

Philanthropy Australia's first Affinity Group: Finding a common path towards reconciliation

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Ten years ago, during the 30th anniversary of the 1967 referendum, a group of corporate and private philanthropists came together to work collaboratively in support of Indigenous issues.

Initiated through a chance encounter between the chairpersons of two corporate and private philanthropic foundations, this first meeting established the loose network of trusts, foundations and individual donors which was to culminate in Philanthropy Australia's first Affinity Group.

A serendipitous meeting between Paul Wand of the Rio Tinto Aboriginal Foundation and Jill Reichstein of the Reichstein Foundation at the Victorian College of the Arts struck the first spark for a coalition of interests around Indigenous issues. Each discovered a shared interest in collaborative funding and a mutual desire to overcome the challenges of attracting and identifying Indigenous projects.

Being approached for funding when the requested amount is beyond one's means is a common occurrence in philanthropic circles. Having discussed this issue in relation to a particular project, Jill Reichstein and Paul Wand decided to bring a group of philanthropic representatives together to explore a collaborative funding arrangement. The project was to support a 'Link Up' program that would provide family tracing, reunion and support for forcibly removed children and their families in the Kimberley Region.

Coinciding with the 1997 Reconciliation Conference and the famous tabling of the *Bringing Them Home* report in parliament, this first meeting was a timely expression of a nascent network of corporate and private funders working in the area of Indigenous issues. The 'Link Up' project, coordinated by the Kimberley Land Council, became the first joint funding initiative in the lead up to the formation of the group. For some participants, it was their first ever grant into Indigenous issues.

The 'Indigenous Issues Affinity Group', as it was first named, grew organically through informal meetings, with hosting



Participants in the Parents and Learning (PaL) program.

being shared between participants, some of whom opened up their homes as meeting spaces. Some 'differences in emphasis within the group' emerged, and some members became wary of 'cosying up to corporates'. However a decision was made to retain corporate involvement, as most saw an opportunity to have a concerted dialogue with different philanthropic groups.¹

Philanthropy Australia approached its American sister organisation, Council on Foundations, for information on its affinity groups and protocols so that a formal mechanism could be established. Affiliation with Philanthropy Australia was seen as central to raising the profile of the group within the wider philanthropic network, and a way of extending Philanthropy Australia's role: according to Grant Hooper [then Membership Manager], the group introduced a new concept and a working model which could be built upon for subsequent interest groups.

The Indigenous Affinity Group was fertile ground in its formative days, with a busy program of activities, including a series of 'Indigenous Issues Seminars' on the themes of education, health and the arts. These seminars not only opened doors for members into distinct funding areas, but highlighted the gulf that existed between non-Indigenous grantmakers and Indigenous

grantseekers, and the need for a stronger Indigenous voice within the sector.

Whilst nowadays the Philanthropy Australia Affinity Groups conduct themselves more as a forum for co-learning than a mechanism for co-funding, there was a strong focus on collaborative grantmaking in the early days of the group. The combined pooling of resources and information proved useful for members with limited allocations of funds and helped to avoid a frustrating 'merry-go-round' for grantseekers.

Some members were active in brokering and entering into joint funding arrangements. These reflected a strategic approach to philanthropy, or what founding members describe as a shift from a 'charitable to a philanthropic view' of giving: they sought longevity for programs by developing demonstration projects, building an evaluation framework so that learnings could be captured, and seeking government resources so they could be replicated elsewhere.

An example joint project of the Indigenous Affinity Group was an ante- and post-natal health program run by the Townsville Aboriginal and Islander Health Service. Known as the *Mums and Babies* project, it empowered Indigenous mothers in health-related matters and improved the health and weight of their babies, who are more than twice as likely as non-Indigenous babies to be born premature or underweight. The program led to noticeable reductions in low birth weight babies and perinatal deaths. The Commonwealth Office of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health took over full implementation of the project in 2002.

The Indigenous Affinity Group also played a 'brokering role' in bringing other funders on board to replicate the Napranum pre-school Parents and

Learning (PaL) elsewhere in Australia. This program fosters community involvement in early childhood education by engaging parents and families to assist with their children's learning in the home. The Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) has since taken on further expansion of the program in Queensland.

Cautious of exhausting its members' time and energy by offering a 'one stop shop' for grantseekers, the Indigenous Affinity Group had to be selective with its audience whilst maintaining a conduit for information between grantseekers and grantmakers. It coordinated and participated in projects that sought to promote the involvement of Indigenous people and organisations in the philanthropic sector. This included the establishment of a national funding directory, the *Australian Indigenous Guide to Philanthropy*, a nationwide program of grantseeker workshops, and an Indigenous internship position shared between member organisations.

An Indigenous Affinity Group was established in Sydney, which brought together religious order trusts, corporate foundations and more recently, Prescribed Private Funds (PPFs). In an area perceived to be fraught with risks, the Sydney group was instrumental in establishing a safe learning environment for a growing network of new entrants to the Indigenous funding arena.

Indeed, founding members saw the Indigenous Affinity Group as playing a catalyst role in attracting funders to the Indigenous arena. It continues to provide a 'safe space' that connects new funders with more experienced members and an 'entry point' for novices to this complex area. It is also a forum for better cultural engagement with Indigenous groups, from cross-cultural training to ensuring funding guidelines give preference to projects initiated by Indigenous communities.

The establishment of the Indigenous Affinity Group was a first for Australian philanthropy, with few known prior attempts at formal collaboration between corporate and private philanthropic bodies, particularly around Indigenous issues. It represents a shared approach to understanding Indigenous issues, promoting funding of Indigenous projects and overcoming the informational and cultural divides that can exist between grantmakers and grantseekers, particularly Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants in the philanthropic sector.

1. Jenny Tretheway, Consultation paper on the Indigenous Issues Affinity Group, funded by the Bokhara Foundation, 1998.

Philanthropy Australia's Affinity Groups

By Grant Hooper, past Membership Manager, Philanthropy Australia

At their core, Philanthropy Australia's special interest groups – affinity groups and networks – are organisations founded by funders who have common interests or share common characteristics.

The first affinity groups that we are aware of were formed in the early 1980s in the United States and provide opportunities for grantmakers with common interests to meet each other, share knowledge and encourage collaborative funding. Some affinity groups in the States have been formed around the identity of the population served. Some have been formed around particular grant issue areas and still others have been formed around position and function.

Since the establishment of the Indigenous Issues Affinity Group (now simply the Indigenous Affinity Group) in Australia, Philanthropy Australia has supported the establishment and ongoing operation of a number of other special interest groups:

- Ageing Futures Affinity Group;
- Agricultural and Rural Affairs Affinity Group (closed 2004);
- Arts Affinity Group;
- Corporate Network (chapters in Melbourne and Sydney);
- Disability Affinity Group;
- Early Intervention Affinity Group (Melbourne);
- Early Intervention (Children and Young People) Affinity Group (Sydney);
- Gifts User Group Network;
- Great Minds Review Network;
- Indigenous Affinity Group (chapters in Melbourne and Sydney); and
- PPF (prescribed private fund) Network.

By providing forums for people funding in similar areas (affinity groups), or people operating in similar roles or seeking to address issues that cross program borders (networks) the groups provide some of the few forums in the philanthropic sector for peers to come together to share knowledge to inform and enhance their own practice.

Meetings tend to take place once a quarter and usually involve 10-20 participants. The membership of the majority of the groups is drawn from the Full Members of Philanthropy Australia. Each group has a Chairperson (some

have Co-Chairs) drawn from the membership of the group. These positions are usually rotated every one to two years. Together with the members of the group the Chairperson agrees the purpose of the group and sets the group's forward agenda in line with their mission including the identification of any guest presenters. Philanthropy Australia assists the groups by helping to organise meeting venues and catering as well as attending the meetings to take summary notes which are then circulated to members. Space is also provided on the Philanthropy Australia website (and PhilanthropyWiki) for the groups to exhibit information about themselves and other information that may of interest to others of like interests.

A number of the groups have also sought to achieve tangible outcomes of their work through sponsoring the development of various resources such as:

- publication of the Australian Indigenous Guide to Philanthropy (driven and funded by members of the Indigenous Affinity Group) – a tool to assist Indigenous communities and organisations better understand and attract philanthropic support;
- publication of the Supporting Leadership Opportunities report (commissioned and funded by members of the Disability Affinity Group) – a research report (also produced in an Easy English version) that provided information and recommendations to philanthropic bodies on the leadership needs and leadership education opportunities for people with disabilities in Victoria; and
- publication of the *Ageing Futures in Australia* discussion paper (developed and funded by members of the Ageing Futures Affinity Group) – a publication that identified 'drivers for change' and 'critical issues' for the future of ageing in Australia, and some opportunities for philanthropy to engage with these issues, that was presented at a session of the Philanthropy Australia conference in 2005 and built upon in a seminar the group held in 2007 (the updated paper will be available through the PhilanthropyWiki and the Ageing Futures Affinity Group page on the Philanthropy Australia website).

Members interested in finding out more about the groups (including how to participate) are encouraged to contact Philanthropy Australia's Membership Services Managers or to visit the Philanthropy Australia website – www.philanthropy.org.au/affinity/index.htm and www.philanthropy.org.au/network/index.htm