Remote Engagement
and
Coordination Strategy

> "*Aboriginal communities and government should negotiate through working together properly and respectfully – not rushing over the top of the other – but negotiating a way forward calmly together, with integrity.*"
>
> Gäwa Elder, Both Ways Engagement Workshops (2013)

Introduction

The Northern Territory Government *Remote Engagement and Coordination Strategy (RECS or the Strategy)* responds to the need to improve the way we coordinate our services and engage with remote Aboriginal community members. This will not only lead to better outcomes, it will also improve our efficiency and ability to deliver in a tight fiscal environment.

The Strategy was designed by an Inter-Agency Working Group based in Alice Springs through a series of workshops. Working Group membership included representatives of agencies whose core work involves remote service provision, two Regional Councils and Charles Darwin University.

Additional feedback and input was sought from the broader Northern Territory Government (NTG) including regional staff to ensure the Strategy was informed by current and previous practice and experience of engagement in the Territory's unique physical and social environment. Ongoing development, including both agency and remote community input, will occur through implementation and evaluation.

The Working Group considered a wide range of recognised community engagement principles, practice, research and literature, particularly relating to Aboriginal communities. The Strategy also draws on key national and international best practice and rights declarations such as the *United Nations Declaration of Human Rights* (1948), *The Brisbane Declaration* (2005), *The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (2007) and the *International Association for Public Participation* (IAP2) *Spectrum*.

Overview

The *Remote Engagement and Coordination Strategy* defines remote engagement and coordination, is underpinned by values and principles and comprises six elements. The Strategy elements are: *Best Practice Guide for Remote Engagement and Coordination, Levels of Remote Community Participation, Remote Information and Coordination System (RICS), Bush Ready* (induction and professional learning), an *Evaluation Framework*, and the *Online Toolkit*.

> **It is not about more consultations but about listening to what the true message is. What is wanted is quality meetings that people act on."**
>
> Gunbalanya community member (2010)

Celebrating community achievements, Numbulwar.

Context

The Northern Territory's remote communities are home to many different Aboriginal groups, most of whom continue to speak ancestral languages and follow traditional culture practices, including traditional forms of negotiation and agreement making under the authority of land owners and clan elders. Understanding of and respect for these different ways is critical to successful work in these contexts.

Challenges in practising good engagement and coordination in remote Northern Territory, are intensified by sparsely populated regions, long distances, a harsh climate, many different language and cultural groups, a history of fraught relationships with governments, multiple programs working in the same space with the same people and high staff turnover.

Purpose

The *Remote Engagement and Coordination Strategy* responds to the identified need for the Northern Territory Government (NTG) to work more effectively to achieve better outcomes for remote community members including:

- consistent and accountable remote engagement and coordination practice across the NTG
- coordination and collaboration within and between NTG agencies, communities, regions and head office in recording, tracking and responding to ideas and issues raised
- confidence that NTG agencies are aware of and responding to local issues
- informed, responsive and aligned policy, program and service delivery decisions
- improved job satisfaction and workload management for NTG staff
- cost-effective use of resources including visits by NTG staff to remote communities
- improved community experience of government service delivery
- greater transparency of decision making processes
- relevant and culturally appropriate communication, engagement and feedback
- a reduced burden of engagement on remote community members by avoiding duplication and unnecessary consultation.

" By listening to locals rather than deciding before they come what they want to hear... actually understanding what is happening in the community"

Ntaria community member (2010)

Users

The *Remote Engagement and Coordination Strategy* is designed for use by Northern Territory Government (NTG) staff whose work relates to remote Northern Territory. Other organisations may find it useful, or participate in its implementation.

" We have enough meetings already. What is bad is when government calls a meeting without plenty of notice and without telling us what it's about ..."

Umbakumba community member (2010)

Impacts

Commitment to the *Remote Engagement and Coordination Strategy* values, principles and practices should have the following impact at head office, regional and community levels:

- **NTG Executive Management** have confidence that agencies are responding effectively to ideas, issues and needs raised at community level, and that policy, program and service delivery decisions and development are well informed, inclusive and aligned.
- **NTG Regional Staff** are valued as an essential link between executive management, other stakeholders and remote communities and have input into NTG planning and processes.
- **Remote Community Members** influence policy and programs that affect them and receive services that are responsive to their needs, understood and coordinated.

NTG Barkly regional staff.

Remote Engagement and Coordination

Remote engagement is the two-way communication, exchange of information and deliberation that occurs between governments and people living in remote communities. It increases mutual understanding and enables community members to influence decisions that affect their lives.

Remote coordination is defined as processes by which government practices, policies, programs and services for remote communities are collaborative, integrated and aligned.

"

Remote engagement and coordination are mutually dependent on each other – engagement will only work if there is good coordination and coordination will only work if there is good engagement. They must be understood and practised together, rather than separately."

Professor Michael Christie, Northern Institute, Charles Darwin University (2015)

Values and Principles

The *Remote Engagement and Coordination Strategy* is underpinned by the following values and principles.

Respect and Integrity

- Engagement is genuine, open and honest
- Traditional authority and governance are respected by working with and being guided by local Aboriginal elders and leaders

Commitment

- *Remote Engagement and Coordination Strategy* policy, processes and practice are endorsed, implemented and properly resourced
- Enough time is given for practices to change and outcomes to improve

Accountability

- Processes are agreed and adhered to and any changes are communicated
- Decision-making is sustainable (economically viable, technically feasible, environmentally compatible, publicly acceptable)
- Ongoing evaluation is used to inform and improve policy, practice and outcomes
- Close the loop – feedback is provided to keep the community informed of processes and outcomes

Clarity

- The purpose, scope and timeframes of the engagement are clear
- Decision-making processes and boundaries (government and other) are understood
- Information and communication is understood by all

Inclusion

- Enough time and space is allowed for dialogue, to reflect and to develop shared understanding

Working Together

- Relationships are established, maintained and based on trust
- Ways of engagement are place-based to suit local needs, language, time-frames and cultural protocols
- Participation is relevant and representative
- All points of view are freely expressed, heard and understood
- Effective engagement is based on dialogue and active listening
- Quality communication and coordination occurs within and across levels of government, other stakeholders and remote community members

" *Government still has a lot of duplication… one department might come out one week to talk about something and the next week another department will come out to talk about the same thing.*"

Wadeye community member (2010)

Elements

The *Remote Engagement and Coordination Strategy* comprises six elements that together provide comprehensive and practical guidance, mechanisms and tools for remote engagement work and the coordination of government policies and services for remote Northern Territory communities.

Best Practice Guide for Remote Engagement and Coordination	The **Best Practice Guide for Remote Engagement and Coordination** brings together universal aspects of best practice community engagement and coordination together with elements of practice tailored to the specific needs of remote Northern Territory communities.
Levels of Remote Community Participation	The **Levels of Remote Community Participation** is designed to help identify the level of participation of remote community members in an engagement process as well as appropriate engagement tools and methods.
Remote Information Coordination System	The **Remote Information Coordination System** is an electronic system to gather and document information, capture issues and facilitate a response and support coordination within and across levels of government, other stakeholders and remote community members.
Bush-Ready	**Bush-Ready** identifies induction and professional learning components that will support staff to develop knowledge, skills and behaviour required to work effectively in remote communities in the Northern Territory.
Evaluation Framework	The **Evaluation Framework** outlines the process for continuous improvement in remote engagement and coordination practices through ongoing review, evaluation and change.
Online Toolkit	The **Online Toolkit** is a user-friendly website to support remote engagement and coordination. It includes useful information and tools including sample policies, processes and templates, stories and case studies, links to professional learning, the Remote Information Coordination System (RICS) and other relevant government systems. **www.bushready.nt.gov.au**

Best Practice Guide for Remote Engagement and Coordination

While many aspects of engagement and coordination are universal, some are specific to work that takes place in remote communities.

This table is a *Best Practice Guide for Remote Engagement and Coordination* with remote community members and the coordination of actions related to this engagement.

The *Online Toolkit* expands the Best Practice Guide into factors to consider, at both operational and strategic levels, **BEFORE**, **DURING** and **AFTER** visiting and engaging with remote community members.

> "*We see the planes come in and go out and often we have no idea who came and why.*"
>
> Ngukurr community member (2010)

Focus	Engagement – Key Actio
Community	• Find out about the community, Ab restrictions, local dynamics and a **www.bushtel.nt.gov.au**
Project	• Define the project, opportunity or outcomes • Clarify the decisions being made related decisions already made • Identify community and other sta • Identify the level and goal of eng • Identify the community engageme • Plan and use methods and tools full participation of all stakeholde • Identify risks and plan how to ma
Relationships	• Good relationships are essential with Aboriginal authorities, comm • Respect and follow local cultural
Time	• Avoid rushing – allow time and fle maximum participation • Allow time for community membe provide input into the project, opp
Communication and Close-the-loop	• Communicate in ways that are ap • Ensure community members and during and after the engagement • Follow up and close the loop with
Evaluation	• Before you start, plan evaluation and process – from introducing th feedback • As you go along, document, mon planned engagement objectives outcomes • Ensure evaluation process is rele • Use evaluation to continuously im
You	• Consider your self-awareness, er skills and training and identify ga • Be aware of assumptions and cu you are suited to remote work • Stay open to learning and reflect

...ons	Coordination – Key Actions
...boriginal governance, cultural protocols, ...any 'burning' issues	• Identify Aboriginal authorities, other community members and regional staff who you should be informing, working with and learning from on the project or issue
...r issue as well as the objectives and ... and who will make them, as well as any ...keholders ...agement for each stakeholder group ...ent purpose, objectives and outcomes ...that suit the engagement and ensure the ...ers ...nage them throughout the project	• Find out what is already known about the project, opportunity or issue, knowledge gaps, relevant history, level of interest and potential conflict or risk • Use Remote Information Coordination System (RICS) for planning, documenting and evaluating engagement, coordination and visits • Find out how to contact other stakeholders, and where opportunities for collaboration, coordination, challenges or conflicts may exist or arise • Develop, support and use community-based and regional processes (e.g. Aboriginal governance groups, inter-agency meetings, Regional Coordination Committees) • Facilitate community members' understanding of government processes and responses
...– find ways to build understanding and trust ...unity members and other stakeholders ...protocols	• Work closely with community-based and regional staff and others who have well-developed relationships with community members • Keep everyone well informed at every stage of the project/process
...exibility to build relationships and enable ...rs and other stakeholders to understand and ...portunity or issue	• Base the negotiation of timing and timeframes on both community and government parameters • Ensure all stakeholders are kept up to date and have time to respond when things change
...ppropriate and understood (e.g. interpreters) ... other stakeholders are informed before, ...community members and other stakeholders	• Help community members raise ideas and issues with the appropriate government agency • Obtain and pass on responses to these
...of the engagement objectives, outcomes ...he project, staying in touch and receiving ...itor and evaluate what happens, whether ...were met or not and any unplanned ...vant and meaningful to the stakeholders ...prove engagement practice	• Facilitate input into the ongoing evaluation and improvement of Remote Engagement and Coordination Strategy and RICS from community and other stakeholders at regional and executive levels
...engagement skills, cultural competency, basic ...ps in your knowledge and skills ...ltural bias you may bringing, or even whether ...on your performance	• Identify, organise and promote professional support, learning or training opportunities you may need • Record your reflections and evaluations in RICS or the relevant government system.

Levels of Remote Community Participation

The *Levels of Remote Community Participation* is a tool designed to help identify the level of participation of remote community members in an engagement process.

The higher the level of community participation in the engagement, the greater the influence community members have on the final decision.

This tool can also be used to identify the level of participation of other stakeholders. It is essential that all stakeholders have a clear understanding about their level of engagement and the say they have in decisions. The *Levels of Remote Community Participation* is based on the '*International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) Public Participation Spectrum*'.

"
We are sick of talking – no one's listening – I won't go to any more community meetings as it's all just talk – people talk and talk – no one listens – it's not worth coming along we have been saying the same thing for a long time, but nothing ever happens."
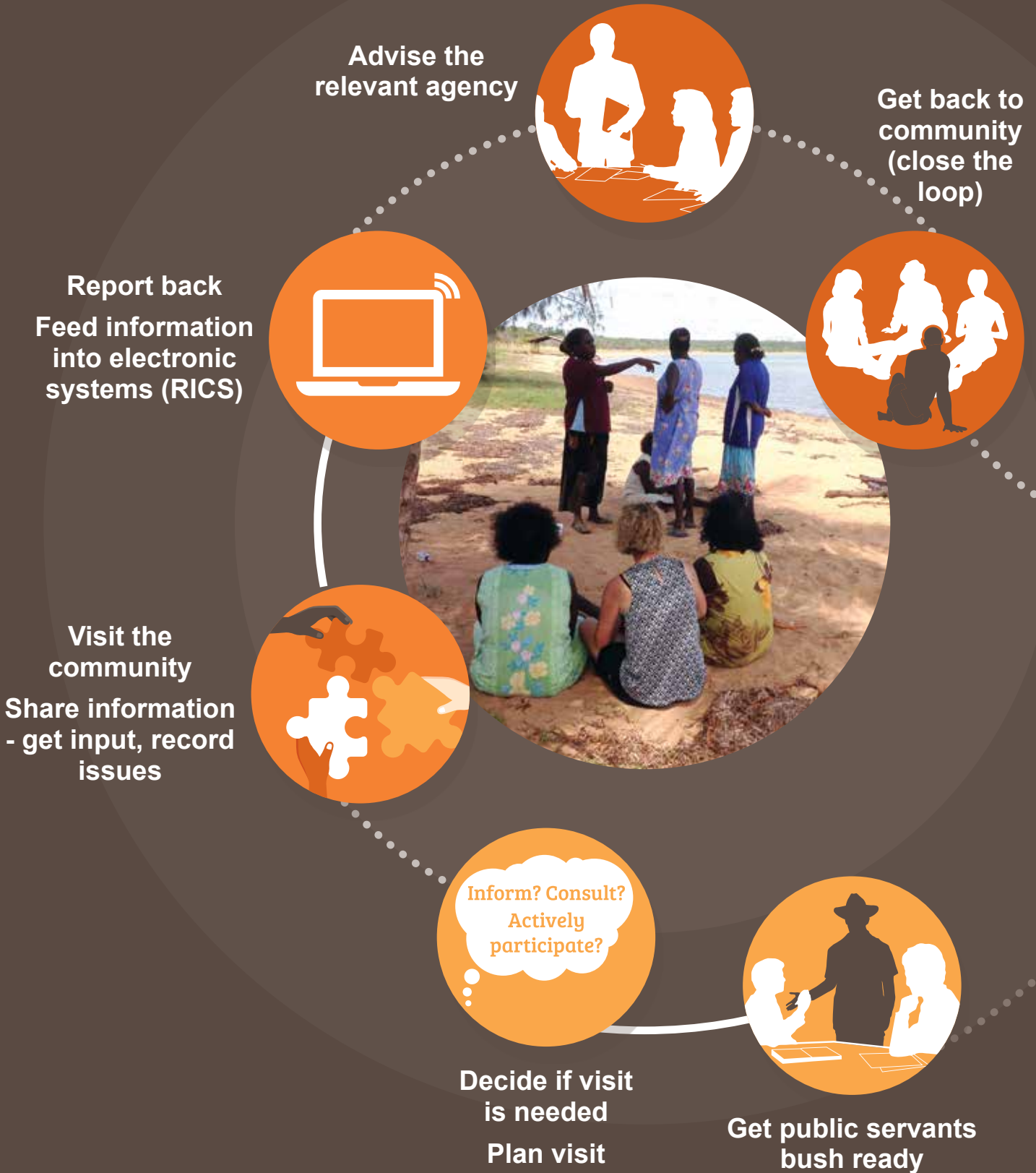
Lajamanu community member (2013)

International Women's Day at Umbakumba.

Levels of Remote Community Participation

	Inform	Consult	Actively participate
Goal of the engagement	Community members are **well-informed**.	Community members are well-informed and **give feedback** that government considers.	Community members are well-informed and **actively contribute** to decision-making
Decision-making level of community members	**Community members _don't_ have a say in the final decision.** The final decision is made by government.	**Community members _might_ have a say in the final decision.** The final decision is made by government.	**Community members _will_ have a say in the final decision.** Community can actively participate at one of three levels: | Involve	Collaborate	Empower
Some say	High level or equal say	Total say and control	
Government commitment to community members	We will: • provide information in the right way to the right people to help you understand • ensure you know the whole story • keep you informed • enable you to ask questions.	We will: • listen to you and make sure we understand what is important to you • ask you for ideas and feedback • consider what you tell us • give you feedback on how you influenced the decision.	We will: • work with you at each step of the process • make sure your ideas are included as much as possible • work with you to find different options and decide what the best decision will be.
Example tools and methods	Posters, flyers, community notice-boards, walking around talking with people, use interpreters, newsletters, local radio, presentations, social media, websites, meetings, story-telling.	Surveys, interviews, use interpreters, story-telling, small group discussions (interest, family, clan, governance groups etc.), focus groups, workshops.	Discussions over a period of time, interviews, use interpreters, story-telling, group discussions (interest, family, clan, governance groups etc.), focus groups, workshops.

Actions

Advise the relevant agency

Get back to community (close the loop)

Report back

Feed information into electronic systems (RICS)

Visit the community

Share information - get input, record issues

Inform? Consult? Actively participate?

Decide if visit is needed

Plan visit

Get public servants bush ready

Evaluate, review and improve performance

Results

- Fewer unnecessary trips

- Reduced engagement burden

- More effective use of resources

- Communities get a response (closing the loop)

- Better relationships with community members

- Community residents have a better understanding of government

- Government is better informed about communities

- Communities have input to policy and program delivery

Inter-Agency Working Group

The NTG Remote Engagement and Coordination Strategy Framework was developed in 2015 by an Inter-Agency Working Group through a series of workshops and research activities facilitated by Kaaren Smethurst and Juli Cathcart.

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Cr Barry Abbott, Cr Roxanne Kenny, Helen Smith

Northern Territory Police
Kate Vanderlaan

Power and Water Corporation
Annette D'Emden

" *...sometimes need to come back and talk a number of times to get it right."*
Ntaria community member (2010)

Representatives from MacDonnell and Central Desert Regional Councils, NTG & CDU discuss the Strategy.

Glossary

Aboriginal authorities	Leaders, Elders, Traditional Owners or other Aboriginal people who are recognised authorities in their community
Executive management	Decision makers in government – could include senior staff, agency executives or CEOs, Members of Parliament or Ministers
Remote community members	People living in remotely located communities, in particular, Aboriginal residents
Regional Coordination Committee	Regional Coordination Committee – regular meeting of senior staff from government departments (and sometimes other organisations) operating in a particular region
Regional staff	NTG staff based in regional centres
Stakeholder	A person or group with an interest, influence or concern (stake) in something

" ... talk to the right people, not just the people who want to talk to them, the first ones they meet."

Ntaria community member (2010)

Nyirripi community.

Sources of Information

In addition to the documents named in the *Introduction*, the *Remote Engagement and Coordination Strategy* has been informed by engagement strategies and documents produced by the Australian Government, State and Territory Governments and a number of local government councils from rural and regional Australia. Other useful information sources include community development practitioners and organisations with expertise in this area.

Quotes from community members were taken from a number of 'Governance and Engagement Maps'. These are reports from a research project undertaken by the Langford Team in 2010 - 2011 managed under the Northern Territory and Commonwealth Government's Remote Service Delivery Partnership Agreement. Additional quotes are from the NTG Review of Regional Governance in 2013 (Department of Local Government and Regions) and from the Both Ways Engagement Workshops conducted by the Yolŋu Aboriginal Consultants' Initiative (YACI) and CDU in 2013.

There is particular acknowledgement of Professor Michael Christie and Juli Cathcart from the Northern Institute, Charles Darwin University, who have provided invaluable advice and input using their vast wealth of knowledge and experience in engagement with remotely located Aboriginal community members.

A full list of information sources is available on the Online Toolkit at: **www.bushready.nt.gov.au**

NTG officer and Central Desert Regional Council elected member workshopping the Strategy.
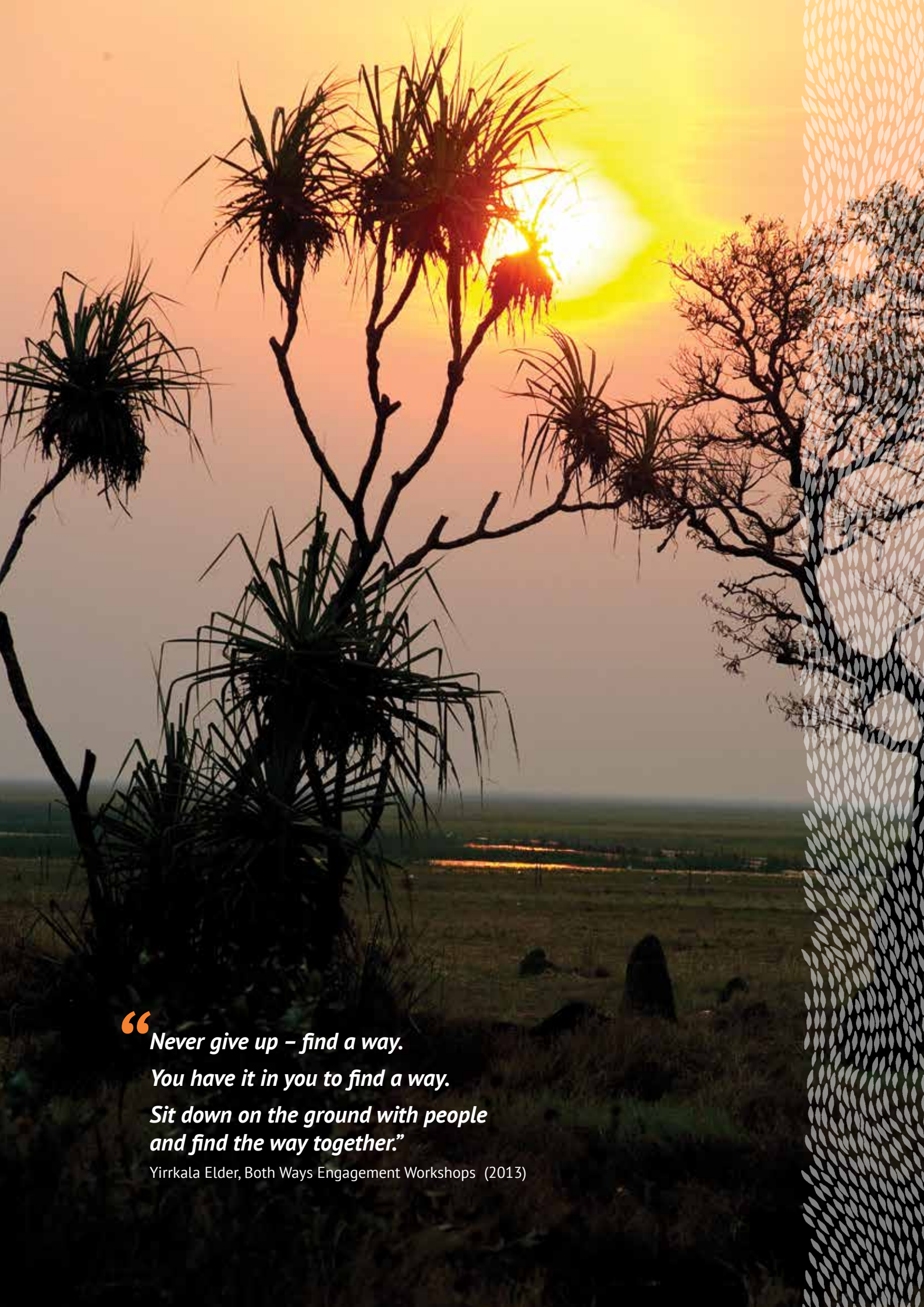
"Never give up – find a way.

You have it in you to find a way.

*Sit down on the ground with people
and find the way together."*

Yirrkala Elder, Both Ways Engagement Workshops (2013)

"*Better they change the way they think. Listen to us... and... let us teach them in our community. We can show them.*"

Yuendumu community member (2010)