in various ways including regular recorded meetings, the ability to cover most issues, a desire to assist other agencies (e.g. the school), strong shared leadership, the ability to make the harder decisions and stick by them, respect for protocols (e.g. when government visitors require special briefings or meetings), and a perception that they want to make change for the better.

Decision-making in Thamarrurr Council meetings occurs in ways similar to classical arrangements. Leaders put forward their point of view, other members debate it, and then a decision is made, usually one that is reasonably fair to everyone. The Council CEO does have influence as well but it is based on fairly sound community development practice. This is viewed as a legitimate way of doing business.

When the gangs are in dispute there is often anger, tension, violence, and renewed alliances. However, since Thamarrurr has emerged, the leaders of the clans, including those who are fighting are more able to sit around a table and negotiate a truce (even if it is temporary) to alleviate the situation. This was not possible previously, much to the angst of the police and other residents including affected women and children. An exciting challenge now for Thamarrurr is to channel the anger, energy and leadership of the gangs into activities that will be of benefit to the community.

Thamarrurr is not just a council; it also is a micro-representation of the society itself. Issues emerge at family level and are communicated through to the clan leaders and the Thamarrurr representatives. This is not to say that it is all good communication—some groups, for example some women, may not be fully aware of what is going on. If they were perceived to be disenfranchised in classical times, they may also be today as well. The council nevertheless has discussed ways of better communicating with their constituents and is beginning to use the BRACS television system and other medium. They have also established a communications and community education section and process within the structure.

**Reflection of community values in the governance system**

Institutional values of the organisation are:

- Equal and fair representation
- A say for all
- Equal opportunity to access resources (e.g. housing)
- Good communication
- Respect for others
- Particular respect for elders.

Generally, these values are adhered to. When they are not, dissent occurs and the majority pull the minority back into gear.
Understanding of ‘whitefella’ concepts, communication difficulties, and education factors often create barriers that slow down discussion and decision-making. Often this conflicts with the non-Aboriginal and some Aboriginal people’s desire to get things done, to achieve results, and to make a difference. Thamarrurr over the past few years has had visiting agencies conduct workshops on particular themes e.g. land rights, economic development, the United Nations, mining and others.

**Decision-making processes, and conflict resolution**

The more educated Aboriginal people (usually aged 30–40 years) understand some corporate governance matters. However, most do not and put their trust in management. Many of the key staff are non-Aboriginal and some of them also struggle to properly understand their roles and responsibilities. Some act counter-productively to the values of Thamarrurr. Strong leadership, good accounting practices, and committed people at the very top of the organisation keep it on track. There could be a problem if these people left. There needs to be better succession planning and implementation. This applies to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal domains.

A major concern for the council now is with the young people. The council spends probably 30 per cent of its time working on issues associated with youth, and particularly the results of gang conflict. However, as time has gone on, they have, by closely working with police, begun to develop strategies that deal with the situation. They see it as an investment in the future. The clan groups and members of the council appear also to be developing the ability to make decisions that are fair to everyone and the whole region rather than just their own group.

4. **Innovative Practices and Approaches**

**Building governance capacity**

The governance structure has been established along classical lines and is still in an embryonic stage. The strength now lies in its recognition by its constituents as a legitimate, relevant form of governance. However, many of the council members are middle-aged and educated in an era when the mission had a high priority on the ability to be able to read and write. During the period of the 1980s to the late 1990s, this emphasis on literacy diminished because of a range of factors. Literacy has now declined to a critically low level; levels not near the level of the current middle-aged members. The community is now faced with a dearth of educated people ready to step into the forthcoming leadership roles.

People have been identified as potential spokespersons/leaders to work in the governance area. Most of the capacity building occurs on the job but there appears to be a need to have a mix of theory and exposure to other ideas as well. There has been little formalised training and this is an area that will require attention as the model develops.

Innovation is happening in the development of cross-cultural training for non-Aboriginals. It is anticipated that this will lead to ‘reverse’ type courses for Aboriginal
people with modules included on governance. In other words, Aboriginal people are saying that there are many cultural elements of non-aboriginal society that they cannot understand. Such courses would be conducted in the local dialect and in English, with a focus on the explanation of key concepts.

One of the most influential factors in the support of the Thamarrurr governance model has been the support and involvement of senior men and women right from the very start. They are the foundations and the teachers on how it has progressed. They continue to be heavily involved. Their own authority has been strengthened by this involvement in many spheres. Conversely, the lack of involvement by some youth (not all) has challenged it.

5. The Effectiveness of Current Governance Arrangements

The people of the Thamarrurr region want practical outcomes from their governance system. It may have some restrictions, but local government has provided the opportunity to have governance based on classical values and relationships coupled with a structure that demands transparency and legitimacy. The people are finding that if the key principles are in place then assistance from other quarters (e.g. banks) is more forthcoming. Aboriginal leaders are able to have their classical authority structures recognised and grounded in mainstream governance and subsequently are able to operate more effectively in the two domains. It has become apparent though, that both cultures value leaders who do not lose touch with the people or the issues.

The Thamarrurr region is fortunate in one sense in that it has, since 2003, been identified as a COAG pilot project. On the other hand, as a pilot, it has had to endure the spotlight of politicians, government officials, and the media to an extent never before seen in the Northern Territory and perhaps Australia. Territory cabinet has met there, the Prime Minister and Chief Minister have visited, and Ministers with accompanying parties of over 20 media and officials have stayed overnight. The pressure to entertain and to meet with people has been enormous.

Through intense lobbying and tools such as the Taylor report (CAEPR), governments and Australians have had to sit up and take note of the plight of Aboriginal people, how they receive services, and to think about what needs to happen in terms of policy change. Federal policy has moved significantly from an Aboriginal elected policy body (ATSIC) to shared responsibility agreements that are delivered at a regional/community level.

At a local level, the community, council members and officials have had to bear the onslaught. They have had to do this with the ‘normal’ amount of people resources. Government—particularly the Federal government—has allocated funding for a wide range of projects, however, Thamarrurr governance officials and members have had their workload increased dramatically. It would definitely assist the process if additional management capacity was forthcoming.

The change in governance arrangements in the Thamarrurr region had commenced well before the COAG process commenced. A new council, structured along classical lines
had already been established. In some ways, it was ready made for Shared Responsibility Agreements (SRAs) and the new way of doing business with the Commonwealth. But governments still appear to have limitations with providing skilled community development staff who do not just hand out money but can assist community governance structures with implementation. There are still challenges in terms of how they negotiate, monitor, and evaluate the programs.

Governance needs to be set up properly in the first place. It might take four to five years if there are many people but it is better to be thorough rather than sorry. Importantly, the people have to be informed at every stage. Similarly, there is no point in thrusting regionalisation or any other model upon people—let it happen naturally perhaps with ‘passive proactive facilitation’. If the governance system has relevance in a classical sense than all the better keeping in mind that there can never be total correlation.

Funding from governments should be goal orientated, positive, and negotiated between Federal and State authorities before it reaches the community.

Teams (change-agents) should be formed made up of Federal, State and local authorities, with common goals and actions. If there needs to be some specialisation during the process, the best person(s) should be designated regardless of jurisdictional arrangements. There needs to be leadership capacity, high level skills, and passion within these teams to achieve agreed outcomes.

The COAG ‘trial’ has without a doubt pulle d the Commonwealth and State government players together at least in a common understanding of the issues and the challenges. As time goes on the partnerships get stronger. Everybody now understands that there is no room for those who are just along for the ride. The establishment of an ‘Office of COAG’ at Wadeye, will I believe produce even better results.

The visit of the Prime Minister to those on the ground at Port Keats was an illustration of how far this community has progressed in terms of governance capacity and organisational ability. The local Army cadets met him at the airport. The council was able to meet and brief the PM and guests on the key issues. A tour highlighting projects in the community was carried out. They organised and formally presented the Prime Minister to the people, and were able to satisfy the demands and needs of the media. At the same time this was occurring, other members of the council were mediating a dispute between younger members of the community.

Many of the council members are now able to articulate the ‘Thamarrurr story’, the vision of where they want to go, and how they are going to get there. They have completed this task locally, at meetings in other parts of the Territory and interstate, and to heads of departments and politicians in Canberra. The carriage and development of this vision continues.
References


Desmarchelier, X. 2000. Background Presentation: A Historical and Cultural Overview to the Re-emergence of Thamarrurr a Traditional Form of Governance for the People of Wadeye Region, Unpublished paper prepared by the people of Wadeye on behalf of Thamarrurr Incorporated, Wadeye.


