Evidencing the emergence of healthy Indigenous communities through Ground Up monitoring and evaluation

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Abstract: *This paper focuses on our Ground Up monitoring and evaluation research in two community development projects where local Yolŋu researchers and Elders supported university-based researchers to reconsider their understanding of what 'evidence' is, and how it works in monitoring and evaluation. In these projects, local Yolŋu researchers insisted that strong practices of monitoring and evaluation were always already being undertaken by Elders and Traditional Owners guiding and shaping the unfolding networks of kin in place. In re-presenting this work here, we suggest that, evidencing good community development did not involve 'collecting evidence' as practice of data gathering, or 'making evidence' through collaborative knowledge work. Instead, it involved 'making evident' to partner organisations the character of particular Indigenous sovereign knowledge and governance practices, and the flourishing that these practices enable. We suggest that such considerations are important in the context of recent Australian Government commitments to Indigenous evaluation through its Indigenous Evaluation Strategy (2020) and, more broadly, in policy realms that impact Indigenous Australian life.*

Introduction

In 2020, the Australian Government released its new Indigenous Evaluation Strategy (IES) (Productivity Commission 2020). The strategy provides a whole-of-government framework guiding the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of Indigenous-specific and mainstream programs and policies affecting Indigenous people.

The IES was created to address the notable absence of M&E processes that could properly guide decision making around programs and services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Hudson et al. 2017; Kelaher et al. 2018). Advocating for increased involvement of M&E in program delivery, it looks to enhance the opportunity for iterative improvement in the design and

delivery of services for Indigenous people and to support forms of Indigenous-led M&E specifically attuned to Indigenous knowledges and ways of life (Ayre et al. 2021; Robinson et al. 2021; Grey et al. 2018; Campbell et al. 2014).
The cornerstone of the IES is a commitment to:

> … put Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at its centre, and emphasise the importance of drawing on the perspectives, priorities and knowledges of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people when deciding what to evaluate and how to conduct an evaluation (Productivity Commission 2020:2).

As a research group frequently commissioned to develop M&E for Aboriginal programs and policies from the ground up, we are often confronted by differences between the M&E methods and data sets requested by government and non-government organisations, and M&E processes being enacted by Elders and local researchers. Following the guidance of local Elders and researchers, we find ourselves developing new understandings of evidence that can take seriously the intentions of organisations seeking to improve their programs while remaining faithful to Aboriginal sovereignty.

In this paper, we revisit our Ground Up M&E research on two community development projects, where local Yolŋu researchers and Elders supported the university-based researchers in the team to re-evaluate their understanding of what evidence is and how it might work to better inform the M&E program. This idea emerges from an insistence by local researchers that there are strong practices of M&E already in place and being exercised by Elders and Traditional Owners (TOs) as they work collaboratively with external partners and stakeholder organisations on community development projects. Therefore, in the context of a community development program, initiating M&E becomes about engaging with and making visible sovereign knowledge practices that are always already at work.

For the Ground Up team, this has entailed a shift away from conventional understandings of 'collecting evidence' as something found 'out there' (Kelly et al. 2021; Ens 2012) and from 'making evidence' as something formed and configured for particular purposes (Coultas 2020; Rhodes and Lancaster 2019; Corcoran and Edward Thomas 2021). Instead, we tell the story of Yolŋu Elders and researchers expressing a commitment to evidencing as 'making evident' structures and arrangements that sustain Yolŋu forms of life.

Backstory

In 2019 the Ground Up team at Charles Darwin University (CDU) was approached by the Northern Land Council (NLC)[1] to be involved in their new Community Planning and Development (CP&D) program. The program supports TO groups interested in investing royalty funds to establish projects recognised for 'community benefit'.

The NLC engaged us to initiate Ground Up M&E of these community development projects at two sites. In each of these places we worked with TO groups, local researchers and the NLC to provide ongoing feedback and recommendations around good practice within community development program meetings, including focusing on specific projects initiated by the TOs.

Our work in the Ground Up research team at Charles Darwin University has evolved out of relationships between Yolŋu and Balanda (non-Indigenous) researchers, linguists and philosophers stretching back over many years. More recently, local researchers have guided these collaborations by working in their home places across many other parts of the Northern Territory.

Our Ground Up research is always carried out under the authority of local Elders and negotiated amongst the research team and funding organisations. This work takes seriously the knowledge and governance traditions of Aboriginal people where the research is carried out, and of government and non-government funding agencies requesting the work. This means that in each new context, a new configuration of TOs, Elders, and researchers is brought to life. We use the name 'Ground Up' as a handle for external organisations who may be looking for assurance of an identifiable research method and approach, whilst maintaining space for each project team to negotiate project designs in alignment with local Aboriginal governance and the needs of the funding body.

Some of the principles of Ground Up research can be traced back to the work of Helen Verran

and Yolŋu Elders who facilitated the development of an educational philosophy and practice at Yirrkala in the 1980s, which took seriously the Yolŋu metaphysics of people-place[2] and the careful unfolding of renewed people-places and the means for maintaining them for coming generations (Verran, Spencer and Christie 2022). These philosophies and practices have helped to guide Ground Up work, over a long period, through a variety of projects on topics such as: homelessness and itineracy (Maypilama et al. 2004), community engagement (Campbell and Christie 2008; Christie 2014), housing (Christie 2013; Spencer et al. 2020), health communication (Christie and Verran 2014), financial literacy (Christie 2015), governance and leadership (Christie et al. 2015; Dányi and Spencer 2020), volunteer work with non-government organisations (Spencer and Christie 2017), disaster management (Spencer et al. 2018), water management (Hayashi et al. 2021; Christie 2013; Spencer, Dányi and Hayashi 2019) and COVID management (Wanambi et al. 2020).

So while Ground Up is different in every site where it attends to various problems in consortia with very specific sovereign people-places, we have found that philosophies and practices which emerge each time often have resonance across sites and moments. In this case, we attend to an interesting, consistent approach to evidence that emerged in the work of particular Elders and researchers.

In our work with the NLC, Ground Up M&E was initiated with Yolŋu TOs living in the former mission towns of Galiwin'ku and Gapuwiyak in East Arnhem Land. The role of the local researchers in each place was critical. They were the bridge between the Elder authorities (and their stories) and the academic researchers' attention to the M&E requirements of the NLC.

In the following sections, we detail several key elements that emerged in our M&E work in each place and have helped to grow new understandings of 'evidencing'. We've found it important to use different voices in sharing each of these elements. We first present a description of Yolŋu M&E by Nyomba Gandaŋu, a Yolŋu Elder and senior researcher on the project, who from the outset insisted that M&E was something always already happening within everyday Yolŋu life. Second, we present examples of Ground Up work, making evident the M&E processes guiding community development in each project site. Michaela tells these stories as ethnographic accounts of research collaboration guided by local researchers Nyomba Gandaŋu and Emmanuel Yunupiŋu. Then, finally, Michael and Michaela present a discussion of the organisational practices that changed within the NLC in the context of the M&E work.

Part 1: Monitoring and Evaluation 'Yolŋu-Way' by Nyomba Gandaŋu

Let me tell you about M&E as I see it, from my Yolŋu eyes. For us Yolŋu in Galiwin'ku, M&E is always there. It is something that is always being done within our Yolŋu life. Balanda eyes are not tuned up to see how grandmothers and grandfathers are guiding the young people, but it is there. It is happening. Yolŋu M&E does not get written down on many, many pieces of paper, the same as Balanda M&E does, so our work often seems invisible to people who are not Yolŋu.

When I shared my understanding of Yolŋu M&E with Michaela and Michael, I made a short video, speaking in Yolŋu Matha (language). They transcribed and translated this video, and we made this text, so we could share my story with the NLC.

Monitoring

… is a practice which Yolŋu are always engaged in as part of everyday collective life, assessing and caring for children, helping ceremony to happen and working together in various different ways.

> Nhaltjan ŋali dhu djäga ga marŋgithirri ga waŋgany-manapan, litjalaŋgal wäŋaŋur?
> How will we (you and I) act with care, and learn, and come together, in our own place?

... [it] involves specific assessment of certain qualities or attributes as they emerge or are further developed in a variety of aspects of community life.

I'm looking at monitoring as the way that 'how we monitor our environment, in ceremony, in workplaces, in family and also in the community'. That's how I understand for monitoring, like in three ways, like safety, learning and education, and wellbeing.

Evaluation

While monitoring involves ongoing practices of finding out and checking in around work that is happening, 'evaluation' helps to specify a way of seeing that accompanies monitoring, allowing the stories emerging from this research to be read and arranged in productive ways.

Or more strongly, evaluation is to do with a moment where what has been done is also seen by a broader Yolŋu polity and become known as having been achieved. This involves not just Balanda seeing and recognising something has been done, but also having this recognised by Yolŋu.

> Nhaltjan nhe ga nhäma nhokal communityŋur Yolŋuny ŋalapalnha ga djamarrkuli', worruŋuny miyalknha, worruŋuny dirramuny, even ŋunha buŋgulŋur.
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> How do you see within your community [not what do you see in your community, but how do you do the work of seeing] senior Yolŋu and children, old women and old men, and even in the ceremonial practice. (NLC 2020:12)

For that M&E, we are watching and guiding, so that gakal can come out. Gakal is difficult to translate into English, but we Elders see healthy gakal as like a young Yolŋu's revealing of their own particular (totemic) ancestral style — the way they walk, talk, hunt, relate to their kin, solve problems, or take up an issue. Gakal refers to that. Gakal performs as it produces evidence. We are watching young people's performance in ceremony and the workplace. We are watching for that outcome, a healthy child who knows who they are and how to dance, and when this child is healthy our Yolŋu society is healthy too. We are not just watching for this in the ceremony, but also in the family, in the workplace and at school. We know those children are strong, they have their gurruṯu (kinship relations) and speak their language. Even if that child at school is considered by Balanda teachers to be vulnerable or cheeky, we know they have a strength which needs to be supported.

When I made another video talking about M&E, I explained it like this:

> Yolŋu-way…that's where you look at the gakal and you decide whether it is coming to the surface or the outside, or whether it's producing work. And [Balanda-way] the monitoring is the (Balanda) gakal whereby you look at him and see how he or she is motherless, or vulnerable. How it is that he is working in that area as services within the family or out in the community or in the ceremony. That's where you can look at those two gakals. If it's very good, it's both of those things I'm working on. That's the thing I'm learning about. I'm holding those two ways of evaluation and monitoring together. (Gandaŋu 2020a)

Balanda have their own gakal, and it is different to the Yolŋu way. But if we are careful, our M&E can work together. It is like working with mukuyuk (pandanus), collecting the fibres and weaving them as a mat.

> When it starts from small (the very centre of the mat), that is how we work and we make things neat and straight so it does not get crooked. This is how the law has to be for kinship, gakal, how we can help the kids. We share true knowledge. Where is their ancestral origin place, where you come from, what this design and skill at weaving can tell you. The weaving has a story, this is how we should be working so it does not get crooked. That is what the mat tells you in its design, it tells the right behaviours. It can be there well finished and beautiful, so nothing gets mixed up with other things. If we start small it can get bigger, and that is like the life of the children. The mat can demonstrate the child. So, the child grows to have more knowledge, understanding, so the child can grow knowing their knowledge and spirit...grow in Yolŋu footprints before walking in the footprints of others. (Gandaŋu 2020b)

When the mat is finished, there are many threads and tassels hanging out from the edges. Those threads, they have been woven strongly and carefully on the inside, then, as you come to the outside, they are like the services (like the government or the NLC) that can be helping and working with us. They are hanging off the edges of that strong Yolŋu mat and connected with our Yolŋu ways. Starting small, and ensuring a

strong Yolŋu foundation, before then connecting with others. The child's body is connected to all these services, and they are supported and guided to grow as a Yolŋu connected to kin and place, under Yolŋu authority.

Part 2: Stories of evidencing community development in two sites

In every site of Ground Up research, the Elder authorities of the people whom the research affects are the first to be contacted for approval of the university-based team. If the Elders are happy with the proposal, they appoint a lead Yolŋu researcher who they trust to be a good listener and work properly within the networks of kin to which they are accountable, and who wish to develop (or already have) experience working with the university. Good research methods emerge through conversations, so questionnaires and other conventional research practices are largely avoided in favour of traditional practices of conversation, agreement making and storytelling. What follows are examples of this work in the two project sites.

Nyomba at Galiwin'ku

Nyomba emerged as the person who was best connected to the authority of the Galiwin'ku TO group and had the experience to work in an academic context. In preparing to do M&E work, Nyomba and Michaela would sit together. Nyomba would talk about the community development projects in Galiwin'ku, including offering direction around who else to speak to when hearing stories from TOs about what had been happening and how things were going.

Very often, the first thing that these TOs would start to talk about, were raypirri' camps. The Yolŋu term raypirri' can be loosely translated as 'discipline' and in this context was about young people learning Yolŋu law and right ways of behaving under the authority of Elders. There has been a history of raypirri' camps in Galiwin'ku aimed at giving young people who have been brought up on the mission experience of hunting and gathering and practicing culture on Country (other Aboriginal communities around Australia often encourage such 'back-to-Country' expeditions for their young people). There were two sets of funded raypirri' camps run through the CP&D program, one on the small island of Murruŋga, and the other in homelands around Galiwin'ku supported by other TOs and their clan groups. Here we present two vignettes, quotes taken from discussion with Senior Yolŋu involved in coordinating these camps.

Jonathon Roy and raypirri' at Murruŋga

> What I am doing in my small Country, my homeland, is small but getting big. Those children get healthier, the Country gets healthier and I feel healthier too. In Galiwin'ku, they are making a mess. I'm trying to give them business into their Country, outstation. Do business out, not into town. So can treat things properly and learn properly. Every outstation is branch of Elcho Island. Each tribe will be getting business. I'm showing the way for what they will do. I'm tribe Mäl̲arra. The clay we stopped using it. They were not using it – clay, rock, ochre. We are lifting up the rightful dreaming. Reminding the kids of the real Mäl̲arra dreaming, leave it where it is. On the island teaching how to hunt and cut it and eat it. The kids come back very healthy – Jonathan Roy. (NLC 2020c:19)

Here, Jonathon Roy, identifies evidence of an important aspect of the raypirri' camp which brings the children to perform their rightful Mäl̲arra dreaming. Running these camps involved gathering the young people within his very extended family group and working with a local ranger group to take a boat to his homeland Murruŋga. The children would spend time hunting, fishing, dancing, speaking the language which belongs to that place, and in doing so, these very practices were also evidencing community development. Before these camps, the children had not been in a position to use exactly the right sort of clay for ceremony. The Murruŋga ochre is the one which belongs to the Mäl̲arra clan, and when the children return to the homeland for raypirri' the right clay is able to be dug, for the appropriate ceremonies to be enacted by the young people under Elder supervision. Re-enacting the Mäl̲arra Dreaming in place, the children become strong by digging and using the clay, remembering the right ownership and relations between themselves, the clay and the

Country. He also points out that in their kinship networks, in ancestral place, they can learn the proper way to divide and share food. When the children go out from 'town' or 'mission' to the homelands, this is where these ancestral identities can be remembered and straightened up. In town everything is all mixed up, but by remembering these relations to homelands and showing how these are part of Yolŋu life and child-raising, relations back in Galiwin'ku are improved. This is the force and process and evidence of Yolŋu 'community development'.

Don Winimba and dancing the right people-places

> Major problem with the raypirri' camps was that the kids were all going mixed. Girls alright can mix, but boys can't. Boys can't be taught if all the clans are mixing. Only they can dance if related through family. If not the right way, they can't dance or do men's ceremony. Doesn't work. TOs have to see, do it by clan groups and looking to the season to see how to work. The school runs Learning from Country, and the rangers have Caring for Country. This is manymak (good), but these are general. When rangers or schools take kids out, camping is all mixed and go to other people's places. But for raypirri', this makes the kids get confused. Children can feel that if they go someone else's land for law, feel a bit strange. How to do this on someone else's land? We can ask children from other clans to come [to the camps], because we are all connected, but the owner of that place has to run it. This is how our manikay (songline) system works. (NLC 2021:11)

Don Winimba, practicing his Yolŋu M&E, was worrying about the way another set of raypirri' camps (not at Murruŋga) were being coordinated when they were being run by a local organisation. The only way you can do your proper dancing is when you are performing the right dance for both who and where you are. Shifting coordination of the camps away from the guidance and control of senior leaders meant that the camps started to be organised in ways which made it harder for children to learn about their identities as relations between themselves, their Elders and their places. For example, when the school takes children out for programs such as learning on Country, all the children go together, regardless of moiety or clan group. Operating under Yolŋu authority, camps on particular owned lands need to be directed by relevant clan leaders looking to the seasons to plan appropriate activities, so as to guide proper learning to ensure that the young people become strong in their identities and relations.

Each of these, and many other stories were shared as part of the work of monitoring and evaluating through the experiences and insights of Yolŋu Elders guiding NLC programs so they may contribute to the unfolding of healthy community.

Emmanuel in Gapuwiyak

When introducing the M&E work at a TO meeting in Gapuwiyak, a young man named Emmanuel Yunupiŋu was proposed as a researcher by his mother and quickly agreed upon by his grandfathers who were both senior leaders in the TO group. They saw the research work as an opportunity for Emmanuel to continue caring for his grandmother's Country while also growing his capacity to work with organisations like the university and NLC. Sometime later, as Emmanuel was writing his own research profile, he described his role like this:

> My father comes from Gunyaŋara (Ski Beach), but I was raised up all my life in Gapuwiyak, my grandmother's land. I got this research job because I need to help my family, Gupapuyŋu clan, Liya-lanmirri. Working with them, it is really important to stay focused and on track, letting them know what the research is all about. (Yunupiŋu 2020)

In this part of the project, Emmanuel would make decisions about which TOs to visit and when, and would initiate all the conversations, often speaking in Yolŋu Matha and working as a translator helping Michaela to understand what was going on and to approve her notes at the end of discussions.

A crucial grounding element of work in Gapuwiyak, was a brief video recorded on the first day that Emmanuel began working with

CDU and the TO group. Sitting with his grandfathers, Clancy Guthitjpuy and Gordon Lanyipi, Emmanuel talked about how he would be working with CDU, checking in and hearing stories about the CP&D projects in Galiwin'ku. They agreed that most important to this work was the creation story of Gapuwiyak.

They told this story in Yolŋu Matha, and it was then taken back to CDU where Michael was able to transcribe and translate it and discern elements within the story that could help ground ongoing M&E work. On later visits to Gapuwiyak, Michaela worked with Emmanuel to check the translation and to meet with TOs to make sure they were happy with the text, and the M&E themes that had been identified.

The story spoke about two men, from two related tribes, travelling to the bushland where the lake (or billabong) in Gapuwiyak is now. As these ancestors walked around, they sang and put names in place. They also sang as they cut a tree, prepared a hollow log coffin larrikitj painting it with ochre, and made a bullroarer from the cyprus pine. These men were the forebears of particular tribes, and the story names the particular trees and places of Gapuwiyak, as well as the relations of these different tribes. These relations are ancestral — simultaneously ancient and alive and in need of observance, monitoring and evaluation in the current day. Many of the problems that happen in Gapuwiyak, between different tribes, can be related back to people forgetting or confusing this origin story, and who is the rightful owner of Gapuwiyak and the different homelands. The insistence of these Elder TOs in telling the story of Gapuwiyak, was also an insistence around what the outcome and effect of the CP&D work needed to be.

Like Nyomba's focus on gakal at Galiwin'ku, it was the agreed themes expressed within the Gapuwiyak creation story offered a way to guide and assess the community development projects invested in by the TO group. Monitoring and evaluating the community development project involved exposing and rehearsing (evidencing) the practices and imperatives already in place for shaping and guiding the emergence of healthy community. A list of these was developed.

Knowing the origins of the land and its peoples in the Milindji area

Everyone needs to know the story work of the original ancestors, Gurrulan and Girkirwa, and of the naming of the billabong after its brackish water. We need to remember the hollow log. We need to make sure that young people travel through the land and get to know it and to remember the names of all the small places in the area. The main purpose of the Milindji Trust is to keep in place that 'biggest name'. The corporation needs to be a means whereby everyone (whatever their relation to Marrkula people) knows the story and how they are connected through kin.

Working locally/learning skills in place

We need to retain the skills of making the hollow log and associated painted designs and performances. And making bullroarers and the strings to attach to them. We need particularly to recognise the Cyprus pine lanapu that is a feature of the area.

Remembering which things belong to which people

Everyone needs to remember that there were originally two bullroarers. One of them doesn't belong to the Marrkula (clan) people. Everyone needs to remember that only one belongs to us. Everyone needs to know the story of the relation between the hollow logs, the ceremonies, and the origins of the Gapuwiyak billabong, and the origin of the name Gapuwiyak. Everyone needs to know that the Wu̲nuŋmurra (clan) people are here because of that ceremony.

Making the true story visible

We need a strategy to keep the story alive. We need to demonstrate how keeping the story alive keeps the corporation strong. And how education is directed towards supporting and enhancing the work of the corporation. Remember the hollow log. Remember the image. Connect it properly to modern institutions. (NLC 2020c:25-26)

In Gapuwiyak, where the focus of the CP&D projects was the creation of a local Aboriginal corporation, this story helped to show how emerging community development projects were themselves helping the Gapuwiyak story to be remembered. These projects included the development of a corporation logo, signage to be placed at the lake and other areas of Gapuwiyak, employment of a paint crew to be working on the maintenance of local houses, and other longer-term projects looking towards tourism development. Emmanuel was told about the potential of each of these projects to evidence the development of a healthy and well-governed community under authority.

Part 3: Changed and changing organisational practices

In a very important sense, as Nyomba and Emmanuel insisted, the role of M&E was to 'make evident' the understandings and interests of the Elders as they worked to bring contemporary relations and activities into alignment with ancestral imperatives. But how did the Ground Up M&E contribute to changing the understandings and practices of the NLC?

Nyomba spoke about the effect of M&E being that external organisations would be properly aligned with Yolŋu knowledge practices, like the tassels hanging off the end of the carefully and correctly woven mat. The NLC community development staff always responded with openness and innovation to M&E stories that were shared with them, sometimes via reports, and other times through conversations and text messages with local researchers and CDU. The local researchers also made ongoing presentations to the TO groups, the NLC and at academic conferences.

By listening and responding to the stories arising out of local M&E research practices, NLC staff gradually effected significant changes to their own practices and the projects they administered. These changes sometimes took the form of subtle shifts in understanding of how and why certain activities needed to proceed precisely the way they did, despite the rationales for these being invisible to CP&D staff at the time. At other times, they helped precipitate or reinforce significant decisions around allocating project contracts and partnerships. We can recount a few examples in relation to the particular ethnographic vignettes we have already shared.

In Galiwin'ku, NLC community development officers had been aware of various side discussions around the raypirri' camps. However, they had not surfaced as key agenda items at TO group meetings. The camps had always been an important part of the group's vision. However, it became clear that attention needed to be paid to the way the groups were coordinated and run if they were going to support the emergence of community in ways that Yolŋu saw as contributing to strength and autonomy, rather than another imposition of Balanda (non-Indigenous) values. The stories shared by TOs as part of the M&E research helped reveal the unique specificity of the concepts that needed to ground the camps if they were to work. This was, for example, shown by the processes of going to dig the right clay and of correct cutting up and sharing meat, as well as in the way that the right children needed to attend the right camps that were run by the right people in the right places if they were to develop an orderly sense of their relational position in the shaping of Yolŋu people-places. This revealed the 'figure of the child' that was assumed by certain organisations when running the camps, and how the selection of children based on being 'naughty' or 'bad' had the effect of promoting their identification with specific forms of Balanda subjectivity, rather than their unique Yolŋu identities. Don's comments also pointed to an assumed sameness, a sort of democratic equality in which children are treated as Aboriginal kids rather than as Yolŋu with unique kin relations. This undermines the emergence of Yolŋu people-place identities. Raypirri' entails acknowledging the gakal of every Yolŋu child as equally sacred and important. In bringing these different concepts to the surface, the NLC was able to more overtly assist TO efforts to coordinate the right leadership and practices for the raypirri' camps over time.

In Gapuwiyak, CP&D activities were primarily focused on developing a local corporation and other sub-projects to be facilitated through the corporation. From a Balanda point of view, this work needed to embrace a particular project management ethic, which looked towards achieving certain milestones such as registering the corporation, setting up business practices and

training and establishing contracts with partner organisations. Working with the creation story of Gapuwiyak, and developing this as a tool that could assist M&E within the everyday life of the project, brought another dimension to these activities. It was significant not only that the corporation be functional but to have the everyday practices of its running actively remembering and promoting and evidencing the Milindji story. A sub-project to develop a corporation logo had seemed to have been completed very early on in the CP&D project work. However, as Emmanuel produced videos listening to Elders stories, they continued talking about and referring to important details of the logo and how it needed to be changed. Supported by the NLC staff, this logo design process subsequently went through many iterations in which ancestral roles and practices articulated in the Milintji story were reiterated. This happened through continually moving back and forth, attending to the very small visual details that would also express an image of the two ancestors whose actions formed the lake at Gapuwiyak, and the correct representation of the larrikitj hollow log so that it showed the correct clan and the correct log and the correct ownership of Gapuwiyak. Once completed correctly, these detailed elements of work embedded in the corporation's logo enabled its capacity to guide and grow the community in ways aligned with ancestral imperatives and possibilities for governance negotiated on this basis, particularly as the totemically accurate logo image became displayed on uniforms and banners around Gapuwiyak.

Through crystalising the insights arising from Elders stories, and presenting them in regular reporting to the NLC, the community development program staff were able to identify habits of understanding which are familiar workings of large organisations, and become sensitised to ways these practices could align with ways of working which are consistent with sustaining ancestral relations of Yolŋu people-places. In nurturing CP&D, devising its M&E specifically in each place, and in valuing the critical role of the local intercultural researcher, this work of realigning needed to remain both current and ongoing.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored Nyomba's practices of 'making evident' as a form of evidencing, rather than 'evidence collecting' or 'evidence-making' in trying to both understand and express what was meaningful in the local M&E practices which came to life in the places where we worked. These M&E practices are doing their work when they align with locally relevant ancestral imperatives supporting the emergence of healthy people-places and support external stakeholders and participants to align themselves in the same way.

In terms of the Indigenous Evaluation Strategy, specifically in terms of its core principles (Productivity Commission 2020:10), engaging the Elders in the first instance enabled our evaluations to be 'undertaken in the areas, and address the issues that are most important to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people'. Their vision and guidance allowed them to participate actively in 'consider(ing) the impacts of mainstream policies and programs' albeit very locally, very specifically, but also in a way that allowed the NLC staff to make incremental changes to align projects towards Elders, visions in ways that they had never considered before. Furthermore, in terms of the strategy, the Elders had 'the opportunity to decide how they wanted to be involved in evaluations'. In fact, as sovereign authorities, the non-Indigenous evaluators were constantly confronted by their own biases as they worked alongside and learnt from the already powerful evaluation capability of the Aboriginal researchers. Most significantly for the academic researchers was Nyomba's insight concerning the inseparability of good M&E from good community development.

In both sites, we found ourselves working with Elders who were already hard at work monitoring and evaluating the unfolding of the people-places for which they were responsible and from which they were descended. To them, M&E as the IES makes clear, is not an 'add-on'. Community development projects do not precede the instigation of M&E. On the contrary, good community development is an effect of good M&E. For academic and other outsider evaluators, accepting this reversal, constantly reiterated by the Indigenous researchers and their supervising Elders entails

unthinking conventional assumptions about the nature of community as well as the nature of development. These are values constantly reiterated by the Indigenous researchers and their supervising Elders. As Nyomba points out, the community (as a network of kin and place rather than a settler government entity) emerges as healthy if we listen to the Elders as they undertake their ongoing governance work. Healthy community development is always aligned with ancestral imperatives, values and practices. The evidence entailed in Ground Up M&E is the community development itself.

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NOTES

1 The Northern Land Council is a statutory organisation that assists Aboriginal people in the Top End of Australia to acquire and manage their own traditional lands. www.nlc.org

2 We have been reminded many times by Yolŋu collaborators that the Balanda (non-Yolŋu) distinction between people and places is not relevant in Yolŋu life where people are their places and places are their people.

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article, she was working as a senior Yolŋu community engagement officer at 'Connecting Beginnings' and also as a researcher focussing on Yolŋu Monitoring and Evaluation in a range of areas. It is her hope for her community that Yolŋu give a true story to our clan leaders, to families, to relatives.

Emmanuel Yunupiŋu's clan is Gumatj, and for much of his life he has lived on his grandmother country in Gapuwiyak. He has travelled to Singapore and Japan, sharing Yolŋu culture through showing traditional dances. He has also had many different jobs as an Aboriginal health worker, media officer, construction worker, intercultural facilitator and community-based researcher.

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