



Australian Government

Department of the Environment and Energy

Partnering with Indigenous organisations for a sustainable environment

Guidance for non-Indigenous organisations seeking to build effective and respectful partnerships with Indigenous organisations and communities.



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This report should be attributed as ‘*Partnering with Indigenous Organisations*, Commonwealth of Australia 2019’.

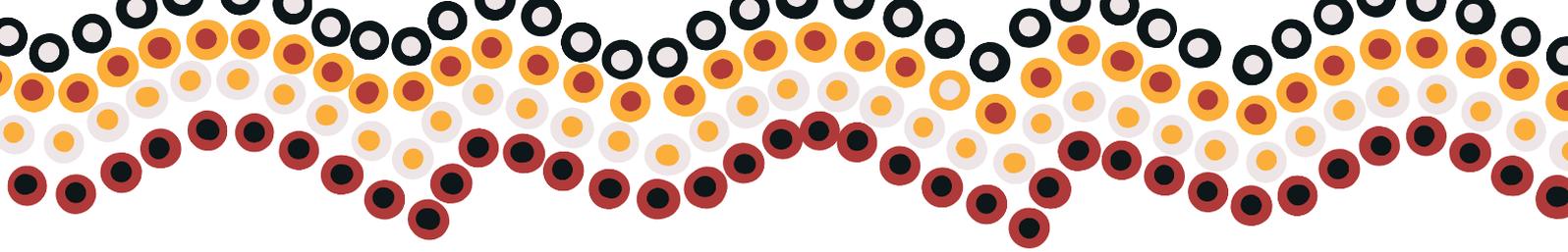
Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Australian Government or the Portfolio Ministers for the Department of the Environment and Energy.

Cover painting

Working Together, acrylic on canvas (Credit: Lewis Burns) © copyright Lewis Burns and the Department of the Environment and Energy.

The piece is painted by Lewis Burns a Tubba-Gah Wiradjuri man born and living in Dubbo, NSW. The U-shaped symbols represent seated individuals or groups. This symbolism is recognised Nationwide. The four skin colours (Red, Yellow, Black & White) Represents that collaboration is for everyone to participate in. All demographics, all the peoples of the world. The two talking sticks signify that there is respectful discussion being had and that the people meeting are the people who have the authority to talk on behalf of their group. The placing of the broken spear represents the end of conflict, this also represents Peace and Unity at the gathering. Dotted lines represent the natural environment, streams, rivers, waterholes or other flowing water.



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Acknowledgement of Country

As this is a national level document, we acknowledge the traditional owners and custodians of country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to land, sea and community. We pay our respects to them, their cultures and their elders both past, present and emerging.

We recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are vital partners in managing land and sea to improve environmental outcomes.

Acknowledgement of co-contributors

The document was written by the Department of Environment and Energy in consultation with over 15 Indigenous and non-Indigenous organisations from government, business, and not-for-profit sectors. We acknowledge and thank everyone who generously contributed their time, expertise and enthusiasm.

Quotations throughout the document are extracts from conversations held at the Indigenous Desert Alliance Forum in November 2018.



Introduction

Intended audience

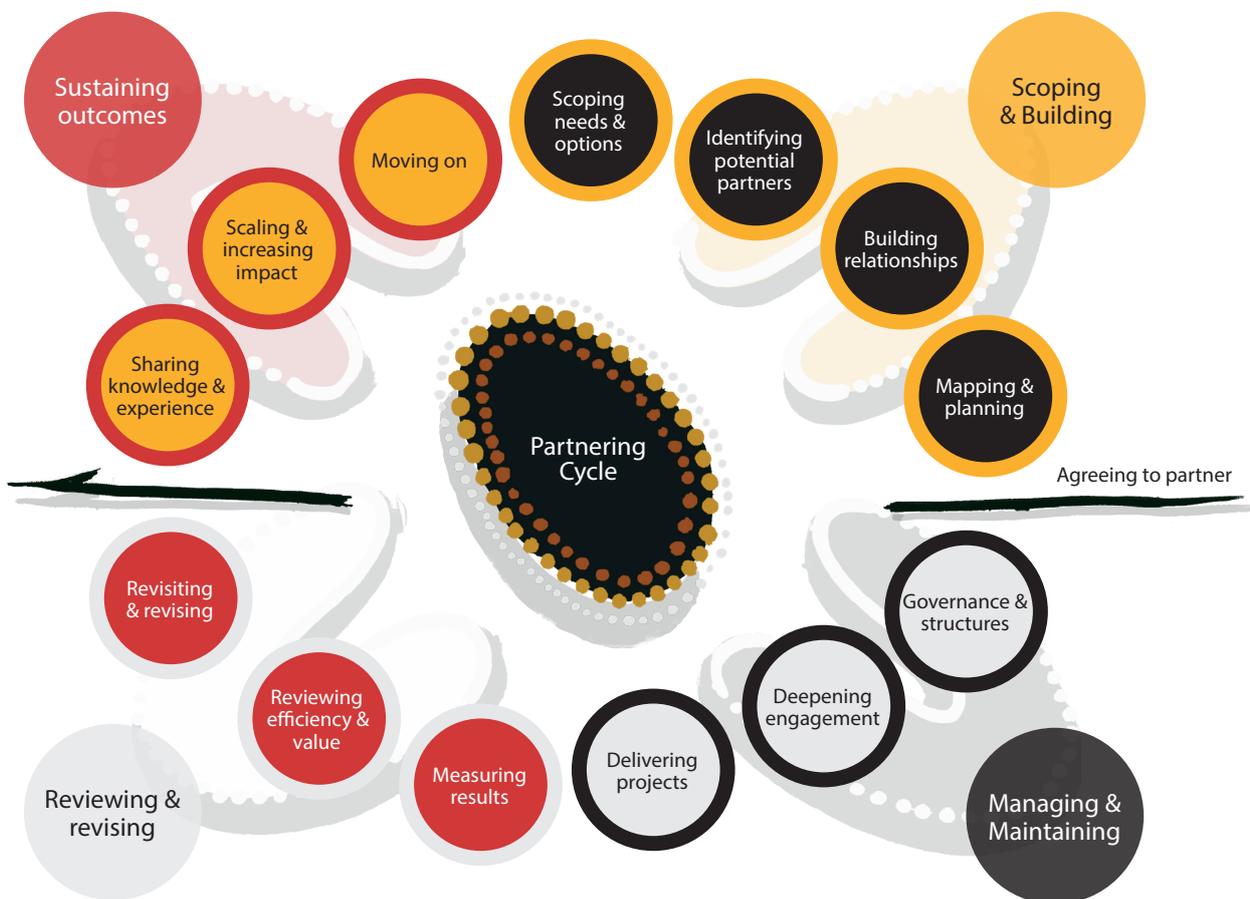
This document is intended as a resource for people from non-Indigenous organisations considering actions they could take to build effective and respectful partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities.

Cultural competency

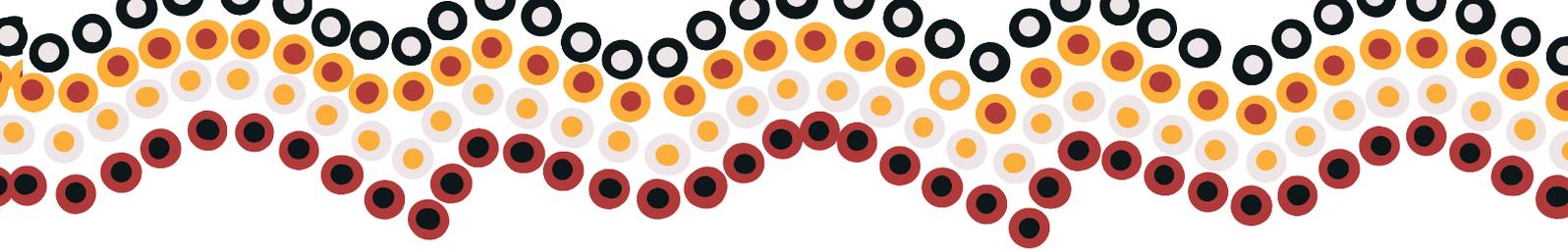
We encourage anyone considering a partnership with Indigenous organisations to develop their cultural awareness and competency.

Developing context around Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people's different needs and experiences should be taken into account when partnering.

Training undertaken is best done specific for the organisation's location and not just a one-off event in order to contribute meaningfully to the journey towards cultural competency.



Partnerships cycle © Partnership Brokers association.



How to use this document

This document is structured around the Partnership Brokers Association's partnerships cycle. Every stage of the partnership cycle is considered in this document, and this is a critical point—partnerships are not one-off engagements.

By partnerships, we mean an arrangement where different organisations bring together their unique strengths and values to achieve a shared outcome that has a greater impact than each partner could achieve alone. This can be a simple, information-sharing arrangement or a sophisticated partnership where resources, benefits and risks are shared and partnering is transformational.

This document is intended as guidance only. It suggests practical actions you could take to demonstrate respect, build positive relationships and co-create a unique partnership that provides mutual benefits.

The guidance is general in nature and engagement and partnering can be very different from community to community or with different organisations.

Not all of the content will be applicable, so choose, expand and adapt appropriately and respectfully. This can be done by working with the community or organisation you are partnering with. Do this in accordance with the partner's capacity, and capability.

Content focuses on establishing new partnerships, but the principles and suggestions outlined can also be applied to reviewing an existing partnership, or bringing a new Indigenous partner to an existing partnership.

The Department of Environment and Energy is on a journey to improve how we partner with others to achieve shared environmental outcomes. As an organisation, we are building our capacity to better negotiate and implement partnering arrangements. We want to share our learnings as we go, through developing resources like this.

For guidance on best practice Indigenous engagement for environmental assessments under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act), see the Department's [Engage Early](#) document.

Have your say

This document is intended to evolve and update over time. If you have any suggestions for future versions, please contact the Partnerships Team at partnerships@environment.gov.au



Upholding rights

The Australian Government supports the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#). The Declaration reinforces Indigenous peoples' right to self-determination, recognises the importance of consulting with Indigenous peoples on decisions affecting them and that respect for Indigenous knowledge, cultures and traditional practices contributes to sustainable and equitable development and proper management of the environment.

Articles 18 and 19 of this Declaration state the following about Indigenous people and decision making:

'Article 18: Indigenous peoples have the right to participate in decision making in matters which would affect their rights, through representatives chosen by themselves in accordance with their own procedures, as well as to maintain and develop their own Indigenous decision making institutions.

'Article 19: States shall consult and cooperate in good faith with the Indigenous peoples concerned through their own representative institutions in order to obtain their free, prior and informed consent before adopting and implementing legislative or administrative measures that may affect them.'

Understanding and upholding these rights is foundational to building respect, relationships and ultimately partnerships. There are number of resources designed to develop your practical understanding of these rights, including:

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations has co-produced a [good practice guide](#) on free, prior and informed consent.

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies explore rights, respect and recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in their [ethical research guidelines](#).

General principles

The following principles should be front-of-mind throughout all stages of the partnership:

Respect and mutual benefit

Respect and understanding are crucial.

Traditional knowledge should be valued and protected.

A genuine exchange throughout the whole partnership is needed for success.

Co-created

Engage early so that you can truly co-create the partnership.

Indigenous interests and priorities must be understood and aligned to the partnership.

The outcome of the partnership should support Indigenous self-determination.

An individual approach

There is no 'one-size-fits' all partnership model.

Be flexible and adaptive.

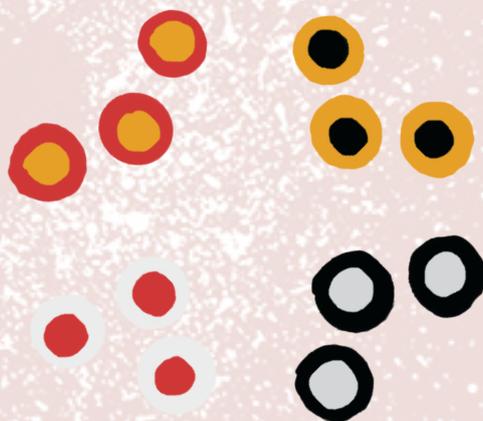
Work together to discuss the right approach for your partnership.

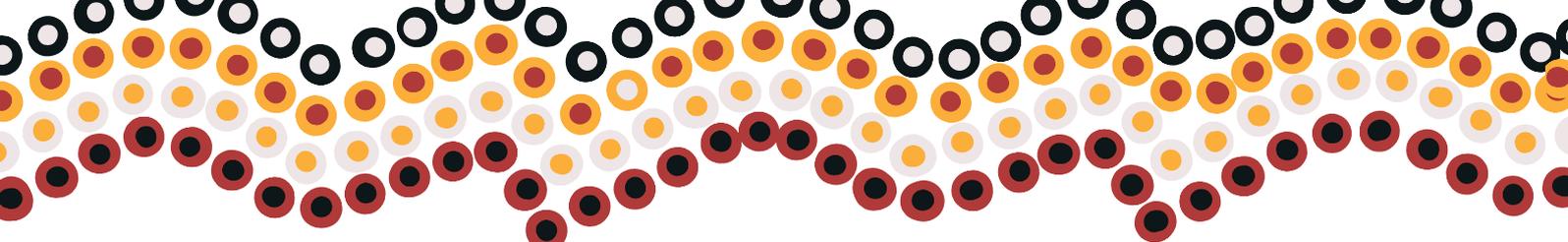
Relationships focused

Relationships are the heart of a partnership, and they take time to build.

Visiting the community or organisation to listen, learn, and share is fundamental.

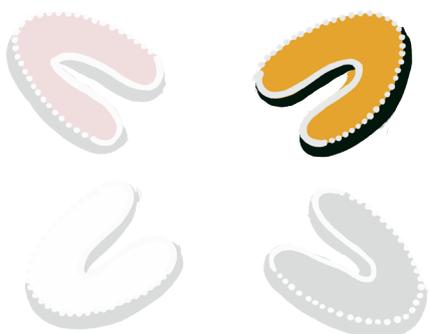
Discuss expectations about objectives and outcomes honestly.





Considerations for each stage of the partnerships cycle

1. Scoping and building a partnership



The scoping and building phase of a partnership is about considering the partnership's potential and deciding whether a partnership is the way to go forward. In this stage the needs and options of a potential partnership are identified, the potential partners' drivers, expectation and interests are identified, relationships are built, and the partnership (if agreed upon) is planned.

Many of the following considerations are useful to consider for every interaction, no matter the phase.

Having a clear purpose

- Develop a **clear purpose** for seeking to include an Indigenous group or organisation in a partnership. This purpose goes beyond the need to 'tick a box' for engagement. Know why you are approaching the organisation or community to explore a potential partnership. Consider the value of the Indigenous involvement and what the partnership can offer to the Indigenous group or organisation in exchange. Be careful not to pre-determine the partnership form, process or objectives before discussing this as this needs to be Indigenous-led. Seek feedback and guidance on the identified value and benefits, to guide the partnership development.

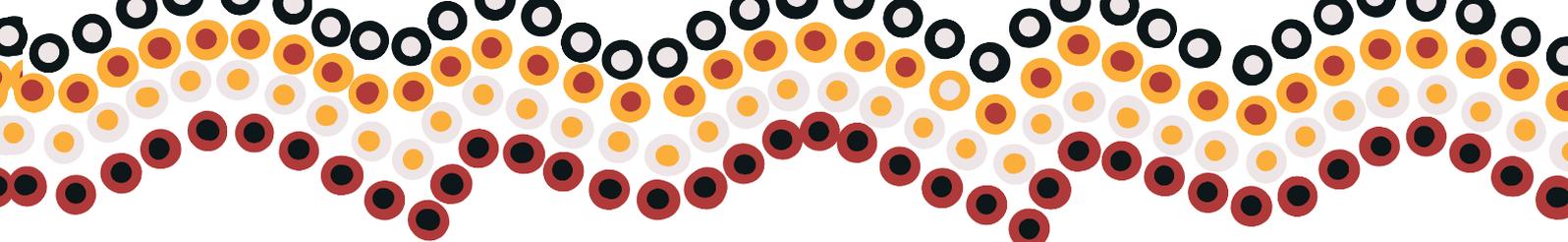
"Come to partner with us slowly and respectfully, without fully formed ideas—so that we can be involved right from the design."

Learning about the local context

It is essential to get in contact with the right group or organisation for the geographic region and subject matter of engagement, and to develop a general understanding of the local context.

You may have networks with the community that you can reach out to—like regional offices for your organisation, medical centres, art centres and employment agencies. Some good starting points if you are unsure where to begin are:

- [Regional Network](#) (regional offices of the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA)).
- Aboriginal Land Councils (community organisations that represent Aboriginal affairs at a local level).
- [Native Title Representative Bodies and Service Providers](#) (bodies that assist native title claimants and holders).
- [Prescribed Body Corporates](#) (corporations established by native title holders to manage and protect their native title rights and interests).
- [Supply Nation](#) is also a useful reference point.



A central contact can help you to:

- Identify the **right people** in the community to talk to (for certain issues, or part of the country, there may be a mandate within the community that a certain person speaks on this issue). Knowing and respecting the decision making processes and leadership structure is important.
 - If you are looking to partner with an incorporated organisation then you need to liaise with its board (as the decision making body), though you may engage through a CEO as the entry point.
- Highlight any specific **social or historical context** you should be aware of and reevaluate your framework and resources so as to engage with them. Being culturally competent can help develop empathy and provide a starting point to work from..
- Learn about all the families that come from the area of interest. There may be some **opposing views of contested claims** amongst these families. Be aware that your central contact may have their own view or involvement. This should not be a reason to decline partnering with people, organisations, or communities.
- Be informed of the preferred name of the community you are talking to. The identity of each Indigenous community is unique and it's important to refer to each group by their preferred name. Be aware that the terms Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander can come with attached stigma. Respecting **how Indigenous people self-identify** acknowledges their history and responsibilities.
- Work out if there are **existing partnerships** in the community and the **level of interest** in forming new partnerships. Knowing and understanding the work already going on in the community is important context—seek to learn from what has happened previously.
- Identify whether the particular issue you want to discuss involves **gender sensitivities**. Certain customs and practices are performed by men and women separately and sometimes privately, and certain decision making may only be exercised by either men or women. This will vary from

community to community. Having male and female staff from your organisation involved in the partnership will allow male-male and female-female conversations.

- Understand the **language needs** of the community and whether an interpreter will be required.

“Indigenous priorities need to be clear and in the forefront at the outset. Partnerships need to fit in with TO aspirations”

- Know whether the community or organisation already has their own **environmental priorities clear and documented**, for example through Healthy Country Planning. For a partnership to work, it needs to reflect Indigenous priorities—starting a partnership where these priorities are not already clear can be problematic and result in a partnership that is not Indigenous-led.
 - If environmental priorities are not yet clear and documented, **discuss the benefits** of articulating priorities before entering into a partnership. **Respect their situation** and **allow time** for the community or organisation to develop their priorities if need be, offer assistance if it is appropriate.

Getting to know the people that you want to engage with

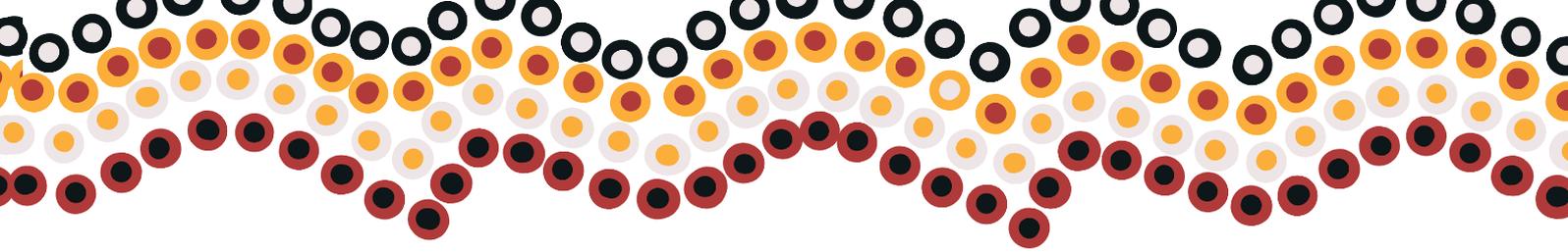
- If possible, **have someone introduce you** to relevant and respected contact in the community or organisation. Being introduced can help build trust. If you get an introduction, remember that your actions reflect on the person that introduced you.
- Good interpersonal **relationships are the foundation for success**, and this can take time. Let these relationships develop naturally. Depending on the enthusiasm of the group you are working with, you might have to put off presenting a specific idea for partnering until people know you and develop their own ideas as to what they would like.

“Slowly, slowly with little steps. Take time.”

- Consider starting small and **building up** through establishing a simple working relationship before jumping into a fully-fledged partnership.

Preparing for an initial meeting

- Know that it may take **multiple discussions, meetings, workshops and interactions** to establish a partnership, especially if you do not have a strong existing relationship.
- It might be appropriate to hold **several smaller meetings** to build the relationship, or accommodate those that might be unable to attend or speak in front of others for cultural reasons.
- Partnering workshops should occur **on Country** or organisations preferred location where possible. If the group is remote, consider how far they are from the suggested venue and how they will get there. Be respectful of others' time.
- The meeting's **agenda needs to be flexible**. Let the community/organisation shape why, how, and when they would like to be engaged. Allow sufficient time in the agenda for unforeseen delays, questions and discussion.
- When **reimbursing attendees** for their time or travel costs make sure payments are equitable and fair across those that have attended. Attendees may need reimbursing for their efforts where people are attending as community members, not as part of a paid role, or there are significant travel costs involved. During this consider how financial privilege can play out in the partnership.
- Over engagement can lead to '**engagement fatigue**'. When people are fatigued it can become difficult to gain interest in meetings. Prepare by researching and acknowledging previous consultation on similar issues. If people are becoming or are fatigued consider what existing events are happening and whether it is appropriate to use this event for your meeting.
- If the group is remote, communication can be difficult. In some cases, a community may not have access to computers or email. **Consider how you will convey messages**, for example, community centres could assist to post messages on a notice board.
- Try to gain **adequate representation**, and know that this can vary depending on community structure. Consider age, gender, position of power, family, and personal alliances. Unbalanced or inadequate representation can lead to conflicts, disengagement and, at worst, exploitation. Make sure you have the right people attending the meeting to talk about the topic.
- If you will be discussing **gender sensitive issues** organise representatives of the appropriate gender from your organisation to be present. This can be helpful even if there are no sensitive issues on the agenda. Make sure you have the right people attending the meeting to talk about the topic .
- **Check in with your central contact** a few days prior to the agreed meeting or workshop to confirm the meeting is still set. Last minute changes to meeting dates and times due to culturally sensitive events is not uncommon. Cultural obligations are important to indigenous communities. These can range from family matters to a death in the community. It is important to listen to their requests during these times to foster a space that reflects their values.

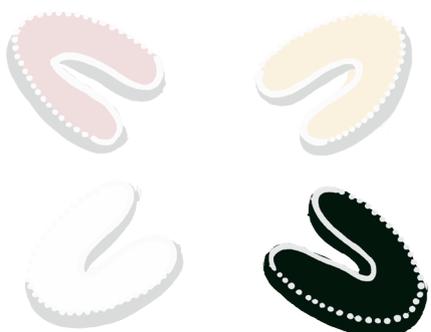


Things to do at initial meetings

- Ask meeting participants how they would like to be **identified**.
- If you are hosting the meeting, providing **refreshments** for a workshop is a sign of respect and great way to start building a rapport.
- Take the time to **share information about your organisation and your role** in it. Cover topics like who you are, what you do, what your organisation does, and why you want to partner. Be authentic. Encourage your partners to do the same so that you can ensure a mutual understanding of each other.
- You may find that people are reluctant to speak up when amongst other members of their community or family. There are culturally appropriate times and situations for people to speak up. **Ensure that you have enough time** in the community for people to talk to you one-on-one if they want to.
- It is respectful to **seek permission** at the outset as to what you do and do not have permission for. For example, there may be certain sites or information that cannot be included in a partnership under any circumstance. This might even include just the discussion of them. Show respect, and seek permission throughout the partnership building process. You can build these protocols into your partnering agreement.
- **Have empathy, be mindful, and be aware** of the ongoing effects of colonisation. The potential partnership is with a living culture. You bring influence and direction to a community through you and your organisation. Power dynamics still exist despite the promotion of equality and equity. Primarily you are there to listen and share.
- Ensure you have conversations that **explore expectations and objectives** of each partner. You need to know early on what your partners expect of you and what role they envisage playing. You should also clearly discuss any limitations each partner might have that would affect the scope or delivery of a partnership.
- Get **feedback** and suggestions around the meetings about what people liked or would like more of. This could be verbal or written depending on what people are comfortable with.
- **Allow time** for participants to reflect on the discussion and go back to their communities to discuss the partnering idea by themselves.
- **Ensure you allow for free, prior and informed consent to any proposals**—which usually involves several meetings over extended time periods.
- **Be prepared for the possibility of rejection.** Do not take it personally. Some organisations will not want to partner. Others might be interested but not yet ready to partner, and in this case you could offer capacity building assistance if appropriate. Any form of engagement is an opportunity to develop relationships, make it a positive one regardless of the outcome.

“You need to be available and have human outreach. Sit down in the dirt and talk to groups. Conversations need to be on Country, so that it is a safe and comfortable environment to talk and share.”

2. Managing and maintaining a partnership



The managing and maintaining phase involves agreeing on and co-creating governance arrangements. It is also in this phase that the partners work through challenges and build, strengthen and optimise the partnership.

Building equity in a partnership

- **All partners should be treated equally**, irrespective of the partners' size, power or influence.
- There may be existing power dynamics between partners, and consideration needs to be given to how partners can create and build equity in the partnership. This might look like:
 - **Acknowledging past** interactions, relationships and issues between partners.
 - **Co-developing equitable frameworks and processes** for how you will work together in future (i.e. not automatically deferring to the dominant partners' way of doing things).
 - **Valuing and respecting traditional knowledge** and western science as being on par with each other. One way to express this could be displaying traditional names alongside scientific names in documents and presentations. Where possible this concept can be expanded to the publication of documents in the traditional language of the region.

"Understand that it is experts working with experts. Acknowledge that Aboriginal people are absolute experts about their country."

- When in disagreement about a topic, respect others authority to hold their stance. Make it known that you understand and respect their position.

Respecting and handling sensitive information

- Indigenous partners are likely to bring traditional knowledge to the table as part of the partnership. Even what might seem like a general discussion about country could be Indigenous cultural and intellectual property. This **knowledge is owned by the community** and may be highly sensitive. It can only be used with free, prior and informed consent.
- **Take time** to understand your partners' needs when it comes to sharing their knowledge, and understand that every community has a unique perspective.
- **Developing a protocol** for how Indigenous cultural and intellectual property will be managed, and recording consent for use of such information is important to do at the outset.

"It is never about the program, it is about the people you will be working with. You need trust and confidence. Listen first and learn how you can help and where you may fit in."

- Make it regular practice to **check the sensitivity** of the information exchanged in the partnership and seek agreement as to how any information or findings from the partnership will be used.
- Think about how you format and **represent traditional knowledge**. Where possible consider presenting the knowledge in the way it was given to you. This recognises and respects other knowledge systems outside of the western format.

- Ensuring that sensitive information or traditional knowledge is not misappropriated and respect Indigenous partners if they wish to exclude it from the partnership. If Traditional Owners are the authors or owners of this information it should be acknowledged and not assumed that the intellectual property can be necessarily incorporated or owned by your organisation. A legal agreement between your company and traditional owners could be developed around its use—if needed to **protect their rights**.

Governance expectations

- **Ask what success for the partnership looks like** from an Indigenous perspective. Are your expectations consistent and achievable in terms of what is expected, (e.g. meeting frequency, meeting style and format, location, reporting requirements).
- **Governance arrangements** should be clearly discussed and fit for purpose. With a clear understanding of roles, responsibilities and accountability. It is important that this is co-developed to incorporate what success is from their perspective and understood through their values.
- **Accountability** is fundamental to partnerships and in many cases for indigenous people is not just focused on ensuring objectives are achieved but on the meaningful long term relationships developed and sustained.
- Consider whether **legal advice** for both parties is needed, and when in the process legal aspects are best introduced. If sought too early in the process, this can generate mistrust and overly complicate the process, but too late may miss opportunities to address issues before they arise.
- If an Indigenous group or organisation agrees to partner, it may take time for them to perform **internal consultations** before the decision maker or board will sign a partnering or collaboration agreement.

Maintaining communications

- Show genuine partnership through **regular communication** with Indigenous partners. Do this even when you have nothing significant to convey.

Ongoing communication builds relationships, trust and respect. It will also keep you in the loop about events that have happened in the community or organisation.

- Making time around formal meetings and workshops to interact is important. If you are able, **spend time** before or after meetings to keep building these relationships. A lot of “business” can happen outside of the formal setting.

“Partnerships work if they understand our ways of living.”

- Sometimes staff will change over during the life of a partnership and, in this case, **handovers are important** for maintaining relationships. Plan a considered transition process where the existing staff member introduces the new staff member to the Indigenous partners (in person is best, if possible).

Capacity building

- Capacity building activities can be an attractive aspect of a partnership for any of the partners. Consider whether the partnership can explicitly **offer capacity building opportunities**, such as:
 - Training and updating of relevant skills for effective involvement and growth.
 - Opportunities for development and inclusion of Indigenous partners, for example through secondments or “yarning with purpose”. This develops understanding of business methods and organisational structures, promoting knowledge sharing and two-way communication.
 - Identifying opportunities for partners to, where appropriate, access each other’s networks and contacts or attend networking events or industry conferences.
- Capacity building should aim to leave those involved able to run the project by themselves (if ongoing).

“Partnerships are about two-way learning. Expect to learn and educate. Partnerships provide mutual benefit, and there is contribution both ways.”

3. Reviewing and revising a partnership



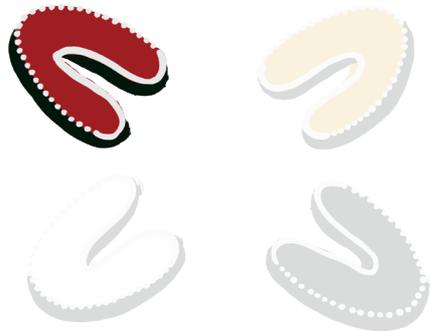
In this phase of the partnership cycle, it is time to take stock of what has happened so far, share lessons learnt, and review the value and effectiveness of the partnership so that it can become more effective and efficient. As part of this phase it is time to start measuring and reporting on the impact, effectiveness, outputs, outcomes and added value of the partnerships activities and approach.

- Be aware that it might be culturally inappropriate or uncomfortable for partners to directly raise or receive any issues or improvements. Check in with how the partners would best like to raise feedback. Some options could include:
 - Creating an **open and welcoming space** to share stories of success and issues. This might mean hosting review discussions in a familiar or informal setting.
 - Giving **opportunities to provide feedback** individually, as well as in a group setting.
 - Procuring services from an **independent and respected third party** to open up the conversation.
- Consider whether the partnership has **achieved the objectives** that partners intended and whether it has helped to deliver the Indigenous partners aspirations.

*“Be courageous and flexible.
A partnership needs room to grow
and adapt.”*

- **Indigenous value systems** might not be directly comparable to your own. An example is that some spiritual aspects may seem like a formality, yet hold a greater significance to some members of the community. Consider working out a rating system for importance for objectives, outcomes, and methods.
- **Document the review process.** This is a good opportunity to generate important data—with consent. A well-documented review can contribute to analysis of what creates successful partnerships.
- Make reviewing the partnership an **ongoing part of the process** so issues can be addressed before they become intractable.
- Also take time to reflect on **broader lessons** you have learnt, so you can bring those learnings back to your organisation and improve practices.

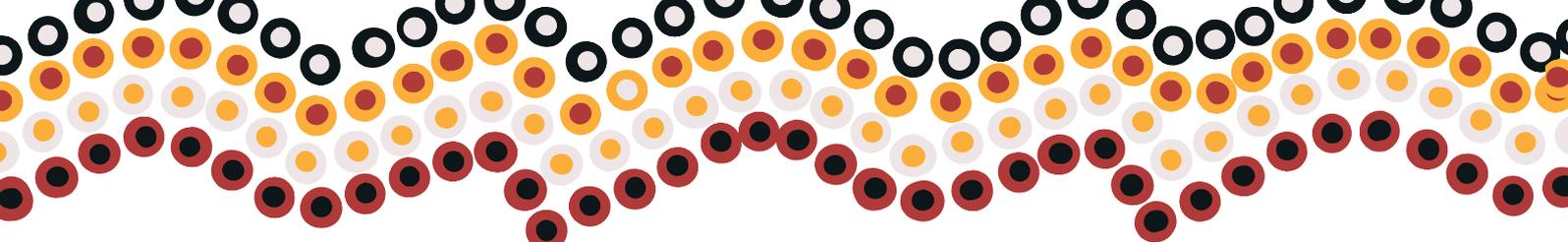
4. Sustaining the outcomes of a partnership



The sustaining outcomes phase is about exploring moving on options and next steps, ensuring outcomes can be sustained and celebrating and sharing the 'story' of the partnership.

- On-going **collaboration is key** to the success of a partnership. Ensure that all findings from the partnership are co-developed from production to publication in an inclusive and accessible format that all partners will be able to use. This closes the feedback loop and proves the partnerships shared values.
- The **legacy of the partnership** needs to be considered beyond the life of the projects in order for relationships and trust to be sustained. This is important to create a sense of togetherness and joining as a part of a wider Australian community.
- If appropriate, ask partners whether they are comfortable with **sharing outcomes** of the partnership with a broader audience. This might be through an event, a written case study or a presentation, and can act as an important way to acknowledge and celebrate success. It would be best if sharing the story is Indigenous-led.

"Working in isolation not good. You got to have that relationship with scientists etc. It's got to be two-way learning. You can't have a nest"



Additional resources

There are many excellent resources available for those seeking more specificity. Below is a short (but not comprehensive) list of documents that may be of interest to you:

- The United Nations [Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#) affirms the minimum standards for the survival, dignity, security and well-being of Indigenous peoples worldwide and enshrines Indigenous peoples' right to be different.
- The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations' [good practice guide](#) on free, prior and informed consent is a useful resource for building a practical understanding of this concept.
- Reconciliation Australia's [Share our Pride website](#) considers some of the ways in which we can all build respectful relationships to progress reconciliation, and provides information on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and history.
- The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies has created the [Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies](#) to ensure that research with and about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples follows a process of meaningful engagement and reciprocity between the researcher and the individuals and/or communities involved in the research.
- The (former) Australian Government Department of Environment's document [Engage Early](#) document is a useful guide discussing best practice Indigenous engagement for environmental assessments under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act).
- The Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA) developed a [Cultural Protocols Guide](#) to assist TSRA staff when engaging with all the communities of the Torres Strait region on all types of business, as well as a more specific [Guidelines for ethical and effective communication for researchers working in Torres Strait](#) document.
- Kimberley Saltwater Traditional Owners led project, the Kimberley Indigenous Saltwater Science Project (KISSP), in collaboration with Western Australian Marine Science Institution (AMSI), developed research protocols for engaging with Traditional Owners to support the development of mutually beneficial research outcomes.

