

NTG Local Decision Making

Ngukurr Community Report

**Ground Up Monitoring and Evaluation
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Key Insights

- At Ngukurr, Local Decision Making (LDM) is an invitation from the community for government staff to work with, and support, them.
- LDM is seen as an opportunity for elders to demonstrate their leadership. When they show themselves to be builders of the community this gives life to young people and a path for them to follow.
- The criteria for success of LDM at Ngukurr are strong clan leaders and families. The reason to work through 'organisations' is because they are more visible to governments, and help focus government efforts towards these more fundamental criteria.
- The process of working on LDM agreements at Ngukurr has required revisiting traditional practices of governance in negotiating a new local agreement with government.
- Local Decision Making is through the Yugul Mangi Aboriginal Corporation (YMDAC) Local Decision Making Board. It draws on the Chair, Deputy Chair, Directors, YMDAC Executive Management as well as Cultural Governance Team and Strongbala Pipul Wanbala Bois Komiti (SPWBK). This integrated structure provides a good foundation for programs and services to be properly coordinated and mutually reinforcing.
- Sometimes when entering into the services people still feel 'controlled' because of the strict rules and policies that need to be followed, which pull away from how to grow healthy people and community.
- Proper services delivery design requires appropriate local understandings of both 'the service' and 'the people' that the service is for.
- LDM provides the opportunity for YMDAC to be strengthened through the governance group so it can become visible within Ngukurr, and to government and other organisations.
- The strength of LDM rests on continual support for culture. If this doesn't continue, there is danger both for LDM and for local people and their law.
- There is a role for the cultural governance group working with local leaders to provide M&E feedback to government through the local decision making group. They are the right people to do research and evaluation supporting government and supporting LDM (see LDM M&E in the future).

What we did

In Ngukurr, the CDU Ground Up team held initial conversations with the YMDAC Chairman Bobby Nunggumarjbarr and YMDAC CEO, who provided initial guidance. Authorisation for the project was provided by YMDAC Chairman Bobby Nunggumarjbarr and YMDAC Deputy Chair Daphne Daniels.

The research was led by experienced local researcher Ian Gumbula. It involved collaborative work between Ian as a senior advisor and researcher, Marlene Andrews as a researcher, and Marlene's daughter Sharona Rogers as a research mentoree. This team was supported on the ground in Ngukurr and Darwin by the CDU researcher.

It was agreed amongst the local research team, that the research should focus on hearing the voices of community leaders guiding LDM. Ian and Marlene facilitated 6 face-to-face discussions with elders and Yugul Mangi board members working with the CDU researcher in Ngukurr between 12-17 Sept 2021. These leaders were visited in their home or workplace, and Sharona took photos and videos. Ian also facilitated zoom meetings with two other key leaders and the CDU researcher.

A further round of interviews was conducted in mid-December 2021. These were carried out by Ian Gumbula working independently in Ngukurr. Ian spoke with 9 elders, YMDAC board members and community members, and focussed on a set of 5 interview questions. He made audio recordings of each of these conversations and shared them with the CDU researcher.

Ian worked with the CDU researcher to provide interpretations of the interview data and worked with Mercy Gumbula, another experienced researcher, to review all aspects of the report and make sure it aligned with local understandings. The report was finalised after Ian shared it with the Yugul Mangi Chair, Deputy Chair and other Ngukurr elders for their final approval, and after the CDU team received approval from the Yugul Mangi CEO.



Senior researcher Ian Gumbula speaking with Craig Rogers, Yugul Mangi board member.

LDM in Ngukurr

The community of Ngukurr was originally established as a mission station in 1908, and so has experienced a long history of colonisation and the need for various clan and language groups to co-exist. When talking about Local Decision Making, the elders often refer back to the origin stories of the community: remembering the time when traditional clan and land ownership relations were acknowledged in making an agreement about new ways of living together (as a community) and brokering safer ways of living with the Australian state (see the local leaders' statements below).

Three specific moments of agreement making were seen as important to the ongoing life of Ngukurr – the original agreement of the land in which people are constituted as clan and kin relations; the subsequent agreement that was made as different clans came together to live in the Roper River Mission (now Ngukurr); and now the agreement currently being made and ongoingly reviewed with the NT Government. These agreements take different forms, and work with different governmentalities – i.e., different kinds of relationship between people, places and government. The previous contract made between clan groups was not written down, nor was government explicitly a party to the agreement.

Current LDM agreements made with the NT government are seen as another iteration in this history of agreement making in Ngukurr. As such, they are a continuation of the practices through which traditional governance seeks to strengthen and maintain itself through good and respectful ways of working closely with government.

In reflecting on the LDM agreement and its associated activities, many local leaders saw the creation of a local Aboriginal organisation as a way to become visible to government, and to have some control over ways in which government funding and support could be channelled in productive ways on the ground. The functioning of this group is therefore to maintain appropriate relations between local clan estates through traditional

governance arrangements, while also being able to connect well enough to government agencies and western governance practices.

The Yugul Mangi Development Aboriginal Corporation (YMDAC) was established in 2008. It had been running for 10 years when its board decided to initiate an LDM agreement with the NT government. YMDAC is guided by a board of 14 directors who represent the 7 local clan groups. The Strongbala Pipul Wanbala Bois Komiti (SPWBK) is a subcommittee appointed by the YMDAC. The committee consults broadly and provides recommendations to the YMDAC Local Decision Making Board. This is a valuable consultation and decision making mechanism that informs strong locally based decisions on foundations of local knowledge and needs.

The YMDAC supports, and is guided by, a Cultural Governance Group. The Cultural Governance group have generated a 'clan based management model' which represents 7 clans (Ngalakan, Mara, Alawa, Wandarrang, Nunggubuyu, Ngandi and Ritharrngu), 4 semi moieties (Budal, Guyal, Mirrunggun and Mambali), 2 moieties (Yirritja and Dhuwa) and 3 cultural positions (Minggirringi, Junggayi and Dalyan). The work of shaping appropriate processes for clan governance to guide YMDAC and LDM is ongoing, and is seen as vital to the respectful and sustainable development of businesses, services and organisations.



Researcher Marlene Andrews (left) and research mentoree Sharona Rogers (right) speaking with Kevin Rogers, Wuyagiba Study Hub Chairman.

The YMDAC would like to work closely with the Millwarrrarra Aboriginal Corporation, which is coordinated by the Traditional Owner group.

YMDAC have signed two NTG LDM Multi-Agency Partnership agreements:

- 28 May 2018 – Multi-Agency Partnership Agreement and Implementation Plan
- 25 August 2021 – YMDAC LDM Implementation Plan

The first of these agreements was designed as a collaboration between YMDAC and staff from DCMC and facilitated by consultants. It was the first of its kind to be signed in the NT. The stated aim of this agreement was to:

“create a future where culture and values connecting Yugul Mangi people to Country are sustained and celebrated, and where children and grandchildren have much improved opportunity for their health, well-being and prosperity”

The implementation plan of this agreement began with the existing capacity and strengths of YMDAC, and focussed on three socio economic priorities: business development and contracting, local jobs and training and community-based service delivery. As well as three strategic enablers: capacity building, MAP plan implementation and resourcing, effective communication and engagement.

The second agreement refined these priorities to be in line with how the YMDAC board wanted to express their vision, and now works with the focus areas of: Cultural Strength & Respect,

Governance & Capacity, Community Wellbeing, Economic Empowerment and Local Jobs for Local People.

There are a number of prominent projects where the careful work of connecting to traditional law and governance, the Yugul Mangi Development Corporation (YMDC) and government departments is being worked through. These include the police precinct and cultural justice area (working waitbala and blekbala law), ongoing road maintenance and other construction contracts, CDP and youth diversion. It's in these and other areas that the visible effects of LDM can be seen by the broader community, and where local leaders hope important outcomes for emerging generations of healthy young people will be felt.

Local Evaluative Responses

In Ngukurr, research took the form of unstructured or semi-structured discussions with elders, Yugul Mangi board members and community members. It was guided by local leaders and their knowledge of their place. Ian worked with CDU to show this story so it can be visible to government staff. They shared their experiences of being involved in the LDM process, outcomes arising and what good local decision making means to them. The local researchers have endorsed these findings and shared them with key elders.

Services delivery design

Prior to LDM, work was already happening through Stronger Communities for Children. But when the LDM policy arrived it helped to show other areas that could be dealt with and connected in. Now through LDM, it's possible to begin focusing on quality services design and delivery. This allows us to follow the voices of previous leaders and helps their vision to become real.

“ We have been working through Stronger Communities for Children for 14 years, building capacity and inspiring young people. Already had community people as leading voices for the people. That helped us with the cultural governance and governance mapping for Ngukurr. Trying to get that structure into shape, and balancing both ways.

“ We're following our past and present leader in their vision, and now focus on quality service delivery and development. We're watching and listening to their song, dreams, visions, and now placing into services delivery. Now we have to be in the middle of navigating this.

This means focusing on changing ways of designing programs and services so they may be more suitable for people in Ngukurr and aligned with ways that young people need to be supported to grow up strong in their foundations.

“ When going from the ground, in homelands and in services all elements are there together – language, artefacts, songs, land, ceremony. All these things are tied together and incorporated. The elders are the decision makers there. We need to get funding for these decision makers and services that are all tied in together, all incorporated.

“ Often government are not acknowledging what young people are good on. They see the bad side but are things we are missing out from that person's way of doing things. Start from the way they are comfortable to do things. Instead of putting them somewhere else and trying to teach. Give time and space for person to stand in their own time.

Support for this includes having control over who gets funding for the services, and who is working in the community. It can also mean careful collaborative work, supporting Munanga (nonIndigenous people) who may not know the correct way to

go if they don't have the right guidance (see the example of the social worker, case study 2).

Integrated local services

With the establishment of the Yugul Mangi office and the governance group it is becoming easier to coordinate social programs in ways which make sense with clan governance and ceremonies, and making visible kinship networks through which children, people with mental health problems and others can be cared for. It also makes more visible the gaps where we have no control.

“ When we saw the gaps on the practical side of things in management, we've been working with the government about our needs and systems.

“ We are realising what we don't have any more – like good education – and working on this. Back in the mission times we were independent and had good education. We need to take back control over who comes in and what services are happening.

“ Housing, employment and youth diversion are all able to come in line with the place and the well-being of people. Integrated, and not having 5 different organisations all duplicating the same services.

“ Youth program and family supports program provides social supports through the social worker who can link in through the youth program and with other people doing different things – this happens under the supervision of the governance group that advises and guides.

“ Need to make the peacemaking stronger – Watjarr' and Gundul. Mediating so there is not just one judge, everybody is judging, and we are not just blaming one person we are blaming each other. That is a strong foundation to be accepted.

LDM will never completely resolve the tensions between cultural and organisational practices

There have always been traditional ways of making decisions and doing it through the right cultural way. But you need to know what you are doing. You need specialist skills in ceremony, dancing and connecting to land. Now this strength is important when working with government.

“ I know both sides of the law the whitefella law and the cultural law. I work side-by-side with them. They are in the back of my mind all the time; the law is already there. The cultural law is supporting me, and that's how I operate myself.

“ Can I handle cultural way or government way and how to marry those? If don't do it right, can be a wrong way marriage, so have to be careful. Result would be an unhappy marriage, unhappy decision. And these things are affecting many, not just a few.

It's important with LDM to be cautious

This is because it's easy to be distracted from what is the right way to do things, and all activities need to be properly mediated through the local leaders and then rules of waitbala governance.

“ If local decision making is to be done effectively, we have to be careful not to be overwhelmed by too many outside demands and too ambitious plans and not enough recognition of what we have already got, what we are already able to do and the ability to join up all those things from our understanding and cultural way to employment.

“ We have to go by the rules and follow the policy, if something goes wrong, we need to fix it up before moving to another step. Government plans its services according to their own logic.

Being 'in place' is critical to the success of LDM initiatives

Most often the government makes an agreement with an organisation, but organisations are just a way for groups and their places to become visible to government and focus funding to where it is important. The Land has law, and everything is lawful, you can't just do anything you want. If we put something there that is not rightful, we will harm ourselves, our programs, services, and funding.

“ We are cultural people respect our mother in law and father in law and boundaries of where we can go. We're trying to get back and fix ourselves with our culture and custom. With community and with ceremony.

“ We can solve problems in our own stompin' ground, instead of influences from the western society and America. Want our kids to stay in the community, deal with them cultural way (when they get in trouble with the police)

“ When other departments and people come in and don't know do things, the community get angry, and they get sick.

“ Everything is here, not like the long-grass people who have got lost, everything here country, culture. This is the best possible position to receive safety. Cousins might be strangers to each other in town, but the country tells them they're connected, and they can heal their fights.

Intergenerational LDM

We need to make sure adults and young people are in local decision making together. LDM can provide intergenerational learning and awareness when young people are involved and called in to be part of the local decision making work.

“ Young people are learning new skills and how to work with elders. Some young people don't yet know the skills, and cultural knowledge the elders have.

“ I'm trying to pass on my knowledge to the younger generation so they can carry on. Make sure they hold that strong law behind them all the time. Make sure they can stand up very, very strong for the benefit of their community.

But what is also happening here, is that young people have their own needs and understanding of what self-determination means. So, they also need to be able to share their understandings.

“ Younger ones tell different story, they want a house of their own. Can see their needs, having house of their own isn't happening. They want to have a house away from their parents.

“ The young people now days, they see the government not taking notice to what their needs are, they think alright this is what you're going to do to us, and they turn their backs on them and be quiet. They are not going to be wanting to say anything.

LDM and external services providers

It can be difficult to work with other organisations towards good LDM when they are focussed on building themselves but not the community. People working in these organisations are often not accountable to the community, but to their organisation. A key area where more of this needs to happen is around the school curriculum.

- “Need to address the school curriculum. Kriol is first together, need to keep supporting Kriol language program, if want local decision making, culture and language are first
- “Stakeholders are sometimes too separate on their own work to collaborate together. Housing, employment, youth diversion – not connecting to community place. What is important is if we are actually benefitting. How to help with wellbeing of people. How to make a strong community.
- “If things come through Yugul Mangi, they can stay connected to community. Programs for troubled youth, family violence or justice, there are projects there. Yugul Mangi didn't have capacities to support and help on family issues in the past. Would talk to people and identify area to get funding for. But now we have resources to help.
- “What matters to me is to have a comfortable life with services and program. If enter into services still feel controlled. In signing, who is the person or group in community who is accountable to government and helping see if community is benefitting? They need person or group who is looking and seeing if its good, how it is running.

- “For example, for housing, this has come into Yugul Mangi, but other people need to be guiding it through that cultural way. The cultural governance group can work with these issues and support the housing work. They need to be the people engaging the service and offering cultural support for that service (e.g., if that house or service gets cursed).

The LDM agreement as an ongoing process

Having the written agreement with government is an important way to keep in focus what we are trying to achieve together and knowing who is responsible for what. But there is a danger in that agreement becoming too solid. This piece of work should be working closely with the blekbala system.

- “We need to get the agreements properly in place so that we can ensure a good partnership into the future with government. This includes working properly with the blekbala system which wasn't happening properly with the Shire, now it is done properly.
- “This document needs to be modelled by leaders as a living document. The first agreement struggled because it was too detailed, and it focussed on tasks rather than visions. They needed to help us to review the plan, tell us what we are doing right and help us to collaborate This is our second one, this time we are seeing for ourselves from there to the future.
- “Now make it work with collaborative approach, listen to others what we're trying to achieve. We use balance in cultural projects. For youth diversion, for all programs.

Local Leaders' Statements



Walter Rogers discussing previous agreement making, when the seven clans came together to live on the mission.

After the 1940 wet they made decision, come up here [to the mission]. Elders with the Traditional Owners of seven other tribes. The Traditional Owners made the decision verbally in church, the Roper River church. The decision was made that we would live together on this one country. We made this decision and agreed to it verbally. We didn't use pen and paper, was elders' agreement. We should stand by that agreement that was accepted by 7 tribes. Now we are making a new agreement with government, and this time it will be written down. Customary and tribal justice should be in that one, that agreement, with government.



Daphne Daniels on Local Decision Making as connecting local leadership and local services delivery outside of the governance structures of the Shire council.

I was a councillor for 4 years; I saw all the gaps. There was no voice, nothing was getting through. Local government was always focussing on the municipality, not on the social side, and people miss out. Promises were too empty, and everything went to Katherine. We were suffering, and they were busy building up Katherine, building up the centre. Now I can focus on quality service delivery and development. In part following what leaders said, leadership hope and directions. Watching and listening to their song, dreams and visions. Now placing this into services delivery, we have to be in the middle of navigating this.



Bobby Nunggumarjbarr on the process of developing an LDM agreement

We were thinking about how we were going to make the government listen to us and how we were going to go forward. We were talking about it a lot, there was a lot of work through our journey to get it to this level. We done a lot of hard work, a lot of thinking, a lot of frustration around how we were going to put it together. We did that work with all the leaders and the 7 language groups and all the outside leaders that come together with us and we work side-by-side with them and make sure this document was strong to make better service for our community and children's children to leave behind. Because some of us won't be here any longer and we worked really hard on this document and I hope this document is now stronger to make sure we work well in the future.



Ian Gumbula on upholding traditional law and practices in making decisions

We are together, people and land. We can't just do anything unless the law requires. It can't be us making something up about the land. The land already has law. Song has law, dances have law. Everything is lawful. All around life is bounded by the law. I can't attack that law, because it is the law. The law will let me know how to use it, how I want to live, protect my land, how we go back and do it in a way that is already there. Decision making is like this, and so if we put something in there that is not rightful it will harm ourselves, our program, services, funding.



Owen Turner on LDM as elder leadership creating futures for young people

Community want to see their ideas are real. If you go back to the olden days, our leaders were builders of the community, and this gives life to the community. Now we are building a new vision for young people who see they will be taking that role. We are not only building things for the community but building a way for young people to follow. Young people need to see we are leading them and giving them an opportunity to be involved.



William Hall sharing words of caution about LDM with other elders and Traditional Owners

If you're going to put through your agreement with the government, it's a dangerous thing to do to because the government might put padlock on it and then we can't get anywhere. Going to be stuck in the middle. So be careful, think about it and talk about it, come back to the community and get more information. That's my opinion, to the board and to the Chairman, for the business in the government. This is our land; this is our community. We'll be living in it for the rest of our lives. And our children will take over when we go. I want to put that in black and white for everyone. Please listen. Be careful. Thank you.



Craig Rogers on the importance of LDM in supporting community cultural justice

When people come out of jail, they are still not free. Their life is all mix up, but goodness is inside. We need to help clear bad things for them. If they get 6 months, then 3 months in gaol and 3 months rehabilitation on country sounds like the best idea. Turn outstation into rehab, better for men, better for women. When meet this place here, stompin' ground they will feel the path of their own community, own country is teaching them respect.

CASE STUDY 1

‘Bringing up’: a local guide to the design of services delivery generating healthy people-places

Elders consistently reiterate local understandings of how services can follow traditional processes of development, where growing up the young people is a model for good governance and service delivery practice.

“ Start with tribal and clan relationship, then family, then the personal. This is not being taught in schools. First, we have that unique clan and kin identity. Have this before build the personal. Be proud of who we are. We are the oldest culture in the world.

Like learning to walk. Start from there, simplest way to develop. Look at law to build them up.

Take things slowly, things develop slowly. Then support will come from people themselves, once build them up, then they go. Have elders as guides for that and working with government.

That’s our major goal, building up from grass roots, making sure they can run businesses. Need qualification so they can come back and run businesses. Government policy of self-determination and we need support to reach goal of Aboriginal people to take control, build structure so people can take control of communities and going back to country to create tribal communities. ”

If the service is focussed on growing people’s right and connected identity through kin relations, then local control begins to emerge as people and country become strong in their connections and their authorities.

CASE STUDY 2

Transition plans: a proposal

Amidst the focus on development in LDM, elders also emphasised how equality between people, and in partnerships is to be brought about.

“ We are not yet focussed on what do we do to make us equal. How do we get there? Through transition plans. These are not yet in the agreement, but maybe the governance group decides this and reviews what is happening.

This local decision means for our local people to actually be in charge here. You are not under or above us – we are equal. If have munanga manager, also have local manager. Munanga CEO then local CEO. That way we can say how it’s going really well. ”

Such transition plans would initiate new roles in services where there is time for Munanga leaders to work with and support their local successors. This practice is already happening in reverse – a team of local cultural authorities have been working closely with the new Munanga social worker, mentoring her into right forms of local practice. The process is recognised locally as a great success.

CASE STUDY 3

Watjarr': standing in between both laws and justice, making it happen in the right way and in the right place

“ We want our kids to stay in the community and deal with them cultural way when they get in trouble with the police. ”

“ Got a new police building. That's really good for the police but can we be part of that justice? ”

Yugul Mangi signed a contract for the construction of a new police precinct in Ngukurr. The police station is integrated with the cells and court rooms, and local people won't have to be held in Katherine while waiting for outcomes of court matters. This is happening alongside the development of cultural justice and mediation practices. To make sure the new precinct is not just 'good for police' it will have to integrate with local cultural justice and support an alternative place for law and justice than just gaol.

“ The Yugul Mangi governance group helps us to put it [the mediation work] together, and to start making this work for our community. We're also working with magistrate and the NAAJA lawyers. They are giving the legal side. In our own country, own outstation, we see a place there where we can make something better for the next generation. ”

“ How will the police and cultural justice work together? The important thing is that we are controlling the decision making and the police are offering a service. With domestic violence, when someone has to go to prison or to hospital, how does the whole family heal? If we support people here in the right way, that healing will take place on country, not in the gaol, and family and partners will feel that too. Family and partners will be there, they will be listening to the elders and feeling something from the country. ”

What's working? What needs more work?

	What's working?	What needs more work?
Self-determination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integrated functioning of the Yugul Mangi board, and Strongbala Pipul Wanbala Bois Komiti and Cultural Governance Group sub-committees. Separation of aspects of local governance from the Regional Council. Increased number of s19 leases allowing more development. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue to acknowledge and strengthen elder/clan representation on the Yugul Mangi board and in local governance roles. Continued combined support through local leadership in re-designing and connecting services so they are aligned with local needs, and processes for growing strong new generations.
Place-based	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Better visibility and foundational role of clan governance in decision making, development, services delivery and working with government. Building and allocating the YMDAC work offices. Building local police precinct. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong and ongoing commitment to the development of local cultural justice initiatives. Continuing focus on language learning amongst services providers. Understandings of local language in governance and services delivery e.g., LDM agreement in Kriol.
Flexible	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintaining LDM agreements as living documents. Provision of select tenders and prioritisation of YMDAC in government contracting. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commitment to ongoing work areas like CDP, health services, youth diversion to local needs, including changing policy and legislation where necessary so services suit local way of life. Giving opportunity for young people to see and learn about tender processes and contracting.
Co-design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support for cultural leaders. Respected and productive relationships with NTG regional staff. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Greater attention to local/ cultural practices in the design of services. More working together on work options and transition plans (see case study 2) so can have local leadership and culturally appropriate services.
Community control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased scope for selection of correct local leaders and future leaders. Key leaders working as intermediaries between local Aboriginal corporations (YMDAC, Millwarrparra), Regional Council and government agencies. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As LDM grows, key leaders work in Yugul Mangi to drive selection of other decision makers around services area, land agreements and all decision making.

Ngukurr Community Report Authorisation

A draft copy of this report was shared with the YMDAC Chairman and CEO by email, and changes that they suggested were incorporated. A draft of the report was also returned to all senior leaders who had participated in the Ground Up M&E research, and they were happy to authorise the version that appears here.



Senior researcher Ian Gumbula reviewing project report with (top left to right): Bobby Nunggumarjbarr, Daphne Daniels; (bottom left to right) Walter Rogers, William Hall, Craig Daniels and Owen Turner (not pictured).