
West Daly Peace Project Ground Up Evaluation

Final Report

June 2026



Michaela Spencer, Annunciata Wilson, Latisha Marranytya, Janine Cooper,
Troy Mardigan, Jack Wodidj, Melanie Cook and Michael Christie

Northern Institute, Charles Darwin University

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West Daly Peace Project Ground Up Evaluation

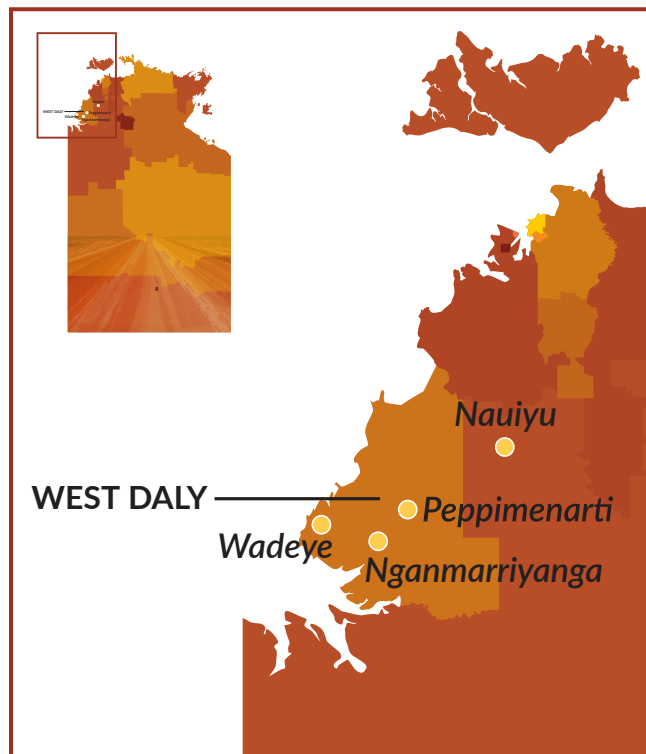
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Cover image: Sunlight shines through the storm clouds at Wadeye

This document may contain the names and/or images of Aboriginal people who have since passed away.

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Contents

Acknowledgements	6
Key Insights	7
Executive Summary	9
Background	13
Mediation and Peacemaking in Nauiyu	16
What We Did	17
Elder Statements	18
Local Evaluative Responses	20
Service Provider Responses	24
Ground Up Commentary	26
Mediation and Peacemaking in Peppimenarti	28
What We Did	29
Elder Statements	30
Local Evaluative Responses	31
Service Provider Responses	35
Ground Up Commentary	36
Mediation and Peacemaking in Nganmarriyanga	38
What We Did	39
Elder Statements	41
Local Evaluative Responses	42
Service Provider Responses	45
Ground Up Commentary	46
Mediation and Peacemaking in Wadeye	48
What We Did	49
Elder Statements	50
Local Evaluative Responses	53
Service Provider Responses	57
Ground Up Commentary	58
Findings and Recommendations	59
Theme 1: Systemic challenges across all communities	59
Theme 2: Engaging differences in local governance	61
Theme 3: The effectiveness of the West Daly Peace Project	63
Theme 4: Supporting a research orientation in ongoing evaluation	65
Conclusion	66





Traditional Owner Christine Pulchen (with Troy Mardigan) calls out to country and welcomes this Ground Up research to Wadeye. Location: Air Force Hill.

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Key Insights

1. Strong Aboriginal peacemaking traditions endure

The West Daly has always had robust Aboriginal processes for nurturing peace and managing conflict, including through the four ceremony groups – Wangka, Tjarnpa, Lirrga and Wulthirri. Elders remain confident in these processes and appreciative of grounded local supports that align with them. This foundational knowledge is the starting point for effective peacemaking work.

2. Peace is relational, not transactional

Elders view peace as preserved when networks of kin on country are in good productive relation. Networks of government agencies contribute to peace when they too are in good productive relation with each other and with kin networks. Disputes are not stand-alone events but emerge from breakdowns in these relations – as relations are restored, disputes resolve themselves. Speedy resolution of individual disputes is not always the most productive path to lasting peace.

3. The Intervention undermined the foundations of peace

The erosion of elder authority – significantly precipitated by the Intervention – was identified across all communities as a root cause of ongoing conflict and unrest. Government agencies cutting across relations of kin, treating people as individuals without kin connections, and bypassing traditional structures of authority have compounded this damage. Restoring peace requires publicly acknowledging and actively repairing this rupture.

4. Elders cannot carry the work of peacemaking alone

It is difficult for elders to sustain peacemaking work when expected to cross traditional boundaries of authority and constitute peace for the whole community rather than their own family or clan group. Their authority is strongest – and most legitimate – when they operate within their own networks of kin and country. Supporting rather than overburdening elder authority is essential to effective peacemaking.

5. The distinctive approach of the West Daly Peace Project is effective and highly valued

Across all communities, the Peace Project team was highly regarded. Their deep knowledge of local people, histories and politics, their active presence in times of crisis, and their ability to work separately with men and women were identified as critical strengths. A key distinction is that the Peace Project team maintains connections and moves forward during conflict, rather than retreating until it has passed. This helps people in communities feel they have not been forgotten.

6. Peacemaking encompasses much more than dispute resolution

Effective peacemaking requires two related but distinct capacities: the ability to discern and support locally relevant conditions of peace as understood by elders, and the ability to resolve specific conflicts when peace has broken down. Nurturing conditions of peace involves remembering, restoring and sustaining right relations of kin on country.

7. Local peacemaking roles require careful differentiation

The role of 'local Aboriginal mediator' is specific and complex. Such roles can be difficult to step into as they can compromise traditional roles and commitments. Elders play a crucial role in supervising and evaluating conditions of peace, but are not always the right people to resolve specific disputes. There are a range of differentiated peacemaking roles – peace facilitators, peacekeepers, cultural coordinators – that are significant to building sustainable local capacity.

8. Government agencies are always implicated in community peace

Local government and non-government organisations play a crucial role in promoting peace. Agencies that understand and affirm ancestral networks of kin and country may generate remarkable benefits. Those that treat people as individuals without kin connections, or fail to align their operations with local governance structures, may inadvertently contribute to conflict.

9. Supporting time on country is a core responsibility of all agencies

Supporting local people to spend more time being and learning on country was identified as strongly conducive to peace and as a core responsibility of all agencies operating in Aboriginal communities. This points to the benefits of building time on country into operational plans, budgets and program design – rather than treating relations to country and homelands as peripheral to an agency's core function.

10. Ceremony groups offer a ready framework for service alignment

People in Peppimenarti and Wadeye identified ceremony groups as powerful organising structures through which people 'settle down' and know what to do. It was understood that services and organisations – including schools, clinics and government employment programs – would be more effective if they worked to align with, rather than work across, these groupings. Supporting existing ceremonial authority was suggested as a practical basis for developing Indigenous Law and Justice Groups.

11. Storytelling is a critical tool for making peace visible

Stories shared within the Ground Up research made visible networks of care and accountability that elders and emerging leaders are trying to nurture. The act of young researchers sitting with elders and listening to their stories was seen as itself working to strengthen conditions of peace locally. Sharing the findings of this evaluation widely is a beneficial recommended peacemaking action.

12. Aboriginal researchers are essential to Ground Up evaluation

The presence of Aboriginal researchers working within their own languages and networks of kin was crucial to all elements of the evaluation research. Evaluating peacemaking from the ground up revealed strong local understandings of how peace may be restored and retained – understandings that are not always visible to government organisations. Continuing to engage local researchers within the West Daly Peace Project is a vital next step.

Executive Summary

1. Project overview

In early 2025, the Ground Up team at Charles Darwin University's (CDU's) Northern Institute were commissioned by the Community Justice Centre (CJC) of the Northern Territory's (NT's) Attorney General's Department to evaluate the West Daly Peace Project. The West Daly Peace Project (2024–2026) is funded by the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) and the NT Attorney General's Department. It aims to enhance local mediation and peacekeeping across the communities of Nauiyu, Peppimenarti, Nganmarriyanga, Wadeye, and their connected homeland areas. In mid-2025 the project transitioned from the CJC to management by the Aboriginal Justice Unit (AJU) within the NT Attorney General's Department.

The Ground Up evaluation was initiated relatively early in the life of the West Daly Peace Project, reflecting a commitment to ongoing iterative learning as the project unfolded. The Ground Up team maintained close collaboration with the West Daly peacemaking team throughout, and together we supported the employment of local researchers, and shared insights relevant to both peacemaking and research practice. Both the Peace Project team and the local researchers had input into developing this final report.

The local researchers who guided this project were critical to all aspects of the work, including conceptualisation, design, on-ground facilitation and interpretation. Latisha Marranytya, Janine Cooper and Troy Mardigan guided the research in Nauiyu and Wadeye; Annunciata Wilson guided work in Peppimenarti; and Jack Wodidj and Melanie Cook were research leaders in Nganmarriyanga. Ground Up researcher Michaela Spencer worked across all four communities, collaborating with the research teams. She also worked with the local researchers and fellow Ground Up member Michael Christie around interpreting and collating findings.

2. Methodology and challenges

Research discussions were guided by elders and local researchers across the West Daly communities. These conversations explored their experiences of working with the Peace Project and helped clarify local practices and understandings of peace and conflict resolution. Ground Up also spoke with a range of relevant government staff and other stakeholders.

A key methodological challenge was working within complex and evolving events. The evaluation unfolded in real time alongside emerging peacemaking work, requiring flexibility and ongoing trust-building. However, as people committed to this work, sharing stories within the Ground Up research about conditions of peace helped make visible networks of care and accountability which elders and emerging leaders were already nurturing, but which are not readily visible to government organisations.

A further challenge was the tension between government and elders framings of the work. Government and non-government stakeholders tended to prioritise resolving disputes – engaging conflicts more quickly and effectively, and reducing active conflict and social disruption. Elders and community members, by contrast, consistently pointed to the importance of organising the conditions of peace: restoring rightful relations of kin on country and appropriate reciprocal relations of care between Aboriginal landowners and government agencies. Holding both framings in view throughout the research was an ongoing methodological commitment for the Ground Up team.

3. Key findings and recommendations

3.1 Understanding peace and dispute resolution in the West Daly

From early in the research, elders drew a clear distinction between 'dispute resolution' and 'nurturing conditions of peace'. Dispute resolution was often seen as government or agency initiated and concerned with dislocations that arise within township life. Peacemaking, by contrast, was understood as the work of recouping, reinvigorating and sustaining the networks of kin on country and under authority that had always allowed for peaceful co-existence before townships were established. This distinction mirrors the difference between 'negative peace' (the absence of

violence, as generated through law and justice processes) and 'positive peace' (the integration of justice and equity within sustainable social structures on country) introduced to the peacekeeping literature by Johan Galtung in 1964¹. In the West Daly, healthy and sustainable social structures depend on access to ancestral lands and resources as critical to growing respectful, peace-preserving future generations.

- Within the West Daly, there have always been strong Aboriginal processes for nurturing peace and dealing with conflict as it arises, including through the four ceremony groups – Wangka, Tjarnpa, Lirrga and Wulthirri.
- Elders remain confident in these processes and appreciate grounded local support that aligns with local arrangements.
- Disputes were not seen as stand-alone events, but as emerging in relation to issues of local governance – including pre-existing tensions within Aboriginal governance (invested in Aboriginal 'people-places') and government governance (concerned with 'the community').
- Peace is preserved when networks of kin on country are in good productive relation. Networks of agencies contribute positively to peace to the extent that they, too, are in positive relation with each other and with kin networks.
- Focusing on the speedy resolution of disputes was not always seen as the most productive path to peace; resolutions often take time and involve working through issues not visible to government agencies.

Recommendation: Agencies working in the West Daly region should adopt a dual framing – attending to both dispute resolution and the longer-term conditions of peace. This means investing in processes and relationships that support the restoration of kin networks on country, not only the resolution of presenting conflicts.

3.2 The role of kin networks and ceremony groups in governance and peacemaking

Research participants drew a further distinction between Aboriginal governance concerned with the constitution of 'Aboriginal people-places', and government governance carried out with reference to 'the community'. Elders noted that their authority is eroded when asked to speak or make decisions outside their clan or family groups on behalf of the whole community, or when all people were treated as having equal standing in meetings and decision-making processes.

- The four ceremony groups – Lirrga, Tjarnpa, Wangka and Wulthirri – are a critical but rarely used structure for government engagement. While clan/language/family groups are many, the ceremony groups are only four, and they connect all the way through and beyond the West Daly region. They embed significant leadership structures respected by both Aboriginal people and government agencies.
- When elders spoke about working on the ground to support peace, it was very often these ceremony groups they referred to.
- Working within ceremony group structures allows elders to act within the appropriate limits of their authority. It is difficult for elders to undertake peacemaking work alone, especially if expected to cross traditional boundaries of kinship and ceremonial authority and constitute peace for the whole community.

Recommendation: Government and non-government agencies should explore orienting their engagement in the West Daly around and through the four ceremony groups. This may be both effective for external organisations and beneficial for local people, providing a culturally appropriate governance structure that honours, rather than erodes, elder authority.

¹ Galtung, J. (1964). A structural theory of aggression. *Journal of peace research*, 1(2), 95-119.
Galtung, J. (2018). Violence, peace and peace research. *Organicom*, 15(28), 33-56.

3.3 The West Daly Peace Project: Strengths and practice considerations

In all communities visited, the work of the Peace Project team was highly regarded. Several consistent strengths and important practice considerations were identified:

- The Peace Project team's deep knowledge of local people, histories and politics was seen as critically significant.
- The team's active presence in times of crisis – staying present rather than retreating until conflict has passed – was experienced as having a clear positive effect: it showed people they had not been forgotten, brought new dynamics to entrenched conflicts, and demonstrated the possibility of renegotiating working networks of trust and care.
- The current team composition was seen as a strength: the coupling of deep local knowledge through Aboriginal practitioners with skilled accredited mediators, and a team that includes both women and men.
- Advocacy work between local people and organisations was valued in helping agencies work in ways that recognise local perspectives and promote peace.

Two separate but related capacities were seen as essential to effective peacemaking teams:

- The ability to discern and support locally relevant means for constituting peace, as shared through elder stories; and
- The ability to support careful resolution of conflicts when peace has broken down.

The West Daly Peace Project was seen as skilled in both these capacities.

It became evident that appropriate roles for local people in peacemaking groups require careful consideration:

- Elders play an important role in supervising and evaluating conditions of peace for their own networks of kin but may not always be appropriate for resolving disputes involving other groups.
- The role of local Aboriginal mediators is specific and can be difficult to step into, as it may compromise traditional roles and commitments.
- Other 'peacekeeper' and 'peace facilitator' roles exist – including supporting groups travelling out bush, coordinating community sports events, holding youth forums, and working with services to align with ceremony groups.

Support for existing elder efforts through kinship and ceremony groups was seen as a natural foundation for developing Indigenous Law and Justice Groups, with the Peace Project team being well placed to facilitate relevant discussions.

Recommendation: Invest in the West Daly Peace Project's distinctive capacity to maintain connections across networks of kin and networks of agencies, and to stay present during conflict. Develop clear role definitions for different peacemaking functions – including mediator, peacekeeper and peace facilitator – that honour traditional obligations and enhance traditional authority. Support the West Daly Peace Project to facilitate development of Indigenous Law and Justice Groups, building on existing kinship structures under elder authority.

3.4 The role of government and service agencies in promoting peace

Local government and non-government organisations play a crucial role in promoting peace and resolving conflict in West Daly communities. Elders often saw conflict as precipitated by government agencies cutting across relations of kin; for example, by treating everyone as the same and ignoring kin connections. At the same time, they recognised the considerable goodwill of many individuals in these agencies and noted the remarkable benefits that flow when government agencies recognise and affirm ancestral networks of kin and country.

- Sharing stories was seen as a way to orient stakeholders to the origins of places, and to the initial relations between Aboriginal and government governance inaugurated in the early days of communities, to which elders see government as still beholden.
- Supporting local people to spend more time on country was also seen as a core responsibility of all agencies operating in Aboriginal communities and as strongly conducive to peace.
- Improving the orientation, flexibility and visibility of networks of government agencies in communities would therefore contribute positively to peace. The Peace Project may provide valuable assistance in supporting and making public such inter-agency coordination.

Structure of this report

The sections that follow present outcomes of the evaluation research as four community-specific reports.

These detail the work of the West Daly Peace Project and the research practice in each place. They share statements and discussions from elders, community members, young people and service providers regarding strategies for settling disputes and creating peaceful places. Each report concludes with reflections from the Ground Up team on the specificities of attending to conditions of peace and resolving disputes in that place.

Overall and site-specific conclusions, as well as further recommendations, are provided in the final section of the report.

Background

The West Daly Peace Project deploys a team of peacemakers who work responsively and proactively across the region.

In respecting Aboriginal people as first responders in community disputes, the Peace Project works with elders, families, local agencies and other government departments in engaging a wide range of issues and community conflicts. They deliver mediation training and workshops and help facilitate communication between parties before conflicts escalate or reach the courts.

In our early discussions scoping the Ground Up evaluation of the West Daly Peace Project, it became clear that the flexible and locally specific methods of the Peace Project team would need to be understood and engaged within our evaluation.

A Ground Up² approach to research and evaluation always centres Aboriginal authority in framing research questions and directions. We begin by working with elders in their own places, inviting them to identify local researchers suited to guide the evaluation. These local researchers are supported to work within their own networks of kin and authority, and in their own languages.

Guided in this way, our research questions emerge from the places and people we work with. Evaluation inquiries are frequently shaped by stories told by elders and participants; these include ancestral stories of how Aboriginal people-places came to be, as well as the histories of current settlements and current problems of the moment. These stories illuminate the issues, everyday practices and governance networks that elders and researchers know intimately, and which matter deeply to productive research partnerships. Our evaluation seeks to make visible the local values, imperatives and understandings that might otherwise seem opaque to commissioning bodies and government and non-government organisations.

Throughout the Ground Up evaluation of the West Daly Peace Project, Ground Up researchers worked collaboratively with the West Daly peacemaking team, elders and local researchers to make visible local assessments of ways of dealing with conflict and restoring peace. Elders and local researchers saw the evaluation process as a new initiative that had not

been attempted before. This is as previous forms of evaluation of law and justice initiatives have sought to review government program objectives, rather than seeking local guidance around processes for constituting peace.

Rather than offering an arm's-length assessment, our evaluation has sought to develop grounded collaborations enhancing and making visible 'just' peacemaking. We have focused on: building well-supported local researcher teams across project sites; deepening awareness of significant histories and origin stories; articulating local peacemaking strategies; and developing insights into collaborative processes for ongoing peace and community justice.

Research questions

Our work across the four communities of the West Daly has been focused on the following research questions:

1. How do elders in each community understand peacemaking and mediation?
2. How do they feel about the work of the CJC and other agencies in peacemaking and mediation?
3. How can peacemaking and mediation be improved within communities and across the region?



² See <https://groundup.cdu.edu.au/> for more details

What we did

The Ground Up evaluation of the West Daly Peace Project was carried out from March to November 2025. In beginning this project, the Ground Up team at CDU met with the West Daly Peace Project peacemakers online and then in a team planning workshop. We had one-on-one discussions with the project director and each of the four team members. This was to learn about the character of their peacemaking and mediation work, as well as recent matters arising, differences between the project sites, and how the evaluation could support their local engagements.

In Stage 1 of the evaluation, we accompanied the Peace Project team on trips to Nauiyu, Peppimenarti and Nganmarriyanga, then later to Wadeye. This allowed the Ground Up team to be introduced to key local people and start discussions around further research. Early emerging insights were shared through an interim report.

Stage 2 involved work in each of the four communities, engaging elders able to advise on the project and appropriate people to work as local researchers. Initially, these researchers worked in their home places, then started to take part in exchange visits where they would work with and support researchers in other communities. We met with senior people and other participants in each place. We would sit with them at

their homes or other places they nominated, and hear from them about their understandings of peacemaking and mediation. We spoke with over 55 participants across the four communities – with research proceeding in different ways in each place. Ongoing feedback in the form of mini reports with photos were shared back to researchers, and edited transcripts and photos of discussions were shared with participants for checking.

Once work was completed across all sites, provisional drafts of community specific reports were written up by the Ground Up team, and were taken to Nauiyu where they were reviewed and discussed by the Nauiyu/Wadeye research team. The local researchers suggested edits and identified key people who had not yet been approached but needed to be included. A full draft of the report was generated through a process of iterative writing and review. The report was shared with the community researchers, who sat with the Ground Up team on separate occasions to review their sections of the report and suggest edits. A draft report was shared with the Peace Project team for review. Their feedback, edits and additional material have been incorporated.

Following the completion of the Ground Up evaluation, the local researchers have been employed to continue working within the West Daly Peace Project.



West Daly Peace Project

Naiyu Report

Ground Up Evaluation

June 2026



Mediation and Peacemaking in Nauiyu

Nauiyu is a small township that was established as a Roman Catholic Mission in the 1880s on the lands of the Malak Malak people. Since the creation of the mission, Nauiyu has included people from across the region who came to build houses and set up small farms. The mission is remembered by many senior people as a time of peaceful coexistence when clan commitments and community life sat well together. Today the Green River Aboriginal Corporation (GRAC) and the Nauiyu Nambiyu Aboriginal Corporation (NNAC) are prominent groups involved in community governance. The dominant languages spoken in Nauiyu are Ngan'gikurunggurr, Ngen'giwumirri, Kriol and English.

The West Daly Peace Project team started working in Nauiyu during a period of conflict that arose after the AFL Grand Final in 2024. The Peace Project team were invited to the community by local organisations, then their work was supported by a contract variation from NIAA. The team started sitting with groups on both sides of the dispute in places which were open and visible – like under the mango tree or outside the shop.

In the early days of fighting, people were feeling considerable distress. Cars and houses had been lost to fire, and children were not feeling safe at school. The police had made numerous arrests but were also pulling back and were unable to contain tensions as they flared up. The feeling of being able to talk to someone at this time, and to be able to share their side of the story, was described as crucial to people feeling like they had not been abandoned.

As tensions continued, senior people were under considerable pressure to manage family members to try and resolve the problem themselves but were struggling and exhausted. As the conflicts continued, the boards of the two local corporations, GRAC and NNAC, were also drawn into taking sides in the dispute. The Peace Project team led a mediation process with the leadership of these organisations. Beyond this, the organisations' boards decided to work more productively together and to look for ways of modelling this publicly.

Accompanying this ongoing mediation work, the team worked closely with Catholic Care and the Women's group, holding workshops around trauma informed practices to work with local women around the ongoing difficulties they were experiencing in everyday life as the tensions continued. There were also some other emerging local matters (such as disputes involving individuals and employers) that they worked on.

In late -2024, a gathering was initiated by senior leaders and police outside the shop. Relevant local people and services were there, and it was agreed that there had been enough fighting, and it must stop. An apology was offered, which was accepted, and the dispute concluded.

Beyond this resolution, the Peace Project team has been offering ongoing support through structured training sessions for community members and first responders, as well as ongoing work with the Women's group and other services such as Catholic Care and Night Patrol.

There has been a great sense of relief that the community-wide dispute has now ended, but this is coupled with uncertainty around if and when such problems might return. There is a sense that if good practices can be grown now while things are quiet, this may help people to heal from past traumas and bring back conditions under which Nauiyu has always previously been a peaceful place.

What We Did

In beginning our Ground Up research in Nauiyu, we first introduced the project to elders, and then were fortunate to be guided to work with three young emerging leaders – Latisha Marranytya, Janine Cooper and Troy Mardigan – who became the local research team.

As the first to join the team, Latisha was instrumental in developing the research approach that emerged in Nauiyu. This involved sitting with elders and other community members and allowing them to share their experiences of current troubles, and stories of working towards peace. In developing this research, Latisha was endorsed by her own elders (including Grandmother Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann). She also worked with the support of Loretta Marranya (senior advisor) and Tynisha Cronin (research mentoree). Latisha proposed a series of ‘research exchanges’ where the researchers on the project could travel to each other’s communities, supporting and learning from each other.

Janine and Troy joined the project as it progressed. They were crucial additions to the team, bringing deep intercultural experience from their work with family and organisations. Working together meant that this research team now included both women and men and carried the capacity to work across the different local languages of Ngan’gikurunggurr, Kriol, Murrinh-Patha and English.

Michaela from Ground Up made eight visits to Nauiyu, speaking to approximately 20 community members and a number of staff from relevant government and local organisations. Extensive notes and/or voice recordings were made of all conversations. These were typed up by Michaela and, where possible, shared back to participants.

The researchers in Nauiyu have been awarded Indigenous Community-Based Researcher credentials through the CDU Indigenous Researchers Initiative (IRI). They are the first researchers in the West Daly region to receive these qualifications. Their online research profiles can be visited here:

- Latisha Marranytya: <https://iri.cdu.edu.au/latisha-marranytya/>
- Janine Cooper: <https://iri.cdu.edu.au/janine-cooper/>
- Troy Mardigan: <https://iri.cdu.edu.au/troy-mardigan/>



Left to right: Community-based researchers Latisha Marranytya, Janine Cooper (and her two young children), Troy Mardigan (at the Moyle river)

Elder Statements

Strategies for Justly Settling Disputes and Creating Peaceful Places

Senior people shared their stories about past and present strategies for peacemaking and conflict resolution in Nauiyu. These statements have been curated for presentation here by the local research team.



Angela Neidacowie (far left), on working with external mediators to settle fights.

“ The last three years, we had a big problem, a school problem, and the kids didn't go to school. It's been really bad. Used to not sleep. Tried to get some help from Darwin to settle the fight down. It's been good. The [Peace Project team] are really good at finding out how the community was going. Everything has been settled down. Now, when we talk to the group, they stop fighting and have peace.

Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann, on moving between groups and talking to people to calm conflicts.

“ I move back and forth and make both groups feel safe and have an understanding about how to live a better life and not just carry on everyday wanting to fight, wanting to argue. They are good people here. They don't think I'm a busy body. I say, I'm not part of what is happening with you and that other group, I'm just here to help you find peace. I can help you if you tell me what you are upset about. You might not agree with some things, but don't have to make it big.



Mark Casey, on calling on elder authority when conflicts are starting to become heated.

“ I talk to people and listen and share advice to anyone, including the other side. Sometimes people think I take one side, and I'm blamed for things, but I'm not involved. In my eyes, something has to be done when things are getting heated. I go cultural. I ring across the river and say 'can you have a word to so and so's Mother'? Get elders to come in and say, 'You can't do that. That is your big brother. Listen to him!'

Patricia McTaggart, on looking back to when people were able to live together peacefully – both Indigenous and non-Indigenous – during the mission times.

“ For fighting and troubles, these don’t go back to the mission time. They are later than that. Everyone been happy then, they had little jobs. They couldn’t read or write, but sisters and brothers were here. This area used to be the community garden. We had all vegetables, there used to be a peanut farm. After that, watermelon was grown here, carrots, we grew tomatoes. You could have fresh food that you grew yourself. Old people been doing all that, it was happy place. I used to work with all the old people to hear the information from them because they had all the knowledge. I never was above them when I was in their presence.



Nadine and Sharon Daly, on how corroboree music and making fires brought healing.



“ When our mother was alive, she would get this big speaker and every afternoon, she would play corroboree sound. She also used to love fire. She knew that biggest spiritual thing if we’re angry is making fire, because fire represents the Holy Spirit from God, and fire is spiritual healing. As soon as that fire was up, everyone was coming. We would just sit there sometimes, mainly out bush, we just let out all our problems. And kids, they would talk and play games. There’s no telephone. Just beautiful healing.

Monica Mushiwan (middle), on the way that hunting, walking and sharing foods make safe places that everyone can live in.

“ We’re trying to make this community stay a safe place to live in. Teachers don’t want to live here anymore. We used to go fishing and do a lot of walking. People went out hunting and always shared things, what we caught and what we brought home. Sometimes we buy kangaroo and take it from the shop with flour and cook up sweet potatoes on the fire. The teachers should come back.



Local Evaluative Responses

Local researchers sat with elders and other community members and listened to their stories of peace and experiences of conflict. These stories were edited by the Ground Up team and reviewed, revised and approved by the local researchers.

'We would talk and answers would just flow'

In the past there were ways of coming together as family groups or a community that would allow disputes to be discussed, and the right way to act could emerge out of that. Today these same processes are not always possible.

"We used to sit together and talk about something we didn't have the answer to. We would sit together, [me and my siblings, sometimes with my son as mediator] and we would talk, and answers would just flow. We would just get the answer. Instead of all separate mind, we would come together and have one mind and get answers. We were taught properly; it used to work for us."

"The only way community used to [resolve disputes] was to have meetings. People would come together and talk about it. We tried that recently, but even then, when it's finished as people were walking away, they started screaming at each other from across the oval. So, then all of a sudden, everyone is coming back to fight. When we had a meeting people came along, but there when we left there was still that nibbling thing in your brain, ticking like, oh, let's go fight."

One thing that has changed is that the strong discipline of senior men has been taken away as they are getting old and sick.

"In my time growing up, everything was just quiet, because of the fear of the old men, especially the elders. Today's elders, male elders, are all scared of young people disrespecting them. When the elder men were strong it was really good. Young people never stood over them, but today nothing."

"What we used to do with teenage boys, the old people would round them all up and go live in the bush. Leave them out there with no car, just hunt for things."

"This used to happen all the time, before the Intervention. The boys or girls used to come back good and settled. This doesn't happen now because old people aren't in good health to manage our young people, they are all getting sick and some have passed away."

'Most of the problems start with grog' (and generational unsolved problems)

Alcohol is one of the main problems, because when people are intoxicated, smaller issues can become bigger than they otherwise would.

"Daly River was always a beautiful, loving and thriving community, but alcohol has become a problem, and during the riots, it wasn't a good place to be in Daly."

"Most of the problems start with grog, it is fueled by alcohol. Or if you have beef with someone, it grows within the school. When kids are having issues in the school it grows into a bigger problem outside. They start swearing at each other at the school, then they go home, tell their parents and it just starts growing. Then all of a sudden, you've got the whole community fighting."

"Sometimes people don't actually know what they are fighting for, there's no point. You can't really pinpoint what the issues are."



'If people don't have jobs, they don't feel good'

Another big issue is there are not enough jobs or activities for people to do. This leads to them feeling frustrated and doing things they should not.

"The Intervention pulled everyone down. All jobs were given to outsiders. Some of the locals used to work in certain areas, and they lost their jobs, got pushed out. If people don't have jobs, they don't feel good. They have too much time to sit and think and worry, and not being proud of what they are doing. That has really caused lots of troubles. When everyone had jobs in the morning, everyone was happy."

"Instead of running amok and getting a bad name for the community, we need more activities like footy stuff to keep busy and keep the young ones entertained. Hunting and fishing is good for us because it keeps us healthy culturally, emotionally and mentally."

"Everyone's so, just so stagnant and like, you see people driving around, but there's nothing to keep them stimulated. Even me, like, I go to work, just so zoned out, you know."

"I just wish there'd be more activities for people. Even organise with Catholic Care to have one night a week for old people to do things like have bingo nights. And even with young people, they're running around, playing footy, they'll go home now and just drink junks, have junks for dinner, and not have a proper good meal."

'The CDEP helped make the community work as one, in harmony'

In the past, the community was organised in ways that helped everyone work together. This included the way that CDEP worked, which allowed everyone to move around, as well as the way the clinic and other places would have community events.

"We used to have the best CDEP program in the whole of Australia. It was working perfectly. You'd have different teams looking after different parts of the community, parks and gardens. But now they've put everyone in the same basket."

"The CDEP helped make the community work as one, in harmony. If you were working at the childcare centre, but you had a fight with someone there, you could transfer somewhere else where you would fit better. You had that option of moving about. Now if you are in a job or an activity you just have to stay in that one place."

"CDEP was running really good. People got their pay and half went to bills and there was money put aside for Christmas shopping and bush holiday. We went camping in different directions, and had money. Everyone went in a different direction to take the kids out. The Intervention interrupted this. Now it's harder to go camping, and to go out to your homeland. Need your own car."

"We used to have big clean ups in the community. We would take all the stuff out of the house, any blankets and sheets. We would wash the house and deal with all the scabies. And clinic mob used to have health week. We would go camping and come back, and get health checks – blood pressure, sugar, weight, all good. Health week and scabies week, was really good."

'We can't just leave it all on one individual or group'

The ways that organisations worked together in the past is something that can keep happening now. When organisations are pointing towards peaceful ways of living it is easier for everyone else.

"People in organisations should help. We can't just leave it all on individuals or groups, they need help. Blackfella have had associations in the past, but now we have to have boards. These are not just sitting around doing nothing. We have to make sure we are being honest and helping make things better for everyone in community and kids."

"Police can be helpful. It is good if they can come straight away, ask what can we do? Then go and talk to those people."

“ The Pub mob are really good, they listen. They watch and see if anything is going on that needs to be dealt with. If you bring something to their attention, they will ban someone if needed. That person can get a ticket for a month, banned from the pub. We all work jointly and it is good.

“ Police are good with riots, but sometimes I think it gets too much for police too. When there’s a lot of people coming from Peppi or Wadeye to help fight with the other families we need more help from Darwin to settle the riots.

“ Our middle-aged family, who are already unwell and not in good health. They can’t always help. The Safe House, GRAC, Ironbark can help to keep the women and men occupied with activities.

‘I talk to people about how to fix things’

Mediation is something that has been known for a long time in Nauiyu. Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann has always been working this way, in the community, talking to different groups, and helping them fix their problems. But not everyone can step into these shoes, and sometimes this kind of work is hard for younger people.

“ It’s normal to have disagreements, but if there is trouble I talk to main ones individually or as a group, saying this is a good place, don’t start making it a horrible place, look after each other. I keep talking with the young and adult men, the young and adult women.

“ I talk to people about how to fix things and go to the person you are uncomfortable with to make it good. Otherwise, I say you pack up and go bush. Go fishing and camping for a few days and get some peace. Both men and women – men go sometimes, women go other times.

“ That thing, being as a mediator, you can’t be taking sides. I would be caught in the middle, Blackfella would say I’m taking sides for that. If I was being neutral, they would say that is taking whitefella side. They would only be seeing me as you can’t be neutral, it’s not possible.

‘I’m only an elder for my tribal group’

When there are meetings with government or mediators, then there are certain ways the community can come together that will help, and others that will not. If elders are asked to speak beyond their authority, or solutions do not come from within, it can be damaging.

“ I’m not an elder for the whole community. I can only be an elder for my family. I ended up becoming an elder because my brother passed. I’m only an elder for my tribal group. I can only speak for them. I can’t pass beyond this. I’ve been asked things by people from different language group, I don’t give answer for them. They have to go back and sit with their own group.

“ It’s got to come within, you know, it’s got to be your community first, you know, because they need to have that hunger and drive to have, you know, organisations from out of town to come in and get things done, you know, but it can’t be a one, two week thing. It’s got to be an ongoing type thing.

“ Those people, they just have to come towards each other little bit by little bit. They will slowly get closer over time, till then they will be close enough and one will just say sorry, and then the other one will, and then it is done.

‘Young people – they have something to say’

The way things are today, young people are not getting to show themselves. Elders and community members are trying to manage them, but we are not hearing their voice. They are not getting a chance to demonstrate their own skills and be encouraged.

“ Young people, we don’t hear them. There is one voice that is never heard in our community. Other voices we have heard, except this one special voice, the voice of the young people. They have something to say.

“ Maybe have someone outside talk to the separate groups of young people, girls and boys. Listen to them and see how to make this place better and happy. We can help with young people. Have someone talking to them. Female talking to the girls, and male taking the male side. Especially the boys, because they don’t talk much about their worries.

“ The children went away on a school trip, but what for. They learned to get on and off a plane, but they could have gone to learn something. Then they could have come and present that back to their parents and grandparents who could encourage them. Let them show their skills, and have these seen here.

‘We have some good role models’

Things have calmed down and are really good at the moment in Nauiyu. There are good role models and good stories to tell.

“ We have some good role models in the community, like Bono that helps young men through football and men’s health group. We also have women’s group for the young girls. At women’s group we come together to talk about our health of ourselves and children and other people.

One special story is about the football round-robin that happened in Nauiyu in late 2025. It was a great success. Janine Cooper worked with Mamulbak, Green River, Vic Daly Council, Ironbark, Kardu Diminin Corporation, the ‘No More’ campaign, Flinders Uni and Team Health to help make it happen. AFL NT Players came in from Wadeye and Emu Point to compete with the Daly River team.

“ This event was done on behalf of a young man who recently passed away at Nauiyu. It was to stop men’s suicide and stop violence in the community. There was a medal awarded to the best and fairest player on the day, in honour of this young man. Everyone came together, not just Daly River mob, but other people visiting. We have not had anything like this since the last festival in 2016 or 2017.

“ Before [Nauiyu men] were all one team, and then the fights happened. Everybody stopped talking to each other and continued fighting. Then all of a sudden, we had this football game, this little round robin they had with Catholic Care and a medal at the end. And the medal was in honour of my little brother that passed away recently, so that was emotional as well. And then, surprisingly after the football game, some of the players went to the pub, but the enemies weren’t fighting each other. They kept it calm.

The mother of the young man named on the medal, wanted to speak in support of this event which she saw as a wonderful tribute, and as bringing everyone together as one.

“ I lost my son to suicide this year, and this event was for him, so we can heal. I want more programs to help young men and women with mental health. There’s too much drinking in the community. There are too many young people drinking, but sports help our young people to be happy, as well as the supporters.

Service Provider Responses

Ground Up researchers spoke with people working in services and organisations. They shared their own experiences of disputes in Nauiyu, and their work with the Peace Project team.

- “ The planting of seeds [by the peacemaking team] was so important, and it started spreading through the community. People could start to talk about how to resolve conflict, about the need to resolve this, to stop the fight. Not forcing, but just planting seeds.
- “ One of the peacemakers came and sat at the women’s room, with one side of the community. She was really good – was hard to get anyone in the room together. Then two [Indigenous peacemakers] also came on board. They were great for local knowledge, and being part of the Darwin community.
- “ It was so good to have someone from outside to debrief, to tell the story to, to know we were cared about.
- “ The peacemakers showed pictures on the board, lists of triggers, people wrote their own lists for themselves. Were some penny-drop moments. Reminding people that conflict is inevitable, but not physical conflict, not violence.
- “ I think they took the time that was appropriate in terms of understanding the complexity of the community, and what our issues were, how deep seated they were. I think that was incredibly valuable, because government doesn’t listen very well.
- “ It was incredibly important that they came, and they did that work, because it was impartial. And there was nothing anybody could attach any criticism to; no criticism could be levelled up. Sometimes you get people complaining, saying ‘that was a crock of shit’. But I never heard any negative feedback. So, it was obviously done very respectfully and equitably.
- “ I think people’s expectations were measured. They weren’t here to save the day. That wasn’t what the issue was. Right from the beginning. Everyone knew they already had the solutions within themselves, then it’s just the mechanism that you use to actually get to that point.
- “ People here were on a journey, which was made easier by an intervention externally. It’s something out left field that comes with a distinctive dynamic and makes the difference. And I suspect [a resolution] wouldn’t have happened if they hadn’t been working with the peacemakers to get to the point where they were starting to reflect and think about what was happening.
- “ They come out and have a yarn to like both sides who are fighting but sitting under a mango tree or on the veranda and just sitting there. They just did that quite a lot. And then more and more family members would come and sit. It was just more and more just drifted, and they probably feel more and more comfortable to do that.



“ They were sitting under a tree in the open, and it’s just, you can feel the breeze, it’s more transparent. Everyone can see who’s there and who’s not there. You could see who they were talking to and see them laughing. In the room, you don’t know if you’re gonna be trapped in there and if the other gang or group, will surround the entrance and exit.

“ The community had tried to make peace previously. They had tried getting people ready and the women started yelling out. Another time the community seemed to be ready. Brought down older men and boys, and other side they weren’t ready to make peace. But it was good to see the elders coming down.

“ It’s so calm and beautiful now. People are being more and more close. The men’s group, the women’s group are united. Younger people are reaching out. Have both sides coming to sit down together.



Naiyu researcher team picking bush plums

Ground Up Commentary

Attending to conditions of peace:

“ When there was trouble, Miriam [Rose] would sit us down and remind people of how they are related and connected. This is what Miriam used to do. Round up the kids and parents, sit us down and growl us as the person we are, and the future we are looking forward to. She would remind us of our family group and skin name, later you would be thinking about what she had been telling us.

– Reflection from the Nauiyu researcher team

In the past in Nauiyu, elders would work to reinstate conditions of peace when troubles arose. By reminding people of their kin connections, proper relations of respect and accountability would re-emerge. This happened when Miriam-Rose spoke with young people and parents. It also happened when elders would take young people out bush, for discipline, hunting and sharing stories around the campfire. Such trips were not holidays. They were important governance events constitutive of peace.

In Nauiyu today, it is increasingly difficult for elders to fulfill these roles. However, in the context of this research, people spoke about new ways in which work affirming right relations of respect and accountability are happening and can be further enhanced. The football round robin coordinated by Janine Cooper in collaboration with a range of organisations was widely seen as a successful event constitutive of peace. It allowed Nauiyu to come together ‘as one’.

Other proposals that would support peaceful relations included:

- Prioritising opportunities through the school for young people to publicly display their skills and be encouraged by families.
- Supporting local organisations to embed on country elements in all their programs.

- Working with Ironbark to develop structures of employment and on country time, like past CDEP programs.
- Re-establishing access to hunting areas at Elizabeth Downs station.

Achieving such goals would likely involve advocacy and accommodations of a range of organisations at a range of levels.

Reflections on resolving disputes:

Recent work by the Peace Project team to engage in tensions in Nauiyu have been experienced locally as a crucial enabler of other local process reconstituting conditions of peace. Providing means for people to talk and share their own stories has reduced tensions and enabled elders to keep going. Sitting outside for meetings allowed people to see what was happening, who was talking to who, and halted any anxiety about what might be happening behind closed doors.

Supporting people in men’s and women’s groups provided distance from the presenting tensions, and created spaces for people to reflect on their own role in the conflict. Working at the pace of the community meant that lasting and sustainable repair within fractured relationships was able to occur. Once sufficient conditions for peace were generated through networks of kin (both visible and invisible to external agencies), a resolution arrived.

West Daly Peace Project

Peppimenarti Report

Ground Up Evaluation

June 2026



Mediation and Peacemaking in Peppimenarti

In Peppimenarti, understandings of peace are embedded in the history of this place as an independent Aboriginal settlement and cattle station established in the 1970s by Harold Wilson and Regina Pilawuk Wilson. There are fond memories of these times, and of the visions of Peppimenarti as a permanent and self-sufficient home for Ngan'gikurunggurr people.

The West Daly Peace Project team began working in Peppimenarti in the context of ongoing unrest that has been continuing for several years. The team were present during particular instances of conflict, visibly speaking with people on both sides of the dispute.

This unrest is ongoing and often plays out around a divide between two related family groups and equitable access to services in the community. There are some elders and community members who feel that there cannot be a resolution to these troubles. Others seek to work where they can, trying to work towards peace through good communication and healthy relations.

As in Nauiyu, people in Peppimenarti spoke about services pulling away and working remotely when conflict happens. It was appreciated that the Peace Project team continued to visit at this time, and that they were offering support on the ground, helping people feel they had not been forgotten.

The Peace Project team are continuing to have discussions with key women involved in peacemaking in the community, working to grow local networks of relationship that may allow current tensions to be addressed. Alongside a focus on this ongoing dispute, they also work with families and individuals around a range of issues that may be producing tensions (e.g. around family in prison, or communication with government organisations).

Recently, finding a space where discussions can happen in comfort and privacy amongst those working towards peace has been helpful for the dynamics of the Peace Project work. Continuing to respect and enact patrilineal lines of authority which are culturally appropriate in the community also remains an ongoing imperative.



What We Did

Following introductions provided by the Peace Project team, Ground Up research in Peppimenarti was guided by Annunciata Wilson, with the support of her husband Karl Lukanovic. Annunciata is a strong leader who is well respected across the region. Within the current family tensions in Peppimenarti, she has been largely unique in her commitment to peace, speaking publicly in support of families on both sides of the conflict.

The presence of ongoing tension in the community, meant that while some local people were happy to talk, they were also hesitant to be recorded publicly as part of the research. Annunciata was also clear that the Ground Up research itself needed to maintain a balance between family groups.

Research conversations therefore began with Annunciata who was able to speak as a member of the Wilson family, then at Annunciata's invitation, grew to include Paula Parry who spoke from the Kundu side. The coming together of these two women to share their stories about peace was seen as the central point of the research.

Michaela made five visits to Peppimenarti, first to introduce the project, then to engage in this series of research conversations.

One of the research visits involved a 'researcher exchange' with Latisha Marranytya (and research mentoree Tynisha Cronin) travelling from Nauiyu with Michaela to Peppimenarti. Latisha and Tynisha were able to sit and hear Annunciata, their aunt, talk strongly about her work in Peppimenarti, and to share their own work in Nauiyu.

As was appropriate in connecting through family and practices of knowledge sharing, the Nauiyu researchers also travelled home with several freshly caught ducks and a barramundi. Alongside these other conversations, Michaela spoke to staff from relevant government and local organisations. During each conversation, extensive notes were taken, and where possible shared back to participants for checking. The outcomes of our research discussions are presented below.



Left to right: Peppimenarti researchers. Left to right: Karl Lukanovic, Annunciata Wilson, Paula Parry



Left to right: Nauiyu researchers visit Peppimenarti researchers – Karl Lukanovic, Annunciata Wilson, Latisha Marranytya, Tynisha Cronin (research mentoree)

Elder Statements

Strategies for Justly Settling Disputes and Creating Peaceful Places

Annunciata Wilson and Paula Parry shared important strategies for resolving disputes and generating peace.

Annunciata Wilson (right), on bringing back conditions that will let people love each other

“ The rights of everybody that live in the community has been taken away, and nobody’s got respect for one another. They haven’t got love for one another. They’re all related, but they are not all knowing they are related. They’re just walking like there is a glass in front of them, where they can’t open up and say, ‘I love you’ or share bush tucker and whatever anymore. There’s no peace for me there. Where you give us our rights back then you experience people start respecting each other, loving each other, going out, gathering, hunting together. All that love and respect for one another as family will come. Community will be there.



Paula Parry (right), on building spiritual strength with your surroundings and working personally to let your anger go.

“ I’ve got rid of my anger, even though we’ve been facing violence. Let us just sit. If you thrive on anger, you will not have peace. Anger alone will take over. I’ll be honest with you now. And when you got anger, you have violence. But when I get angry, I just leave it. Then I think about it, then I start crying. I just talking to myself. Saying that’s all right. Because you’ve got to talk to yourself to deal with the emotional issues, but it also helps to build that spiritual strength up with country, with the land and your surroundings. Because if you don’t communicate these with yourself, how are you talking with family?

Ground Up commentary: In these accounts, the possibility of a peaceful community does not pre-exist life outside of the practice of Aboriginal identity and governance. When right ways of relating to one another are practiced, then healthy community emerges. However, this is often very difficult to do when other forms of governance get in the way of maintaining healthy Aboriginal lives. There are possibilities for healing in the dual work of nurturing spiritual strength through talking (even to yourself) and reinstating routines by which families can love each other. This is the work of peacemaking.

Local Evaluative Responses

The local research team discussed experiences of conflict, and ways of bringing about peaceful places. These were collated by the Ground Up team and shared with Annunciata for comment.

Remembering the original vision for Peppimenarti

People have fond memories of how they were able to live when Peppimenarti was first created, where it was possible to live freely on your own country and follow your own laws.

“ My father [Harold’s] vision was to get rid of the missionary ruling the same as the government. The Catholic missionaries are the same as the law. People got sick of the missionary. 20-30 clan groups got put all in one at Port Keats. On this side, people were rounded up and went to Daly River. Majority at Daly River are from here. People chose to follow either husband or wife’s family. Grandparents were not allowed to practice ceremony. He was trying to better the community for everyone to live in paradise.

“ Back in them days, everyone was really loving everyone healthy blessing again. You feed our community, but it’s not there anymore. And everyone, all the older people, recognise that, and I feel so sad.

“ Old Harry built most of the first houses here. Then the government came along and said, ‘Do you want a hand?’. He wanted support from the government for power, water, services. Then the government started ruling the roost. They came and shot all the cattle because of TB infections. There came to be interference from government all the time.

There is a sense that over time, governmental management has become far more dominant, and there is grief for the passing of the past vision.

Remembering traditional forms of community justice

There were strong and well-respected forms of discipline that were seen as enacting justice within Aboriginal networks of authority.

“ Back in the day, if someone committed a very bad offence that was sacrilege, they would have been speared dead. If a person committed crime and then wasn’t in the community to face what they had done, it would go by the family – to get father, brother or sister. Or would take sister, marry her off. It was justice system where if you mucked up you were tried and punished.

“ Justice was laid down by the ceremonial leader (there was just one leader back then – now too many are being boss). For example, my grandfather was the chief, the boss. Then authority passed to my Dad, then Dad passed away and it passed to my brother. It’s still now decided in the same way.

“ Back in the day power was with local men. When there were fights, they would bring people together and sit down and talk about things. This is how it was from whenever, till when the Intervention came and changed everyone’s behaviour and attitude. There was a verbal law in community that if you mucked up, you were sent out of community. Elders had the power to do this.

“ Traditionally, mediation should be done by the men. This is their role, but they are not strong at the moment. The uncles should be mediating if there is an issue.

Describing current challenges

Without the strong presence of discipline, there are previously unacceptable behaviours which have become part of daily life that elders must grapple with.

“ A lot of the time there is drunk driving, and it just makes us so tired and exhausted. It is exhausting, just that driving around and around all night. But you still want to keep trying with them, and with the police. We had that meeting to try and stop the alcohol coming in, that’s a big thing. It’s out of hand.

“ The ladies that don’t drink have to put up with all sorts of rubbish, you get woken up. That’s no good. People waking you up out of bed, early hours of the morning, getting woken up by some stupid, drunken people causing big dramas.

“ That knowledge of kids being vulnerable and being abused, this causes mental illness. Violence we deal with, people can't express themselves through talking and is making them sick. The violence and poverty they are seeing is affecting the communities. It is making the senior people unwell, what they are seeing.

Wanting to see people having jobs and being active

Today, the practice of community justice has changed. It is about the way people can live their lives in the community, and how they can continue to have pride and control in their lives.

“ If have something like CDEP, it will work. Will have voice, will have pride. Needs to be community driven and designed. There is no employment and we are facing all sorts of evilness now.

“ Locals should get a job Monday to Friday, so they can be there for their partner, themselves, their kids. Not run to Darwin and run amok though alcohol.

“ We can create jobs in the community for people to end up with trades. Because if they learn. If they're ready for the mainstream, they will also already have their own understandings of community life. So, they can do anything.

Government displaying ignorance and highhandedness results in interfamily conflicts

When government are not orienting to ways in which people maintain peaceful lives, they enact a form of privilege in flying in and out and not always being visible. Anger and tensions between Aboriginal and government governance are not addressed with the agencies involved, but often get directed towards family instead.

“ When people get angry at each other, they are getting angry at the wrong people. I say, these family are not the ones doing this to you. But the government are invisible. And family are who we see. There is systematic abuse (from government) and people fighting each other.

“ Government people came out here last week, and none of my family were involved. Should have mediation in all the organisations, mediating their engagements in the community. For example, at the moment we have two Housing Reference Group meetings, one for each side of the community. But maybe it shouldn't be like that, it is just supporting troublemakers and division.

“ The behaviour of staff at clinic, school, shire shows that the government belief is that these are not your organisations anymore. They don't realise they are the problem maker. They act like they have the answers, and say 'Listen to me, I am the manager or the boss'.

Often services and agencies do not realise they have a responsibility to support elders in directing young people towards the practices which will allow peace to return – such as through observing ceremony and being aware of what is safe or dangerous for people in the community.

“ The ones locked up for what they have done miss out on their grandparent's funeral. They miss out on ceremony, and those ways of coming together. It's really bad. It's an extra punishment for them that the court doesn't know about, and they blame the government. They feel more and more guilty about what they have done, and have more and more blame, blame.

“ School is not doing balance properly, and this causes more divisions. This is happening right now. They employed that young fella that went to prison for what he had done [shooting a crossbow bolt at my son]. The kids are really scared to go there, and it keeps the trouble going. If kids aren't going to school, they should be asking why this is, and whether people feel safe.

Coming together through the songlines

There are ancient ways that guide how people can come together through proper kin relations that keep peace. These are not restricted to Aboriginal people but can be observed by everyone.

“ The songlines are very, very important cultural ceremonial lines. When people start singing the song, everyone sits down, starts dancing and come together. Funeral, smoking ceremony, rag burning ceremony.



“ School needs to change how they are teaching. Kids can count, say their ABC but not add up or spell their own name. Need to go back to old way of teaching. Best way is to bring the songline groups together. On the West Daly Regional Council logo, there are the songlines. Young men sing these before they lay down and become a man. The three dots are the three different community: Peppi, Palumpa [Nganmarriyanga] and Port Keats [Wadeye]. Each one of us link into the songlines, footprint is where used to travel to participate: Tjarnpa (black), Wangka (red), Lirrga (yellow).

“ Back when we didn't have car and house we were taught by demonstrating and listening through those songlines. I think if you really start at the little ones as well, we can make change in the future. Because when we educate those little ones, they see these old ones starting to try and take shape, by getting the community up and running, and where every other come out of their house and go and do something for the community need.

Wanting to have good relationships with police

There are ways that elders can work collaboratively with police to make their jobs easier, and community life safer.

“ We need the police here, but we need to engage with how they're going to be culturally and community appropriate. And if they're here, they're living here, they're seeing the reality. I've said, Look, when use a policing, we don't want just coming here just to do negative things. Can you visit this community and do some positive things? Yeah, go and play with the kids.

“ We don't have safe house, we don't have police station. It doesn't have to be \$20 million. Just a little police station and a little family accommodation at the back, for their privacy. Then at the front it's a police station.

“ When young boys, young girls, they miss court, then they have warrants issued. Then the next thing you have Federal Police in the community [finding people on warrants]. It's so sad to see it, and for the kids to have to witness it. They don't have to come in like that, with that attitude. They can get better outcomes if they talk to people. Maybe we can get the young offenders together and hold them there and present them to the police, instead of the police doing it in a Black Op, like a commando style.

“ If we get this program up with elders taking control with their own policing and relationships with outside police, the indicators of success can relate to communication. If there is someone here they want to lock up, they can go and talk to the elders and get that person, and wait for the police in a good manner. They can explain why they want to lock him up, and say this time you go, and when you come back you might be a better person.

“ It's not only about solving disputes, doing that can make things worse. Disputes come under land ownership. Mediation happening in organisations can help the organisations to align with community in the right way.

Locally led initiatives will bring back right ways of being together, with this itself an indicator of success

It can be difficult to support peaceful relations when services are trying to achieve outcomes determined elsewhere. Local initiatives can more easily orient towards constituting peaceful places, while also achieving outcomes sought by government.

“ It’s important that people who are on the programs are designing the programs. All programs are funded by government, but there is no evidence on the ground. There is no examination or audit from government. A lot of the time people are blamed locally for what is not happening.

“ If voice is given back to local leaders dealing with own policy, and if government listen to people and acknowledging what they are saying is justified, then there will be outcomes.

“ Ticking stats is systematic neglect. Health has to submit these to Dept of Health about immunisations and who they have seen. But they don’t have to do anything beyond this.

“ But if we’re looking for things running well, it used to be a common occurrence that a young person would turn up in the yard with a bag full of turtles or fish or whatever, and vice versa. That doesn’t happen anymore. When that day happens, I’ll have a smile.

“ We’re asking for this building in next door, Lot 25, to make a women’s centre that can deliver parenting activities for ladies to do, make skirts and things like that. Having somewhere good for all a woman to meet up, and do activity together. Like a blessing. Having connection coming back, relationship coming back. There are photos of old people sitting around in the park area. This is when I was a young girl and all my nanas and aunties and mothers would sit together.

“ We want help to get that spirit. And that doesn’t happen anymore. Gone. That whole feelings gone. Those gatherings are gone.

“ I’m working with NIAA and hoping to get more program for this community, and Paula will come with me so she can have her say, and our brothers and sisters, and then nephews and nieces. Paula will be involved with me all the new programs that’s happening, and it has to be laid out there. It’s for the whole community – that there’s proper job happening, anybody can sign up. Save people from being hungry, and let them be coming off from Centrelink payment.



Service Provider Responses



There were fewer relevant stakeholders to speak to in Peppimenarti than Nauiyu. Conversations with government staff working and travelling to the community raised key points about the challenges of being responsive.

“ The team that go out there, they have family connections and have worked a lot between Peppi and Emu Point. They know how to navigate and work with people really well. They know a lot of families and have earned their trust and respect.

Creativity is required to develop contracts and funding arrangements to support responsive work in comparatively hard to access places.

“ The work that has happened, is positive. But it is hard for it to happen enough because it's hard to get out there. There's rain in the wet season, and it's just challenging getting stuff out there. It's just the geographical issues.

“ There are challenges around how do we build a funding agreement not knowing what's going to happen, not knowing what the circumstances are going to be. I think we can kind of do it in some way, but it is a challenge, in terms of directing need to the most urgent area.

Hearing about these challenges, including creative ways they are being met within central areas of government, reveals there are extended networks supporting and orienting around peace. These accountabilities do not reside only within the community and local services themselves, but also the arrangement of funding and support which guide local programs.

Ground Up Commentary

Attending to conditions of peace:

The research in Peppimenarti clearly identified that when people enact their ancestral accountabilities to country by hunting and sharing bush food in the right ways, love is shown between people and healthy people and peaceful places emerge. Achieving this can be difficult within the current conditions of community life. Consistent suggestions for enabling peaceful relations to re-emerge included that:

- Community justice is bound up with people's rights to be on country and contribute to productive work. When people are without work, they get angry and frustrated at each other, even though the cause of this frustration lies elsewhere. Supporting appropriate jobs for people in the community is a priority.
- People had confidence that locally led initiatives, such as a Women's Centre and Safe House, could grow services and employment opportunities and support Aboriginal practices of authority and flourishing community life.
- Organising through the songlines settles people down and lets them relate to each other in right and peaceful ways. This happens in ceremony, but is also possible in other services, including the school. Having these ceremony groups – Lirrga, Tjarnpa, Wangka and Wulthirri – as the basis of organisations reinforces and makes visible the connections that are already there between people, and would support the work of elders and others, and make the work of agencies more successful.
- Local organisations, corporations and services were seen as having a key role to play in modelling ways of respecting differences between families while engaging with the whole community. They should cultivate awareness of ongoing and past trauma visited on people in the community (sometimes by family members), and work to mitigate the real dangers continuing to be felt by people in community spaces and services.

Reflections on resolving disputes:

Current work by the Peace Project in Peppimenarti has proceeded differently to work around the conflict in Nauiyu. Sitting outside with large groups of family was not possible or appropriate. Instead, work has proceeded slowly, and by engaging senior women able to contribute to peacemaking in collaboration with external agencies. Remembering and coordinating conditions of peace required observing the roles accorded to men as cultural authorities with specific leadership responsibilities, as well as strong connections between closely related senior women. Aboriginal politics and decision making in Peppimenarti currently take place in a bifurcated polity (i.e. two dominant family groups in one place). Many community members insist resolution between these groups is not possible. Ongoing work of the Peace Project may involve supporting government agencies to align with this 'dual-model' and work in balanced ways, until such time as community members advise otherwise.

West Daly Peace Project

Nganmarriyanga Report

Ground Up Evaluation

June 2026



Mediation and Peacemaking in Nganmarriyanga

Nganmarriyanga is a small settlement located 50 kilometres down the road from Peppimenarti and 45 kilometres from Wadeye. Through an agreement with departing missionaries, the Wodidj family established this site as a cattle station in the 1960s and started building the infrastructure – clearing timber, laying pipes, erecting fences – creating a settlement that would serve as a permanent home. Over the years, the community has grown and now includes several families with specific connections to each other and nearby homelands.

When the West Daly Peace Project team started working in Nganmarriyanga, it was during a time of relative peace. There was no need to work responsively in relation to a particular dispute, so the focus was with an emerging group of Night Patrol workers. They also ran workshops to support their role engaging with tensions within the community and generating productive relationships with police.

When violence and conflict did arise in 2025, the Peace Project team were already known to some people in the community. Following normal practice, they began meeting with different people and family groups involved. They spent time listening to different sides of the story, while remaining visible and transparent about who they were speaking to.

Maintaining a commitment to working with separate groups until people were ready to come together, the team have continued moving backwards and forwards,

offering to share messages, but respecting that groups do not yet feel ready to sit down together.

In working with the Traditional Owner group in Nganmarriyanga, this has also involved making connections with other organisations, including coordinating a meeting between the Traditional Owners and other stakeholder groups to collectively explore the possibilities and limits of certain ways of managing, and seeking to resolve, the ongoing dispute.

The work of the Peace Project in speaking with family groups until they are ready to sit down together continues, as does other family-based mediation work and workshops with young people at the school.

What We Did

Of all the communities we worked in at the time of the evaluation research, Nganmarriyanga was most actively involved in negotiating current community violence and inter-family conflict.

Ground Up research here was initially guided by Jack Wodidj, senior Traditional Owner for Nganmarriyanga. Jack saw collaborating with CDU as a significant opportunity to generate a story of the origins of the community and its ownership (see below for further details).

Beyond this initial piece of work, and with Jack's endorsement, Melanie Cook was engaged as a new local researcher. Melanie started to guide research conversations with senior women, facilitating a range of discussion in Kriol, Murrinh-Patha and English.

Melanie was aware of the current inter-family tensions driving much of everyday life in the community and saw it as important to have conversations with people across the family groups involved in the conflict. She began with a research approach which retained this balance. Part way through the project one family group left the community, and this became more difficult.

Michaela visited Nganmarriyanga six times, including an initial introduction by the Peace Project team, and spoke with 10 people. Melanie conducted some of these interviews independently. Michaela also had discussions with relevant service providers.



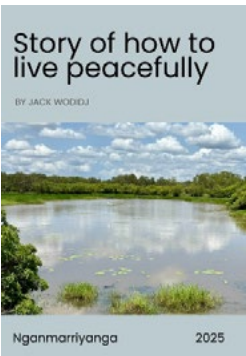
Nganmarriyanga Ground Up Researcher, Melanie Cook

In all her work, Melanie was supported by researcher Latisha Marranytya and senior advisor Loretta Marranya from Nauiyu, who travelled to Nganmarriyanga to assist and learn about peacemaking research elsewhere.

Melanie has been awarded an Indigenous Community-Based Researcher credential and her profile can be accessed here: <https://iri.cdu.edu.au/melanie-cook/>



Camille Dumoo and family sitting with Ground Up researcher Melanie Cook



The story of how to live peacefully'

by Jack Wodidj, 2025

In the course of this project, Jack Wodidj, senior Traditional Owner for Nganmarriyanga, worked with CDU to create a booklet detailing the origins of the community and his experiences in recent times.

The booklet can be accessed online: <https://bit.ly/45cSIFq>



Elder Statements

Strategies for Justly Settling Disputes and Creating Peaceful Places

In Nganmarriyanga, many senior people were cautious about becoming visible by speaking out in the middle of a live dispute. The quotes below were approved to share by their speakers as pointing towards peace. Most people did not want their photo taken.

Jack Wodidj, on the importance of remembering that different places have different histories

“ Wadeye and Daly are both missions. At these places, the priests brought everyone together and told everyone they need to believe what is written down in the bible. In Wadeye... priests were already there before you. It is different in Peppimenarti and Nganmarriyanga. We were pagan at Arwergne Station. Governments really need to recognise this, and to listen to how we are different and have a different beginning. Government did not come and build everything. This is the proper story how people need to understand.

Mary Wodidj, on the difficulty of stopping fights without strong elder authority

“ Times have been hard. There's been lots of fighting and drinking, especially young people. Young people get drunk and go and fight. They're on social media, and it's a big problem. Young ones are on it all the time space. It's I've tried my best to stop the fighting. When my Dad was here, it was good and peaceful. We were happy. Since he passed away, people have been stirring up trouble, bringing in lots of grog here, starting breaking in the shop and the office space.

Suzanne Munar, on the importance of fishing and hunting in growing up young people

“ Want family to go out hunting together and go fishing like used to before all the family. Not like this year. Taking kids fishing and hunting and walking and go out somewhere to look for bush tucker. Hope for these kids, new generation to grow up like that.

Sandra Jacky, on remembering that everyone belongs to the one family

“ We are all one family, we should look after each other, love each other, stay in peace. But we don't do that here. We are all family fighting each other. We should look after ourselves. All in one community, should look after ourselves.

Camilla Dumoo, on trying to make the school and other services safe places

“ We really want kids in the school space. In the school, the teachers do keep things peaceful, but they're not feeling safe. Education is for everyone. Need to have someone there to stop people just barging in. There can be six or seven people coming in at one time, and the kids might feel trapped. The same at the clinic, the office, the CDP, the shop, people feel trapped and unsafe. The kids are the future.



Local Evaluative Responses

When we sat with people and spoke about peacemaking in Nganmarriyanga, most people were focused on the particularities of this moment, and the dispute currently going on. Discussions were facilitated by Melanie Cook. Responses were collated by the Ground Up team and then shared with Melanie for approval.

There are times when Nganmarriyanga has felt good and safe

Origin stories of Nganmarriyanga point to its beginnings as a working cattle station with clear agreements between family groups around land ownership and use. When these agreements were observed, life was peaceful but structures of control have changed.

- “ We were one group, one family, with a cattle fence around community. The gate was steel and mesh wire, all chained up and locked. The fence was great, we felt safe. The mob from Port Keats used to drive straight past. Drive straight through and keep on going. Back then, there was no trouble in this place. It was running smooth.
- “ When the station was here, there were two clan groups whose land we were using for just for cattle. We had an agreement with those clan groups. The agreement was that we would use their land, and we would give them a house to live in. Those are the two lands we were using to grow cattle. It was really good.
- “ This was a really good cattle place. It went nice and smooth until government came along. Local government came in, and we started to get sitting down money. At the same time, people moved here from Wadeye.
- “ It had been only the Wodidj family were here. When the government came, they built a new clinic. Back in the station day we just used a room at the back of the store. They built new clinic and new school.
- “ It was going good in that time. Then after a while, that's when the place sort of went off. Like where we are now. There are lots of reasons it's gone off. Silly things. In that time, they had a club at Wadeye and Peppimenarti. People would buy takeaway grog and come here.

At the moment, it can be hard to do basic things like go to the shop or clinic

Trouble has come to affect every aspect of life, where even accessing basic services can be difficult for some people and groups.

- “ Kids are struggling to get into school, and there is low attendance. There's no safe way for them to go to school, and we can't even go to the shop. Sometimes you can't even step out in peace. If people see you, they just laugh.
- “ The school, the clinic, all the services we can't get into them because of this. They're doing this in public. Instead of coming and sitting down and talking.
- “ There is constantly alcohol coming in during the days, alcohol just keeps coming in and in. Overcrowding in the house is really hard, and we have to feed everyone hungry. People are angry. Food is all expensive, and tobacco is \$140.
- “ It was a peaceful place before. But now, like this year, now it's like getting worse for the kids, they are seeing violence everywhere, sometimes really scary to go to school.
- “ This arguing and fighting. We don't want that. We don't want kids to watch them like family arguing. They don't want to get upset for their parents, we just want our kids to be safe and happy for the family.

Elders are attempting to establish proper leadership and work out right ways of respecting each other, but there are different ideas about how to do this

There are strong tensions arising between Aboriginal governance through senior authorities recognised as Traditional Owners, and other understandings of what community governance involves and how leadership should be enacted.

- “ We are trying to support both way – both families. We told them stop fighting, want to be safe all living here. But things get dangerous and we want to push them out.

“ Today people are not showing respect to the TO. Even if driving through our land without asking. Doing burning with bushfire, not showing respect. Don't even go and see the right person to talk to, no respect. Driving cars here, doing doughnuts, no respect. Telling other family member from anywhere that you can come and live here.

“ Some of the TOs are talking about a walking ticket [an eviction notice requiring families to leave the community]. Why would they even consider giving the walking ticket? Because his mother is family.

“ Nobody should give a walking ticket. In my opinion, there is no help from the TOs. They should be out here helping everybody, not just one-sided space. Palumpa today has lots of people in it, so try to work with that person. But they just walk away.

“ The people we are trying to give walking ticket, they know they don't belong. Know they have been in trouble. They know we are the leader. They can't keep attacking us, or the community.

“ Want this piece of paper or book to keep strong for future generations. If someone looks, is all written down. Walking ticket needs to be recognised by government so can make it stronger. Be recognised by government, law and justice, police.

A lot of hurtful things have happened, which makes peace feel a long way away

There continue to be actions taken in the community which inflame existing tensions and mean that reconstructive work bringing about peace is difficult to attempt.

“ There's heartbreak at the moment, because the old lady's funeral was meant to be here, but she was buried outside area, and so there's still lots of heartache.

“ Because of this situation, we might go to Peppi. These things used to be sorted out by talking amongst each other, coming together. That is not possible now, it would cause new troubles.

“ It's going to take a really, really long time for everyone to come together as one. There is not one leader now.

“ Sometimes people are tired. Some people get tired, some family get tired.

It is good to have activities, and find ways to be busy and have fun

In lieu of pushing for speedy resolutions, there are actions that can be taken to help enable everyday life to continue and the situation to become less inflamed.

“ We can't do things like have fun and have those light feelings again when it's holiday, sport and rec should really take the kids and go and do sports, but we can't take them on the other side so they don't feel safe. Try and see if they can come here and still do sports.

“ Is always something between families for food. There is always sharing between families for food, and that helps everyone remember we are all related. We are doing this.

“ Sometimes police are helpful but only when bad things happen. The school is alright.

There are some (not many) places that feel safe

There are ways that local services and organisations can work to help generate safe spaces and ways of living everyday life with less stress and fear.

“ People all come in and do the laundry. They do washing, and do it all for free. The laundry is accessible for everyone. It's a really good place. We like that one.

“ We do help each other in this house, we go hunting and fishing and we bring back food to share, and lots of barramundi. The family come together to share good food and good times.

“ There are not enough people going to work. They're feeling unsafe at the workplace. Everybody feels like this. The police come around once a week and don't really engage. They don't get easy conversation. They're not talking to people about what is happening when they come. They're not spending time. We've never had a police station here. We would love this. Then the police would always be here.

“ We don’t want to give up, we want to keep trying to help those young kids. Bring them to school every day, and we just want to be safe. My partner says, I don’t want to give up for this community. I just want to keep talking for this community. Important for the kids, not enough going to school.

There are strategies for working towards peace within families, and with the help of others

Senior people are working in the context of their own families to reduce tensions and support young people to stay out of trouble. This work is hard and often tiring, but significant to the possibility of reconstituting peace.

“ Family need to talk together. We can talk, like we support each other and like, help them local people to try to stop the violence for all the young men and young teenagers. Sometimes they listen and sometimes they don’t. Some go find a job. But some teenagers they don’t change, want to go for violence. It’s hard to support them.

“ My daughter has gone to Port Keats. She’s gone there because she can’t wait for it to settle down here. She’s keeping away from temptation, and decided to move herself space. Her other sister tries her best to calm people down, but it doesn’t always go to plan.

“ I’m always doing my best being a role model, doing my best, looking after the grandkids. My daughters are okay to forgive people. I always talk to my daughters and forgive them, and show them how to forgive others.

“ It is important for young people to listen to what we are talking about, what the peacemakers are talking about. Because it is not just talking for herself, is talking for the whole region. Young people listen to the peacemakers because they is helping.

“ For trouble maker, government and TO have to sit down with family group, tell them if you want to live here, we want young people to work.

Service Provider Responses

In Nganmarriyanga (like in Peppimenarti) there were fewer relevant government staff to speak with regarding peacemaking than in the larger communities. In the responses gathered, comments showed respect for the Peace Project team, as well as struggles within services themselves when conflict arises.

- “ People working in the services here [in Nganmarriyanga] are told not to participate if there are conflicts because police can't come. In that situation, it's good to have other supports.*
- “ From my perspective, how I interpret the [Peace Project team's] focus is more around familial conflict and conflict between families, than other types of conflict; that's very pronounced in Nganmarriyanga.*
- “ There seems to be something important in the balance of the team – between having qualified mediators and Indigenous staff as well. When it was first discussed about bringing mediators on, that was kind of like the main point being discussed was that we need qualified mediators out here. There's been these mediation groups that have kind of started in the past that haven't really actually been set up, because they haven't had the foundation behind them.*
- “ I think it's been hard identifying local peacemakers and I think they've talked about that maybe that's possible in Nganmarriyanga but might not be elsewhere.*
- “ I've always found my interactions with [the Peace Project team] have been amazing in terms of their reactivity and responsiveness.*
- “ The Shire Council is supposed to be built around the community, and to come in behind them. We have different stakeholders, but no-one works with each other. There is a role for mediation. I've been talking to CDP about getting all services – shop, clinic, teachers – and to go out for a bonfire each month and create atmosphere where people enjoy the community. Also, could lead to Indigenous people taking us to homelands and telling the stories. This would be the best outcome.*



Ground Up Commentary

Attending to conditions of peace:

Across all the research discussions, supporting the wellbeing of young people was seen as a priority. There were stories shared of the bush trips that used to occur and ways in which people used to have much more connection with country and their homelands. Finding ways for service staff to be guided by relevant authorities to spend time out bush and support young people was seen as a positive step.

The laundry and other job providers were named, almost exclusively, as the only safe places left in the community. Significant support is needed to make the school, clinic and store safer for everyone.

Finding new opportunities for people to share ancestral stories of Aboriginal people-places, alongside more commonly iterated historical origin stories, was mentioned as a positive action towards peace. This allows ancestral stories of homelands and country to complement stories of the history of Nganmarriyanga as a settlement.

The agreements made between family groups when the cattle station was established were not written down. Current work building documentation (e.g. through the rule books and business case of the local Aboriginal corporation) is performing important governance work as it is formalising government

endorsement of existing Aboriginal governance of the settlement.

As such, reconstituting peace through networks of kin on country may involve broader land ownership relations than those of the township alone.

Reflections on resolving disputes:

Local negotiations around what constitutes proper Aboriginal governance of Nganmarriyanga have started to draw in a range of government and non-government agencies.

External mediators may have a positive role to play in supporting such governance negotiations. However, doing so at the level of the whole community may be difficult, and counterproductive.

Negotiating with agencies around their capacity to contribute to specific issues (e.g. access to homelands) might reveal new possible partnerships and allow action that positively contributes to the resolution of disputes. This may be in lieu of seeking one shared agreement between groups around a community governance model going forward.



West Daly Peace Project

Wadeye Report

Ground Up Evaluation

June 2026



Mediation and Peacemaking in Wadeye

Wadeye, formerly known as Port Keats, was established as a Catholic Mission in 1935. At this time, many different clan and language groups came to live together on the lands of the Kardu Diminin people. Since then, different clan groups have worked together through different eras of governance – creating new organisations to support the healthy life of people living in the township. This included a period of self-governance through the Kardu Numida Council, and more recently through the creation of Kardu Diminin Corporation and the Thamarrurr Development Corporation.

The West Daly Peace Project team started working with people in Wadeye as part of the Wadeye Peace Project (2022-2024) which at that time was run through the CJC. They were engaged in a series of mediations connected to issues of interfamily conflict and were communicating between families and government departments.

The Peace Project team were present in Wadeye during the large-scale rioting which occurred in 2022 and in the time following that significant conflict. They worked closely with families experiencing difficulties accessing their homes, food and basic services. They also worked closely with the different parties involved in the dispute, sitting and listening to their experiences, and running workshops with the men's and women's groups. Over time this also expanded to workshops for young people.

Since then, they have continued engaging in issues arising within workplaces and at the interface of families and government agencies. This work has been spoken about by government staff on the ground as positive, and effective in alleviating tensions before they escalate.

Ongoing work involves extensive engagement with local families and clan groups, service organisations and government agencies. This has included the delivering of training and workshops. It has also begun to explore ways in which a local Law and Justice Group may be appropriately constituted in Wadeye.

The Peace Project team returned to Wadeye following further conflicts in early 2026. They have supported restorative processes within groups of women and men involved in those disputes. This work has also included local researchers Melanie Cook, Janine Cooper and Troy Mardigan.



What We Did

Our research in Wadeye was guided by the team of local researchers who initially came together in Nauiyu – Troy Mardigan, Janine Cooper and Latisha Marranytya. The team were confident of their authority to work through family connections in Wadeye, and because of the make-up of the research group, we could speak with both women and men, and could work in Murrinh-Patha and Kriol, as well as English.

The research took place over three days in late October 2025, and followed processes devised by the researcher team. Troy called ahead to his family, members of the Pulchen family and Traditional Owner group to let them know we were coming. He also invited Christine Pulchen to travel in the car from Nauiyu. Before arriving in Wadeye, we stopped at Air Force Hill, where Christine called out to her country to announce our arrival, and performed a welcome.

When we arrived in Wadeye, we met with family members and shared mangoes from Nauiyu, and made sure to speak directly with Margaret Perdjert, senior Traditional Owner, to let her know about the research and continue to work under her guidance and approval.

Over the visit, we had conversations with 22 people from different ceremony groups, meeting them at home or at other places they specified (such as the barge landing). We were guided by what they wanted to share, in talking about their experiences with recent conflict and peacemaking in Wadeye. As the word grew about the research, more people wanted to be involved, including a group that participated in a small youth circle facilitated by Troy and Latisha. Michaela also had a range of discussions with relevant government services staff.

Several weeks after this research, senior leaders William Parmbuk and Damien Tunmuck visited CDU and were themselves able to be included in the research. They offered their own stories and looked over and offered comments on an early version of the draft report.

In reflecting on the research process, senior elder Gemma Alanga Nganbe sent the following text to local researcher Latisha Marranytya:

“ You guys are really making good and honest research on this topic by actually sitting down with many different groups of people of all different ages, tribes, families, and languages, and I’m proud of you all. Go the young guns! 🍌. We can only do the best we can to put peace in our communities to stop all this rubbish. Thank you all for coming and sitting down with us. I felt a little lighter and good. Ma - Gemma Alanga Nganbe



Ground Up research in Manathape area – with the Dumoo family (top); with Leon Melpi (middle); youth circle led by Troy Mardigan (bottom).

Elder Statements

Strategies for Justly Settling Disputes and Creating Peaceful Places

Margaret Perdjert (centre), on remembering past senior leaders raising young boys and girls



“ It was different in the old days. My father was a strong leader and used to work for the church, he was the first Aboriginal deacon in Australia. He used to look after young boys, tell stories of Jesus and go out bush. I would like to be taking young girls out sitting and talking to them about how will they grow up as the next generation? Dad went to Rome to represent the Australian Aboriginal people for the canonisation of Mary McKillop. He travelled from Darwin to Alice Springs with the Pope. He was a strong leader.

Leon Melpi, on traditional law as invested in the land and clan groups, and never changing

“ If you want to have peace, why don't we have the UN of Wadeye. Why don't we do this diplomacy between clans? Wangka, Tjarnpa, Lirrga, the three culture groups have leaders in there, each group in there have to back each other up. This used to happen at Community Council. We made the boundary for this region came in the late 1980s or 1990s, and we would service that area – the Thamarrurr region. But the Shire now has responsibility for that, so we pulled back. It's governance we made, but we were not making it up. Our law never changes. It was there from the beginning. The government changes, but we don't.



Gemma Alanga Nganbe, on focusing on young people as future leaders

“ Our young people, we must teach them and must see that through doing some sort of course or activities. Young people need to be active all the time. They need to be working on something that they want, something that they own and something that they can take home. Then maybe later they will run their own program, a peace rally or whatever. They can be the bosses to do an activity to teach other people. We need different support for different areas, for the organisations, we can straighten their path.

Maria Narndu, on working between family and stakeholders in bringing about peace

“ I help all my kids and my nephew, my kids and grandkids, I teach them to grow into what I am doing. They see me as a role model, so they can stand in the middle. Whether family or not I always stand in the middle. I go to meeting with stakeholders and others, go to council, and sometimes I used to go helping young boys about lawyer when they go to prison. Sometimes police get involved with Corroboree, work together Western way and cultural way to make peace.



Jules Nganbe (far right), on senior leaders as responsible for the people and places of their own ceremony group

“ This used to be a really peaceful place, no fighting. The community was small, not much troubles. People were just in one main area. But the government came and built new suburbs, and we got more people. There are four clan groups with different languages, and that is how we work here. Each group has to look after the area where their little ones are in trouble. I look after Wangka, I am the senior leader for them.



Gregory Munar (left), on the way that ceremony settles everyone down and makes elders strong again

“ What brings peace is when there is ceremony. At this time, we all have to be sober and follow our own law. Everyone knows this is where we see peace in the gathering of clans. The elders and old ladies get their power back when we have ceremony and people visit from Daly, Peppi, Emu Point. The law makes them strong again. No one can jump up and down and talk back to the elders. That is where you see support, respect, love, kindness and joy.



William Parmbuk, on being visible and coming together to address violence through ceremony groups

“ My plan is for a peace march. Everyone’s going to get together from the end of the airstrip, white fella, black fella, old and young. Father Leo will be doing a mass for the school children. After that, we all get together and do this walk. I’ve designed the shirt, it’s a yellow shirt saying ‘No more violence’. We’ll be carrying a loudspeaker and have a barbecue and talk about this. How can we fix it? How can we work together, for the sake of our young people. Wangka, Tjarnpa, Lirrga and Wulthirri can get together and teach the kids to follow the right path instead of going everywhere.

Damien Tunmuck, on the guidance he offers young people around feeling good by staying connected with families.

“ I walk around, visit people, talk to families, say please be happy. I tell them instead of being boxed up in the house, go walking around visiting families, this will help you get your feeling back. Take a deep breath, go for a walk. Find a friend who can make you laugh, and make you sad. It’s not a magic thing; you have to have a feeling of friends and family around you.



Local Evaluative Responses

The local research team sat with elders in Wadeye and they shared their current concerns and the different ways people are trying to bring back peace. These stories were collated by the Ground Up team and then reviewed and approved by the local researchers.

Remembering old ways of coming together to make decisions

Old people worked to maintain conditions of peace by coming together through the four ceremony groups to discuss issues of relevance to different tribes.

“ Old People were the peacemakers. One would step up from this land and have meeting and would have boss from each language group were peacemakers and could discuss issues for their own tribe – Lirrga, Tjarnpa, Wangka, Wulthirri. But Tjarnpa and Wulthirri are the same group. Wangka has a different language, but we all speak one language now, Murrinh-Patha.

“ In the old days, it was different. Tribal groups would come together and sit and talk. Traditional Owners would sit and talk together. Leaders from different country, different language groups would come together from inland and TOs for that place would lead the meeting for other tribes to come together.

“ Richard Docherty was the founder of this place. He gathered the tribes to come and settle on Murrinh-Patha land. They used to have separate places. Murrinh-Patha was spoken by Tjarnpa and Wulthirri clans. One place, it was peaceful. Now everyone is intermarried. If they had married their own right skin, it would be different.

Today, Wadeye has become really big

It has been difficult to maintain old practices of peace as Wadeye has become bigger, although people have made attempts to create peaceful areas to live with their own family groups.

“ After the Intervention came in, we had all this change of government coming through every year, different stories, different ideas. Back then, community was small, whereas now it is big.

“ Community was small, not much trouble. People were in just one main area. But the government came in and saw people here were overcrowded. They built new suburbs and new community members came in.

“ When we first started off [in the second suburb – Manthathpe area], we had eight houses, everything was quiet because we had no shop. When we headed to the shop, we would walk from here to the main shop. This area is always a safe place. I remember when riots were happening, women and children used to come here.

People are all ‘mixed up’ and without discipline problems spread easily

When people from Wadeye are in the care of government agencies, such as in prisons or the school, they are often organised in ways that cause people to spend time together without respect to clan or family differences.

“ I could see that prison is like a zoo. There’s no order. Everyone is mixed up. They put everyone all together in prison. When there’s a problem happening outside, they carry it in. People say family are calling you from the inside, but then when they come out, they are still fighting.

“ They’re saying that from adult problems in the community, the children then go and fight at school, and they can come back home, and it causes even bigger problems. So, the trouble comes from the outside of school, then the kids mirror the adults and fight inside, and things can get bigger.

“ These problems, they affect from one person to whole family. Out there, there is a leakage that maybe a wife or any person within the family can go tell this other group of families or gangs, then they come into our issue, whenever we’re trying to do our best.

“ These days, young people married, not in kinship, but in wrong side. So, it mixes everything up, okay, makes that discipline and authority harder.

“ There is no discipline, and when we try to discipline the kids they swear. We’re trying to find new ways to discipline the children, or to make sure the children listen, just to make sure about discipline, about safety, about health, education – go and find a job.

There is lots of grog, ganja and cars driving around

When looking at immediate and visible problems, it is young people as well as adults having too much access to alcohol and drugs that makes elders feel sad and unwell.

- “ The main issue for people that is causing all this trouble is mainly from grog and ganja. That causes people to argue, and it can escalate up to the point where a big tribal kin group fight.*
- “ Cars are driving around. It’s just around and around. No one pulls anyone up.*
- “ Nowadays, the modern technologies that young people are using. They don’t have any respect for the elders anymore. We are down the bottom, young people are at the top, smart ones because they can use all those technologies.*
- “ It is very sad. In today’s society, where are young people going? How will they learn from us? How will they do culture? How will they make didgeridoo or fighting stick? What they do now in their mind is, come payday time, straight to ganja.*

Whole community meetings don’t work

When people are asked to come together and make decisions ‘as a community’, this reinforces issues of being mixed up and is not conducive to Aboriginal forms of governance and decision making. Such efforts are likely to be counterproductive.

- “ We’ve tried before, having meetings at the club for the whole community, but BANG right on the spot, people would start arguing and fights. It was organised by shop mob and police. That didn’t work, people were pointing fingers, saying one group started it. I was over here, you did this, you bashed up my house. Instead of getting two people talk, the whole tribe wants to talk. Then one elder gets up and talks, young people shout bullshit, F-off, or that’s a makeup story – your kid was running around burning my house. Policeman, shop people and leaders were there. Better in smaller group.*

Some leaders are working in their own family groups to support peace

Elders also resist trying to work at the level of ‘the community’. This would involve them speaking beyond their own Aboriginal authority and could cause more problems. It is safer and more productive to exercise their proper leadership in relation to family, clan or ceremony groups.

- “ How to make peace? This year started with family, me and my brother were sitting with young people, just from our family. Whole community is really hard. I’m not a senior person to this community, but I am a senior person to my tribe. I’m one of the eldest for Ma Rak Thangurral tribe.*
- “ We have different clan groups. We have to sit down and talk to them about how to make this place a better place for young people, communicating with the police about better ways to organise in the community. Can all come together. Clan groups organise, meeting and people come together. We don’t want young people to keep breaking things in the community. It upsets us as TOs. Young boys are causing troubles, and a few girls as well, they’re going out breaking in.*
- “ Down the bottom where I’m staying, some women were working to break up the fight. After that, they worked with different groups to sit down to say sorry. We encourage them to stop the fighting before it gets big.*
- “ At the moment, there is a problem within my family group. My brother and I were trying to get our nieces and nephews, the young ones, to come together to talk to them. Not the whole tribe, or not the whole gang. That’s another problem, young people gang up and your kids follow. The little ones imitate. They follow. We see that and are very sad. So, talking in a smaller group is helpful, but then there’s that thing that we need to find a way to talk to them somehow so we don’t trigger them or make them angry or offended.*

“Clan groups are the basis of our authority and our leadership. Xavier is pushing to help keep the community peace. He’s talking to community leaders pushing to bring peace back. We are translating in Murrinh-Patha, telling them, this is not good. There is no family for you at prison. We need you back here in Wadeye.”

“I’m getting started to talk about trauma with people in clan groups. I’m trying to see each family, Lirrga, Tjarnpa, Wangka. I want to focus on each group in community, see each family and talk to them about trauma in Murrinh-Patha and in English.”

Ceremony, and being on country, helps people stay strong through kin connections

Peace exists as the performance of right relations of and in country. Ceremony activates these right relations, and when this happens people feel good, leadership is respected, and the law is clear. Missing ceremony further erodes these connections and creates problems.

“When ceremony is happening, everything is all quiet. No one’s walking around, even the young people, the young girls will be following their law, even wearing skirts. It’s good to see the ceremony. Keep strong for young people.”

“What brings peace is when there is ceremony, all have to be sober and follow our own law. Everyone knows this is where we see peace in the gathering of clans. That is where the elders and old ladies get their power back when we have ceremony, people visit from Daly, Peppi, Emu Point, elders get their strength back. The law makes them strong again, and no one can jump up and down and talk back to the elders. They also come if one of the kids is participating, they come to support. That is where you see support, respect, love, kindness and joy.”

“I work on the elder’s program. I go to prison and sits with the young boys, telling them, it’s not your home here. You should be back with your family. You’re missing a lot of things, ceremonies and funerals.”

Other ways of remembering and reactivating kin connections is by being out on country, away from the

pressures of town, where people can do traditional activities and live in right ways according to the law.

“Women’s group – going out on country. Weaving and hunting, no pressure – this is peace. Makes the elders and family strong in who they are.”

“When the problem starts here, we go back to the homelands, and it’s more peaceful. There it is in the dry season when we were voting for government, and they were promising for people to go back to homelands, but it’s still not happening.”

“Take them out this learning on country is a good one. People love like it. They love it. Men and Women’s Group, rangers, get involved. School, local family. Taking out to any country.”

“If we want peace, we want to see the young ones go back to school, training on country. There should be clean ups on community after people come out of jail. Corrections can run this one. We want to see our young ones in community working hard and working together when boys come out from prison, they used to spend time cleaning up the yards.”

There is an important role for local services to orient back towards kin connections

Organisations can show people they are supported through working to take people out on country, organising through ceremony groups, and guiding young people back to their elders. If they are concerned about peace, these actions should be part of their core business.

“People like Catholic care, and other workplaces, they can sometimes help. The health side clinic, help the school side, more education, getting kids picked up in the bus.”

“It was really good, the police sergeant spoke to my nephew and said, jail is not a good place. People only sit in a room with four walls. They have three meals a day. But what can you learn? This spooked my grandson a bit. He kept saying in Murrinh-Patha to me at the visit on my phone, Nan, when am I coming back?”

“ There was the Men’s Shed youth diversion for young boys. There are four clan groups with different languages supposed to be taking part in looking after our clan group. That’s how we work here. That group has to look after our area where little ones are in trouble.

“ There’s government funding for youth diversion, but there is no office for us. The office is right in the car. The NTG said, there’s not enough money for that. Jules and his nephew Norman, were working there, and now they’re trying to get it back.

“ They are doing this for some people in prison. They need to be doing some program for people in prison, like about alcohol and other drugs. They do things in prison, and then when they come out they don’t have any support. That support should continue while they’re outside. The Employment Advisor at TDC should help with Ochre cards. Make them feel good that they are being supported. But people feel like they don’t care about us so that we can do whatever we want.



“ Even students from Nungalinga College came in that group, and it brought peace, because everyone could focus more on the prayers and the Lord Yeah, so not on each other. Even a group came from Peppi, they came here to support the women ceremony to happen. The Wilson mob came. Went out to women’s place to do ceremony and everyone was quiet.

“ I would agree with people being local peacemaker. Get all the Christian mob and elders together, they need to mix. Stronger ones that local people, the younger ones that are in within the work areas can get together instead of one person doing it. Can even get help from Darwin, getting support from Darwin, or from another community. Like the Christian Rally that came from Elcho when the riots were on. They help the community.

Connecting with other Aboriginal church groups can also help

There are strong relations between Aboriginal people from different communities that extend through the church and fellowship groups. These can be key supports in times of trouble.

“ Christian Rally, they came in after it got quiet. They brought peace. Community could see they were getting support from other community.



Service Provider Responses

All government staff and service providers we spoke to in Wadeye were positive about the Peace Project. Their responses identified elements of peacemaking they have seen as benefitting both local people and the running of their own services.

- “ The peacekeepers were critical right through the district at times of community disruption. Because they were neutral, they could achieve what we couldn't ourselves.*
- “ A consistent presence of peacemakers provides a benefit, even if they're not being utilized in every way all the time, in every dispute. It's about community members having relationships with people that have the skills to work through situations regardless of the issue or profession and then being able to approach them when needed.*
- “ They were particularly effective communicating with services, including around what families are trying to do. Police will sometimes oversee a mediation and demand certain responses, push things and possibly overlook what's already happening. The [Peace Project] played an important role in highlighting what community were already doing, and I think that that meant that there was better buy in in those attempts for mediation with different sides.*
- “ I've seen the [Peace Project team] taking the time to get to know people. They speak to leaders, but they're not the only people that need to be spoken to. Not many services will take the time to speak to everyone else. It wasn't just going to the police and going, 'who do I talk to?' This led to some really good results. Starting from the ground up and going to the mums and to the ladies that were able to point them in a good direction.*
- “ They were useful for workplace issues. They were used at the clinic, because the girls didn't want to come to work. A certain clan group didn't want to come to work, and it all had to do with someone sitting in the wrong chair, or something really innocuous that once they were given the opportunity to speak about it, it became something immediately fixable.*
- “ The night patrol training has been effective. We had really good feedback from our night patrol staff. That was an issue, and still is an issue for us, the night patrol relationships with police and even defining role of Night Patrol. Having some kind of peacekeeper mediation direction has been helpful.*
- “ There was one specific conflict with the death of one community member where there was rising tensions, and the Peace Project team, in moving between community members and sharing messages of people in a constructive way, was showing that no one wanted things to escalate, even while people also weren't ready to come together. Having someone there to relay information helped there be a really great outcome.*
- “ Without the community peacekeepers, we would have had a community meeting and just asked everyone to come. Those who were interested would turn up, and they would all yell and scream and try to have loudest voices, and people wouldn't get heard. In utilising the peacekeepers though, their response was far more considered and better received.*

They also identified opportunities for stronger mechanisms supporting government coordination:

- “ Real connections between services, for example coordination around prisoner release dates involving corrections, Centrelink and others, need a Community Justice Agreement so everyone is on the same page.*
- “ Youth crime has such a serious impact in Wadeye, and they have no fear of police or service providers and families are ill-equipped to hold their teens accountable. A Law and Justice Committee would give community TOs a stronger voice in shaping appropriate responses, including identifying suitable homelands for bail and determining what consequences will genuinely deter offending.*

Ground Up Commentary

Attending to conditions of peace:

Elders in Wadeye insist that peace exists in being on country in right networks of kin – this is when people can be strong in who they are. Trouble arrives when people are asked to speak outside of their Aboriginal authority, and to live in ways which confuse kin relations.

Within our discussions, ceremony groups were strongly proposed as appropriate ways to coordinate locally in Wadeye, and which could guide restorative work. Further exploration of the character and dynamics of these groups, and how they might guide practices of other local organisations, could be fruitful.

Considerable opportunity was seen for local initiatives involving collaborations between local people and different services to support more peaceful living. The local research team identified the following key actions that would positively contribute to peace in Wadeye:

- *Greater engagement between police and young people outside of the courts.*
- *A night and day program carried out as a collaboration between night patrol and police.*
- *Activities for young people which teach about food, health and self-care.*
- *Support from government stakeholders and organisations to take people out on country for 'discipline camps.'*
 - *Parents and stakeholders can work together for the benefit of the kids.*
 - *Local police and ALO mob can collaborate to work with mob out bush, especially those in trouble.*
- *Each family group could come together as one for clean-up days and have BBQ, hand out clothes and toiletries.*
- *Collaborations between corrections and CDP could support returning offenders to be directly engaged in programs cleaning up the community. This will give them work to do and show they have not been forgotten.*

Reflections on resolving disputes:

A range of government staff in various organisations in Wadeye have a strong appreciation for the value of mediation work. This work can help issues to de-escalate before they become larger disputes and enable government business to be achieved more productively. Additionally, when government and services organisations work to share information in accessible and timely ways with community members, disputes themselves may be avoided.

Strategies such as 'whole of community' meetings and conflict resolution processes may have been beneficial in the past but today are often experienced as inflammatory. More specific low-key engagement with family or ceremony groups and specific services are seen as more beneficial.



Findings and Recommendations

The Ground Up team began our collaborative inquiries as a new visitor in the West Daly. It is due to strong and respectful relations between local researchers and their elders, that this research has been able to proceed as smoothly and effectively as it has.

In this final section, we draw on our evaluation research as a whole and identify significant findings across four themes: systemic challenges across all communities; engaging differences in local governance; the effectiveness of the West Daly Peace Project; and supporting a research orientation in ongoing evaluations.

We also offer recommendations and next steps across these four themes. The recommendations point towards processes of further iterative learning aligning local Aboriginal strategies for peace with the operations of the West Daly Peace Project and government agencies. We suggest that all findings should be taken as preliminary as the Peace Project continues.

Theme 1: Systemic challenges across all communities

The following issues recurred across all places and point to systemic concerns throughout the West Daly Region.

Elder authority and governance

- In all places, the last few years were identified as particularly difficult for Aboriginal governance and peacemaking. This is due to the loss of respect in leadership, and lack of opportunities for young people. The Intervention was often pointed to as the cause of these issues, as it undermined the authority of the elders.
- Everyone had a sense of traditional peace as emerging out of country and the accountabilities that country entails. Such peace cannot be driven from above.
- Witnessing ongoing drinking and violence while being powerless to intervene was described by elders as making them sick and further undermining Aboriginal authority.
- Elders were seen as the correct advisors, supervisors and evaluators of peace. However, they are not always the right people to work towards the resolution of all community conflicts.

Safety and community wellbeing

- There were consistent reports of people not feeling safe, both at home and in other places in the community, and fear for children who were growing up experiencing community violence as normal.

- There were feelings of disempowerment and despair when damaging narratives about West Daly communities as 'bad' places circulate within the media and government. This is not the reality always experienced on the ground, and such narratives can become self-perpetuating.
- Ensuring schools are safe spaces for young people was identified as a priority across all communities, however this was often not the reality being experienced.

Employment and economic opportunities

- There were clear memories of times when jobs were available, and people had opportunities to feel pride in their places and the active work they were doing to shape prosperous lives in connection with kin and country.
- The lack of jobs today was seen as a primary determinant of ongoing unrest. Across all places, there were proposals about forms of employment that would be suitable, and structures for supporting young people, including people returning from prison to enter meaningful programs.

Police and government services

- There were strong feelings of anger and disempowerment when police operations enter communities unannounced. At the same time, there were consistent calls for increased permanent police presence in each of the communities, and for good working relationships between elders, police and young people.

- Services were frequently seen as controlled from above, and so oriented towards their own outcomes and performance indicators rather than towards nurturing positive ways of relating together on the ground.
- It was often suggested that to the extent agencies understand ancestral connections and networks, their work is more successful and integrated into the life of the community.

Cross-community connection

- Many people wanted to be able to travel to other communities to show support in times of crisis. This would allow them to work towards peace beyond the pressure-cookers of their own communities.
- Visits from elders and others offering to help were valued and seen as providing support and solidarity.

Recommendations

- Prioritise reinstating cultural authority. The erosion of strong elder authority was pointed to as central to breakdown in peace. Work to affirm and reconstitute this authority can be supported by the Peace Project and government agencies, including through:
 - Recognising family, clan or ceremony group leaders as rightful supervisors of peace.
 - Supporting government staff to operate in ways that have young people witnessing elders being respected by government.
 - Publicly acknowledging the rupture of elder authority precipitated by the Intervention as damaging to social cohesion.
 - Working with local leaders to affirm relevant cultural governance structures and have them underpin the work of organisations.
- Work in collaboration with government agencies to support their orientation towards local imperatives of peace. Elders have pointed to peace as best supported when healthy networks of government services interface with healthy networks of kin on country. The Peace Project can begin with local concerns (e.g. the need to spend more time on country, the problems around prisoner release) and then engage relevant government agencies in developing processes of on-ground coordination and policy delivery which support peace.

- Consider the delivery of collaborative workshops facilitated by the Peace Project supporting government agencies. The workshops would help activate an orientation towards local peacemaking in program design and delivery and would address processes for engaging local leadership, building time on country into operational plans and budgets, and identifying processes for local job creation.
- Explore the scope and dynamics of employment positions for local people attending to conditions of peace.
 - In Nauiyu, work with Ironbark and other relevant bodies to develop employment structures with the flexibility of CDEP.
 - In Peppimenarti, support the design of community-driven employment programs, prioritising trades training.
 - In Nganmarriyanga, there is potential for work linking belonging and employment as advised by Traditional Owners.
 - In Wadeye, pursue collaborations between corrections and CDP to engage returning offenders in community clean-up and other meaningful work immediately on release.
- Strategically orient to effecting conditions of peace in the short, medium and long term.
 - In the short term, maintain and enhance the delivery of mediation services in communities – supporting capacities to provide proactive restorative practice in relation to known issues, and responsive mediation in the context of new active disputes
 - In the medium term, enhance the strength and visibility of Aboriginal peacemaking (e.g. constituting law and justice groups, identifying intergenerational networks of Aboriginal kin responsible for peace) while advocating for the local contingency of such work.
 - In the long term, work to attain conditions of positive peace through repositioning community justice as the centre of peacemaking activities, shifting the dominant discourse from 'resolving disputes' to restoring 'conditions of peace'. Without this, the resolution of disputes may work to stabilise injustice.

Theme 2: Engaging differences in local governance

Specific differences between places were often insisted upon as crucial to understanding current conflicts, and appropriate modes of engagement by government agencies and others.

Settlement histories and contemporary Aboriginal polities

- The 'mission-founded' communities of Nauiyu and Wadeye were talked about as sharing a history of multi-clan settlement on a single clan nation's country, as well as a strong Catholic influence. Both have grown significantly over time and face the governance challenges that come with scale and diversity (e.g. challenges around how multiple clan groups may manage their interrelations while living away from their own clan estates and on someone else's land).
- The 'self-determined' settlements of Peppimenarti and Nganmarriyanga share a founding story of deliberate independence from mission and government control, previously successful cattle station economies and a period of disruption following government arrival. They face ongoing challenges around how to work the 'dual' structures traditional in Aboriginal societies (e.g. a necessary split into two moiety/clan/family groups) within a single contemporary community.

Methods of engagement

- In all places, it was agreed that 'whole of community' meetings are difficult to manage and are frequently counterproductive as forums for consultation and decision making.
 - In Nauiyu, there was a strong preference for open and visible engagement allowing people to participate freely without fear, and for other to be able to see what is happening.
 - In Peppimenarti, engagement at three different levels was described as important: (1) retaining a balance between the two main family groups and their access to services and resources; (2) supporting women to engage through unified/ community groups and spaces; (3) recognising patrilineal lines of cultural authority.

- In Nganmarriyanga, there are two levels of engagement currently seen as important – recognition of traditional owners as sovereign authorities, and parallel engagement with other individuals and groups constituted as 'community members' who would otherwise be left out.
- In Wadeye, the key principle has been to work through ceremony and family groups, not at the level of the community. This reflects Wadeye as a cultural centre for the region, and their continued maintenance of strongly authorised ancestral accountabilities.

Visions for peaceful townships

- In Nauiyu, peaceful township life is associated with the mission era of shared productive work and inter-clan coexistence; its return is imagined through football events, good role models, and structured activities that bring people together "as one."
- In Peppimenarti, a peaceful township is framed through the practice of Aboriginal identity – a restoration of basic rights enabling love between family, hunting and sharing bush tucker, and living freely on country. This includes giving voice to local people, particularly through a Women's Centre, safe house, and locally designed programs organised around the songlines.
- In Nganmarriyanga, Traditional Owners return repeatedly to the image of the fenced cattle station – a bounded, self-governed, productive place – as the template for what a peaceful settlement felt like; returning to it requires resolving the land authority dispute and formalising governance agreements.
- In Wadeye, the vision of a peaceful township is the most explicitly grounded in ceremony and traditional law, with what needs to happen articulated with the most confidence. Peace exists in the performance of right relations – on country, in ceremony, the proper exercise of authority by elders within their own clan groups.

Recommendations

- Recognise that engagement should not always be pursued in the same mode in all places. Practices of engagement may reinforce or cut across conditions for peaceful Aboriginal polities.
- Recognise that not all elders will have a right or responsibility to be involved in every dispute but can be regularly consulted outside mediation processes. Support elders to operate within their rightful clan or family group authority rather than being overburdened with whole-of-community expectations (Naiuiyu).
- Support locally-run spaces and groups – including men’s and women’s groups – as crucial peacemaking infrastructure. Facilitate community events that bring people together, with careful local coordination (Naiuiyu).
- Work to address structural entrenching of conflict within community organisations, and support the creation of safe, inclusive spaces for women across family groups (Peppimenarti).
- Actively engage with ceremony groups – Lirrga, Tjarnpa, Wangka and Wulthirri – as organising structures for services and organisations, including schools, clinics and government employment programs (Peppimenarti and Wadeye).
- Explore the potential of more active engagement with Land Councils outside the context of specific disputes. This recognises Land Councils as key players in historical and current issues of land ownership which exceed the scope of the Peace Project, but which have significant bearing on community tensions and possibilities for peace (Nganmarriyanga and Wadeye).
- Investigate appropriate processes for the development of local Indigenous Law and Justice Groups, including considering: appropriate ceremonial governance structures, the operational scope of such groups beyond close connection with the courts, and how they may enact intergenerational structures of knowledge sharing (beginning in Wadeye).
- Prioritise intersections between prisoner release, police, families, corrections, Centrelink and government employment programs as a crucial node of action, helping people to be released at appropriate times and places and into work programs (Wadeye).

Theme 3: The effectiveness of the West Daly Peace Project

What is working:

Within the West Daly Peace Project, the grounded and locally engaged approach of the Peace Project team has revealed itself as highly effective. It is conducive both to the 'just' resolution of disputes, and as a basis for broader peacemaking work which is ongoing. By beginning with family connections, and working separately with men and women, local strategies for restoring peace can be recognised and engaged by the team. The team has been particularly successful in working towards apologies between family/clan groups, and in advocating for ways in which Aboriginal groups and their needs might better connect with, or remain separate from, government agencies.

The Peace Project team are frequently guided to occupy different positions in relation to different situations arising across different communities and homelands. Their practice expects this, and in being adaptable in this way, works towards enhancing local capacities in ways which are respected and transparent.

By working within complex ecologies of cultural and organisational practices, rather than focusing on disputes alone, they can address what may seem tangential to the issue at hand, but proves to be crucial in supporting conditions of peace to re-emerge (e.g. working to heal tensions between local corporations in Nauiyu; pushing back against agencies calling for elders to resolve issues prematurely). In maintaining a basis within local relationships, they are well placed to guide other agencies in ways that observe and affirm local imperatives of peace.

Over the course of the West Daly Peace Project, there has been significant coverage across all main communities. The complex and non-linear time frames of disputes mean that impacts of such work are hard

to track and causal factors in positive outcomes are often multi-faceted. Ideally, Peace Project initiatives will only ever exist as a contributory factor within larger processes leading to sustainable outcomes. Such positive outcomes have been clearly seen in relation to the community-level dispute in Nauiyu, and around a range of large and small matters in Wadeye.

What is not working:

The West Daly Peace Project has generated enhanced capacities for peace within networks of Aboriginal groups and government agencies across all places. However, work towards constituting local teams of Aboriginal mediators has been revealed as generally not appropriate. This is gradually being replaced by ways of working with local peacemakers that do not require neutrality as a condition.

The peacemaking team is carefully constituted, but also very small – necessarily limiting their capacity to be available and responsive on the ground. While this team will only ever be an adjunct to existing local processes for restoring peace, and as a connector of other agencies, some enhancement of the team could be beneficial. This would likewise support the project to engage long-term systemic work, such as enhancing access to country and working towards better processes for local employment.

The frequent turnover of staff in local organisations means that the peacemaking team are continually needing to refresh and re-establish the good working relationships that benefit local outcomes. Over time there may be opportunity for higher level endorsement of the team and their approach, supporting their efforts on the ground.

Recommendations

- Maintain and enhance the delivery of mediation services in communities.
- Seek funding for an expansion of peacemaking beyond dispute resolution. Such work towards peace will likely centre on questions of community justice, engage local Aboriginal advisors and collaborators, and support healthy organisational partnerships in community. This work would likely involve:
 - Remembering the elders' insistence on the active role of being on country in maintaining conditions of peace.
 - Working with organisations to nurture new grounded possibilities in key areas of concern (e.g. the interface of family/community and prison release processes and employment providers).
 - Maintaining involvement in cross-jurisdictional groups, such as stakeholder groups and Taskforce.
- Actively maintain the culture of flexible and locally responsive peacemaking and mediation central to the current Peace Project team, while working to cultivate networks within or beyond the project that can champion and communicate these grounded approaches across tiers of government and policy domains.
- Recognise the range of roles relevant to peacemaking that could be actively engaged by the Peace Project, including ceremony group leaders, local researchers, and relevant authorities supporting children to spend time on country.

Theme 4: Supporting a research orientation in ongoing evaluation

Continuing to support a research orientation in the evaluation, design and delivery of West Daly Peace Project will be beneficial to sustaining and growing this work. Engaging local researchers on a more permanent basis would be a good first step – we note this is already starting to happen.

Sharing the findings of this report will promote an orientation towards conditions of peace. This document has been designed to speak to different audiences – elders and their family groups, the West Daly peacemaking team, government funders, other stakeholders and agencies. Copies will be shared with all those directly involved in the research. If deemed appropriate, the report can also be shared by the Peace Project team in a range of forums – board meetings of local Aboriginal organisations, stakeholder groups, and with staff from relevant government departments. The aim of this is to make visible statements from local Aboriginal authorities, and ways in which they are both problematising and working towards peace.

In the long term, there is more significant inquiry that can be pursued under the guidance of elders and local researchers, further clarifying conditions for peaceful places, means for working towards these outcomes, and forms of positive partnership with government agencies.

Recommendations

- Continue to engage local researchers within the Peace Project.
- Actively share the findings of this report across relevant forums – board meetings of local Aboriginal organisations, stakeholder groups, government departments – to make visible local Aboriginal perspectives on peace and to promote an orientation towards conditions of peace.
- Explore possibilities of further peacemaking research which seeks guidance from elders, young people and other Aboriginal authorities. Most significantly around local process and protocols for restoring peace which recognise their ongoing story sharing and evaluations as central to lasting outcomes.

Conclusion

The West Daly Peace Project is working. Its greatest strengths are locally embedded relationships, a team that stays present in times of crisis, and an approach to mediation and peacemaking which is sensitive to local pace and dynamics.

The core insight of this evaluation is that peace in the West Daly is not primarily a matter of resolving disputes. It is a matter of restoring and sustaining the conditions of peace – ancestral connections to country, healthy networks of kin, respected elder authority, meaningful work, and cultural governance – under which Aboriginal people have always been able to live well.

There is significant scope for government and non-government organisations to contribute to these conditions, or work against them. Restoring reciprocal relations by which Aboriginal polities and government agencies engage and respect each other is central to lasting peace, and a task which is best achieved from the ground up.



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