

# Taking the Middle Way

## Ideas for Sustainable Indigenous Development

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- Thanks for the intro and I want to also provide thanks to Liz de Chastel and Tanya Berkeley from our office here in Canberra, for their outstanding work in getting this seminar, in fact the whole series of seminars up and running
- Today I want to raise some ideas in pursuit of a more objective and balanced, and therefore sustainable, approach to Indigenous development in Australia
- In our work we are seeing a growing interest in the question of how to make approaches to Indigenous development sustainable, recognising that we are in for the long haul
- If all I achieve today with my ideas is to start a debate about how we might get to there, then that is fine. Just in this room alone, there is more experience than I have had, and a across a broader range of areas – other ideas there will be – but what I hope we can all agree on is that we still have some work to do to raise the standard of our approach

# Key Messages

## Ideas, not answers

The central idea being that we need to find a **middle way** if we are serious about sustainable Indigenous development

And that, based on this middle way, in partnership with Indigenous people from the very outset, we need to build an **Indigenous development practice** from the ground up

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- I'd like to support acknowledgment of country
- I really believe that amongst all the countries of the world we in Australia are very fortunate to have the opportunity of an Indigenous culture and presence in this land
- Many of the ideas I will raise today about this concept of the middle way challenge us to reassess the value of this opportunity, and the ideas of the worldview offered within it
- You may be disappointed but today I come with ideas not answers, perhaps by the end I will have created more questions for you, and perhaps we can explore them
- In fact, I believe that we are yet to go through the deeper questioning I think is still required before we get too far ahead of ourselves in the pursuit of closed gaps
- The destination is right, I'm just a little unsure about the pathway – can we trust it?
- I want to explain what I mean by the concept of a middle way – and why I think this is essential to the quest for sustainability
- And I want to set out some ideas for how we, taking the middle way, might build a more objective Indigenous development practice in Australia, from the ground up

## Where do I speak from?



- Non-Indigenous
- A planner
- A lawyer
- Observations of two ends of the spectrum

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- I am not Indigenous so I can't speak for or of Indigenous people with any authority... but I can speak about and question how we non-Indigenous people experience things and how we are going at the moment in our relationship to Indigenous people, their experiences and their challenges
- I am educated and experienced as a planner - with a special interest in strategic planning... so I am always absorbing information from the world (the context if you will) – including the plans we have about where we want to go – and, given what we know, trying to work out some ways to achieve those plans
- I am also educated and experienced as a lawyer – a barrister version – so I am interested in evidence and advocacy, fact-finding and using facts to persuade the choosing and monitoring of appropriate courses of action
- In both of these guises, since about 2001, I have come to be involved in looking at the circumstances facing Indigenous people – firstly at the back end – the justice system. And then at the front end – the places, regions, communities where Indigenous people live
- The experiences I have had through this involvement have led to a series of personal and professional transformations over time
- At times I have felt like I have answers, other times I have been completely confounded, sometimes elation, sometimes despair, always learning something and in many ways still feeling like an absolute beginner
- But all the time I have been slowly moving towards where I am at the moment – a deepening questioning about fundamental approaches and practices, about the quality of the values and ideas that have inspired our responses
- Especially about how we non-Indigenous people think about, perceive things and react, inspired by our increasingly well intentioned desire to change the dire circumstances that have confronted Indigenous people in various ways and to varying degrees ever since we got here
- It is from this place that I speak today

## A middle way



The Buddha



W.E.H. Stanner

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- Introducing the Buddha and WEH Stanner
- I can't claim to be a Buddhist, but I am a fan of the Buddha – especially his logic. His philosophy is often called the middle way. He called it that himself because, as the story goes, in a quest for an enlightenment based on a profound happiness and wellbeing he had experienced two extremes – at one end the abundance, indulgences and pleasures of a sheltered prince, at the other end the deprivations of a sadhu, a wandering ascetic who renounces everything and who is exposed to every kind of suffering one can imagine
- The Buddha meditated on his experiences under both extremes and finally realised that neither extreme could achieve his goal, a middle way was needed, and his philosophy and teaching went on to explore, explain and objectify what this middle way is and the logical steps to achieve it
- WEH Stanner was an anthropologist who spent his career observing Aboriginal ways and the ways in which non-Aboriginal people (especially those in authority) acted towards Aboriginal people
- I thought I had come up with some original observations and thinking on Indigenous matters until I read Stanner for the first time a few years ago and discovered he got there a long time before I did, before many of us have
- There is some recent renewed interest in Stanner's observations and advice, but otherwise I think it is fair to say that it is taking a long time for non-Indigenous Australia to pick up where he left off
- In one of his final essays *Aboriginals in the Affluent Society* (1973), Stanner identifies what he called 'two extremes of outlook' prevalent pretty much throughout his entire career
- At one end was 'a rather heady and facile optimism which brushes aside all mention of limiting conditions as irrelevant'... those who would 'simplify unduly' and work and live for illusions
- At the other end was 'a settled pessimism' held by those who would 'assure us and the Aborigines that what we are doing is a waste of time: they say that nothing will work because nothing has ever worked'
- Stanner called this the 'utopian-realist' dualism and he believed that for us to keep the difficulties in focus as 'true life-size not...smaller or larger than life' we should reject the two extremes
- If you've worked in and around Indigenous affairs, you'll have spotted this dualism is often alive and well in some quarters
- Both of these men rejected extremes and suggested that we grasp for extremes when we are confused, when we've lost our objectivity, when we lack knowledge and experience, when we have failed to make proper enquiry...

# The Extremes Described

Stanner quotes Edward Hallet Carr (1945):

“the **utopian**, fixing his eyes on the future, thinks in terms of creative spontaneity: the **realist**, rooted in the past, in terms of causality... The complete **realist**, unconditionally accepting the causal sequence of events, deprives himself of the possibility of changing reality. The complete **utopian**, by rejecting the causal sequence, deprives himself of the possibility of understanding either the reality which he is seeking to change, or the processes by which it can be changed...”

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- Here's Stanner's utopian-realist extremes more fully described...
- But I also think that right at the moment, the official agenda appears some way from the complete realist extreme – the Closing the Gap agenda is about the possibility of changing reality
- And it is probably also true that we are not at the complete utopian extreme – we have tools such as the OID framework that are interested in certain causal sequences for example
- So perhaps we are already starting to approach a middle way in relation to this kind of dualism

# Other 'extremes'

Intervention **Self Determination**  
Responsibilities **Rights**  
Non-Indigenous worldview **Indigenous worldview**  
Non-Indigenous values **Indigenous values**  
Practical **Symbolic**

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- But there are, in my view, a range of other extremes we see still at work in the quest for Indigenous development
- So I think that our likelihood of finding a comprehensive middle way is currently limited because, in my view, we don't yet have a full awareness of when and how these extremes operate - and in particular – the principles and practices through which things can be less extreme
- As examples for forming some ideas, I have listed what I regard as some of the more ever present extremes
- And when we look at the list I have suggested, I think it is fairly straight forward to accept that in recent years the extremes on the white side of this list have been dominant
- In any case, historically, policy and practice has vacillated between these extremes, often for the most subjective of reasons e.g. the political persuasion of the day, ideology, etc
- I want to advocate for an approach to Indigenous development in Australia that avoids these extremes, a set of principles and practices that is more balanced, more certain and less subject to the wavering influences of politics in particular

## Finding the middle way



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- This is July 2008
- Galarrwuy Yunupingu, a leader and countryman from East Arnhem Land, meets the Prime Minister
- There was big ceremony this day and, and on behalf of his people, Galarrwuy petitioned the PM for constitutional recognition of his people's rights to their identity, culture and land – I'm not sure how Kev's going with that...
- So how to find the middle way for Indigenous development? I'll provide my ideas on some principles and practices we should set as a basis upon which we could found a proper Indigenous development practice...
- These ideas come from our experiences and exchanges at SGS, but also from listening and watching the nation grapple with the question of how to proceed... many of these ideas can also be found in international frameworks and approaches, including in international development practice
- A lot of these principles challenge those of us on the dominating non-Indigenous side to change our thinking
- Though we are seeing signs of some of these ideas across the places and agencies we have worked with
- The challenge still falls for us is to define and formalise a set of effective principles and practices for Indigenous development, and work with these in a consistent way over time

# Intervention **Self Determination**

## Principle

Making decisions about actions and doing things **with** each other, not **for** or **against** each other

## Practices

Skill Indigenous people for roles throughout the **whole** development cycle – policy, action, measurement, review

Let Indigenous people share in the **leadership** of ideas and actions

Non- Indigenous people **share, facilitate** and **support**

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## Intervention versus self-determination

### Principle

Making decisions about actions and doing things with each other, not for or against each other -  
Partnerships based on proper representation right the way through the cycle – from policy-making through action on the ground through to review

### Practices

Skill Indigenous people for roles throughout the whole development cycle – policy, action, measurement, review

Let Indigenous people share in the leadership of ideas and actions

Non- Indigenous people share, facilitate and support

# Responsibilities **Rights**

## Principle

Don't **impose** responsibilities upon each other that **ignore** each other's rights

## Practices

The agreement of rights and responsibilities at all points in the development cycle must be **legitimised** through **representative, transparent** and **fair** negotiation

This must be done **before** any actions are taken

**Share** responsibilities according to practicalities – who is **best placed** to do what according to **capability** and **capacity**

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# Mainstream values

## Indigenous values

### Principle

Both sets of values are legitimate, in the right place

### Practices

Work together to define and accept each other's values

Classify values according to areas of action – governance values, health values, education values, etc

Benchmark a 'good idea' as one that is able to serve both sets of values at the same time

When values can't be reconciled, use sound technical reasons for choosing one value over another, and make this choice together

Monitor the results of actions on the degree to which they have lived up to both sets of values

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# Practical Symbolic

## Principle

Combine the practical and the symbolic

## Practices

Immediately follow any symbolic gesture with an appropriate practical action

Look for opportunities to recognise and celebrate the symbolic within any practical action

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### Practices

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- And some of us are worried about this becoming a risk

## Other practicalities

Get a **representative body** in place before going too much further

Create a **'hybrid'** national agency for Indigenous development

**Define** Indigenous development

Establish **principles** and **practices**

Identify the **knowledge** and **skills** required

**Teach, learn, develop** a national **capability**

**Apply** these beyond the reach of any extreme political influence

# Examples



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- This photo is of a tourist centre near Yalata in SA, for whale-watching...
- But I wanted to talk about an exchange we had in Wadeye, Port Keats in the NT
- Explaining the value of planning to a group of elders
- Then the group of elders interpreting this and relating back

# Five foundations of stable, sustainable human settlement & development

## Governance

Deciding what we do and regulating what we do in pursuit of needs / aspirations

## Resources

Land /environment, food, shelter, tools, money, capital, buildings, plant, equipment etc

## Health & Wellbeing

Physical, social, cultural, spiritual

## Knowledge

Skills, techniques, education, training

## Economic Security & Development

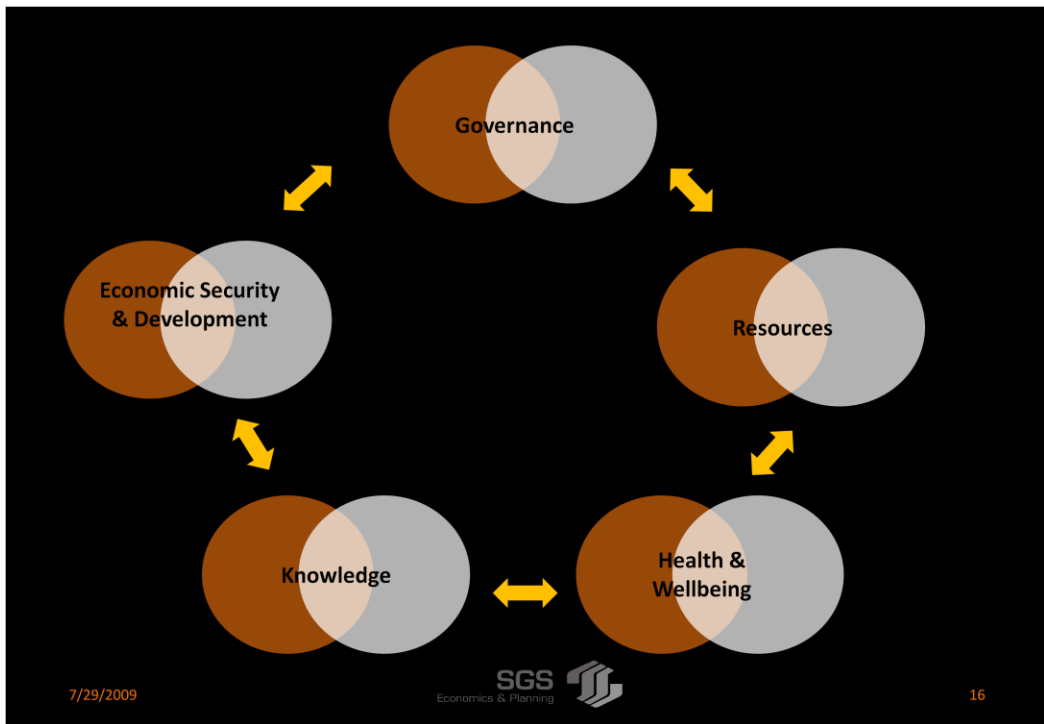
Securing & re-investing resources to achieve and sustain needs & aspirations

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- We are in the process of adapting our mainstream thinking



- So that we begin to make room for Indigenous perspectives... explicitly recognising the cultural overlay...
- Doing this embeds the worldview and therefore culture into each of these foundations
- Then, we can build benchmarks for and indicators of development that use both ATSI and non-ATSI worldviews i.e. some ATSI-specific indicators as well as some 'mainstream' ones

## Qualities of Indicators & Metrics

Context-specific

Set with (not for) ATSI regions, communities, people

ATSI ones + non-ATSI ones

Hybrid

Practical

Indexed

Refresh quickly, easily

## New Zealand



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- Is there a middle way in practice elsewhere?
- NZ has a Ministry dedicated to Maori potential (development)

## Quality of Life Indicators for Māori

Built with Maori for Maori

### Lead Indicators

Economic

Social

Cultural

Environmental

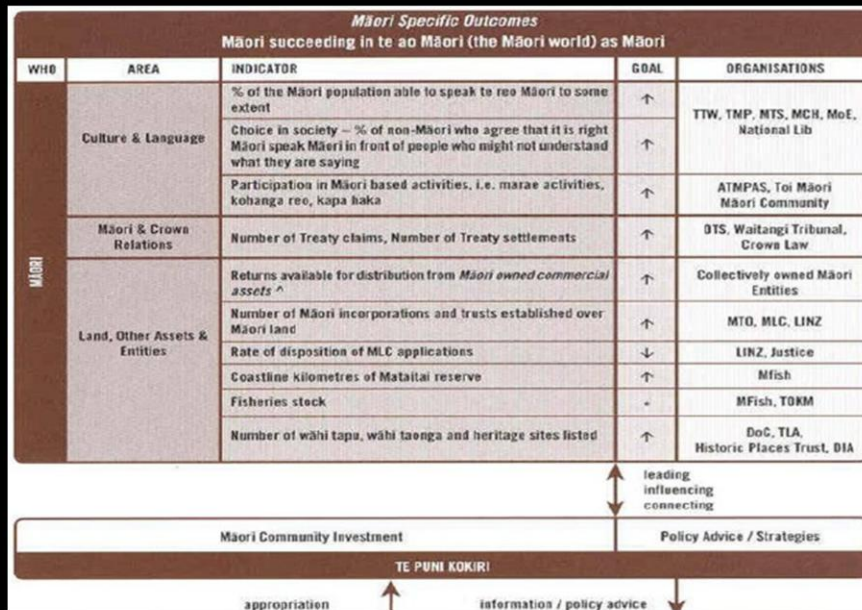
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- The NZ framework talks about quality of life, and moderates GDP-based notions of development to some degree
- Built with Maori, for Maori
- Lead indicator sets include cultural

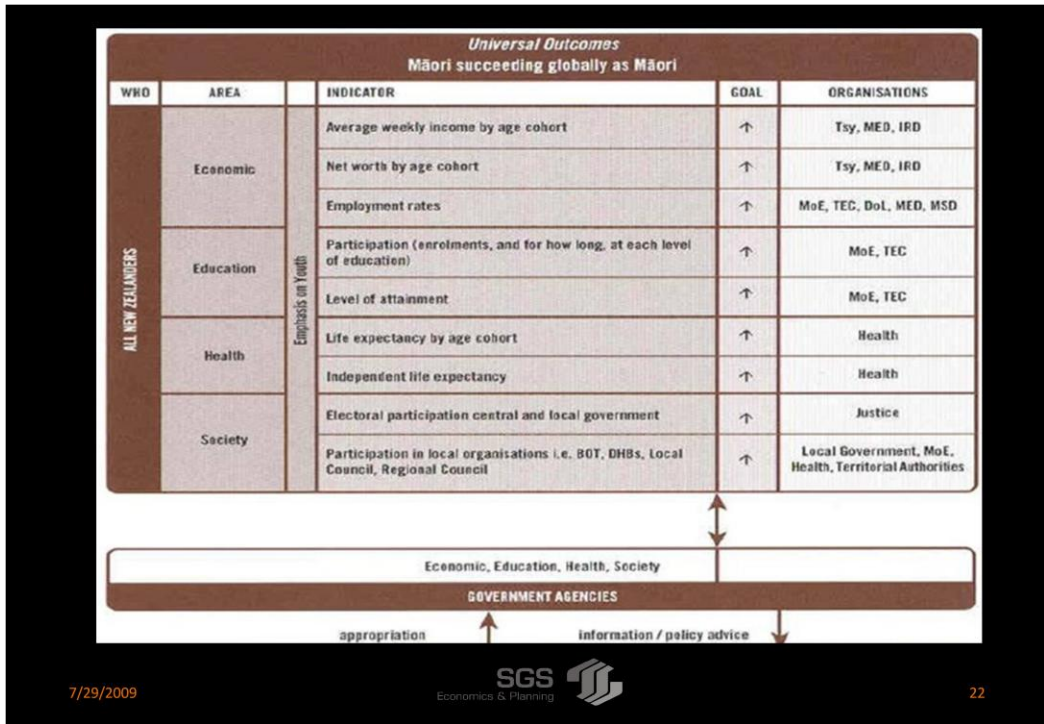




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- First half – Maori succeeding as Maori
- Culture and Language
- Maori & Crown Relations
- Land, Other Assets & Entities



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- Second half – Maori succeeding globally as Maori
- Economic
- Education
- Health
- Society

## Concluding remarks

### Ideas, not answers

The central idea being that we need to find a **middle way** if we are serious about sustainable Indigenous development

And that, based on this middle way, in partnership with Indigenous people from the very outset, we need to build an **objective Indigenous development practice** from the ground up