

Mapuru Food Cooperative (a balanda view)

"Through Home-land communities, Aboriginal people can continue to take responsibility for their lives, if given half a chance. This model of community development contrasts with the dysfunction resulting from forcing people to remain in centralized townships away from their ancestral homes." Kid Tracks, Nov 2004

Background

Mapuru is a Homeland in North East Arnhem Land, it is remote, very remote. Mapuru is located 600km from Darwin, a return airfare costs \$940, and requires changing planes three times.

The local post office and Wespac bank are both in Darwin.

The nearest store is a \$360 return air charter away to the Galiwin'ku (Elcho Island), settlement.

There is no road access during the wet season.

While this may seem remote to many outsiders, the Mapuru residents would not swap places with anyone, because they are living on their custodial land. Why on earth would they live in the local town of Galiwin'ku. That is not their land. Galiwinku is the land of the Malarra people. There are too many problems there brought about by the blind policies of governments that have centralised peoples from twenty or so clan groups onto the land of one clan.

There are however still pockets of people living as they have always lived on custodial lands. Despite enormous bureaucratic pressures to move, they have remained faithful to their Land. Lands where they have a right, and responsibility to live. Where decisions can be made knowing that they have the authority to do so. In the local township (called communities by governments) they can never have authority to speak, it is not their land,

How the coop began

In April 2002 Marathuwarr asked John for assistance to buy \$400 of food at Galiwin'ku and bring it back to Mapuru on the next visiting teacher flight. After discussions that afternoon it was decided that he would buy the food from Darwin as it was cheaper there, and they would store the food in the small store-room in the Homeland Learning Centre. Families could come and buy the food and that running a coop would be a part of the schooling for the children and that her son Jackie would look after the sale of the food. Marathuwarr and families decided that there would be no owing,

A speaker phone was an important adjunct to allowing Jackie and the HLC students listen to English conversations. At first Jackie was unable to order the first food by using the English language, even with practice. So John placed the first order. John ordered the first food, flour, tea, sugar weetbix, milk, corned beef and paid for it with his Visa card. The food duly arrived two weeks later by barge from Darwin, from there John picked it up with the NT DEET vehicle and took it to the airport. The food was then flown by 'back' charter to Mapuru.

A price list had already been organised so that change would not be required. All goods were priced in multiples of \$5.

Marathuwarr had a cash tin, which she gave to Jackie. The next week John brought over forms to open a joint cheque account at the Traditional Credit Union. This account meant that Jackie and the families could bank the cash at Elcho Island, and pay John when his Visa was used.

The first sale was for a packet of powdered milk (\$10), a packet of tea (\$5) and a packet sugar (\$5). Several people were there but no one was able to read the price list or calculate the cost. Then Jackie ran off, got a calculator, and after some time said \$20. In an exercise diary he noted the name of the person, the goods being purchased and the cost, the first sale. Jackie and Djinimbiliwuy completed most of the transactions for the first three months.

With more practice and having heard how John placed the first order with Phyllis at Independent Grocers (IG) Jackie stumbled proudly through the second order, then John came on the phone and paid for the orders. From then on Jackie did all the ordering. IG kept John's Visa details and every time Jackie ordered food he would note the cost, tell IG to charge John's Visa then send John a cheque.

Jackie was (and still is) Assistant Teacher in Charge of the Mapuru Homeland Learning Centre. Although he had worked there for twenty years English reading was very difficult. Initially he was unable to read the IG catalogue or find any items in it. But he was so determined with a renewed sense of purpose that he (and family) poured over the catalogue for weeks on end, trying to make sense of the long lists. It was only a matter of weeks before they found the items and began ordering additional food lines.

After five months families decided to obtain an EFTPOS machine, this was necessary as all people were receiving benefits (such as pensions and supporting parents) directly into bank accounts. Previously people had to fly to Elcho Island to draw out cash. The cost of the charter is currently \$310 return. This is equivalent to the fortnightly income of most people.

To make sure that every thing was upfront and legal John sought advice from the Australian Tax Office (ATO), after being sent between sections the advice was that as long as there were no profits then all was legal. This was crucial information, for if these Mapuru residents were to meaningfully engage with western culture they would need time to learn. To demand a formal company structure with regulatory BAS statements would have ensured the death of the coop.

Not long after the EFTPOS machine arrived something happened. Jackie had always been very shy even in the classroom. He would always sit at the back of the room allowing the Visiting Teacher to do the bulk of the teaching. He had done this for over fifteen years. There had been no encouragement by his employer the NT DEET to support him to undertake teacher training or attend professional development. The number of students had swelled to over forty students. Anyway, one day John arrived and was walking to the school from the airstrip. As he approached the school, he heard singing. Every one was singing to the top of their voices but above them all was Jackie's voice. When asked later what had brought about this confidence, he said the coop had returned his pride, together with dignity and a voice to speak.

In December 2003 lightning struck, knocking out the EFTPOS machine and telephone lines. People needed food so sales were made with a record kept of name, items purchased and cost. After two months the replacement EFTPOS machine arrived and was running. There were however \$8,500 worth of debts. This was bad enough, but when Jackie and the others looked at who owed money, no-one was sure which amount was for which person. You see there are five Lindas at Mapuru, and a number of Helens. One Linda was sure she had paid all her debts, there was no way to tell which amount was for which person. Not a problem! The families met and agreed that all prices would go up until all the debts had been cleared. By the end of the year all debts had been paid, local control does work.

Earlier in June 2003 the school at Galiwin'ku wrote a submission to Telstra seeking a computer and two-way satellite link. A computer with internet access was seen as essential. Internet banking would enable the families to buy goods with a Visa card, and to clear off the Visa debt by internet bank transfer, all from Mapuru. (Remember the closest post office is \$1,000 return airfare away.) In November the two-way satellite link was installed. At the same time Jackie applied for a Visa card.

From then on it was plain sailing, and things got better. Students counted real money during the school day, they also conducted sales for those relatives who could not write or add money. By August 2004 families had saved enough to buy a vehicle and trailer. Food no longer had to be wheel barrowed half a kilometre from the airport to the storeroom.

In January 2003 while John was in Melbourne Jackie rang for advice. Three pallets of food had been ordered but only two reached Mapuru. "What can we do one pallet is missing" he asked. John asked for details of the missing food, and Jackie read out his stock-take, missing: two boxes of baking powder, four cartons of mackerel, five drums of flour, three milk, four boxes of peas, corn, beans." John said. "You've never ordered peas, corn, beans, before." "No, but now we want healthy food." replied Jackie. It seems that when doors are unlocked people will open them.

The stock list grew to include, tyres, fishing lines, hooks sinkers, a variety of tools, digging sticks for yams, hoses, clothes blankets, sheets, pillows, and footwear.

In June 2004 Linda from Menzies School of Health Research wrote a submission for a HF award to recognise the efforts of the Mapuru residents. They won! First they won in the territory, then they won the national award for their category (Small Rural and Remote Initiatives). A wonderful achievement.

"This award celebrates their achievement for initiating and independently managing a healthy food coop on their Homeland. While Mapuru residents hunt and harvest bush foods every day, food from the non-profit co-op supplements food collected in the bush. Residents see the key to healthy living and health enhancing decision making is living on our ancestral lands."

The Indigenous Economic Forum was coming up in 2005, and Shae who was organising the Forum had heard about Mapuru. She invited Jackie to speak. Knowing that Jackie had limited English, John asked various organisations for financial assistance to help produce subtitled videos for Jackie to use at the forum. Lisa from the Heart Foundation (HF) suggested writing a one-off submission to the HF requesting funds. [You can read part of this submission.](#) The videos you see on this website have been produced using these funds.

Post-script: The coop has now been operating for over three years. During that time the Mapuru residents have developed skills that restore their autonomy and dignity. But there are still some unresolved issues. The biggest one is the transport of the food from the barge landing to the Galiwin'ku airport, a distance of 3km. Thanks Don and Gavin for your continued assistance. Without your help the coop could not continue.

Glossary

homeland: lands where Yolngu can exercise custodial rights and speak with authority. (as opposed to living in a settlement on another clan's land)

Homeland Learning Centre: Mapuru does not have a school, it has a Homeland Learning Centre. At Mapuru this means that trained teachers visit for three days a week working with two Assistant teachers. There is no teacher accommodation, the limited electricity to the HLC building is subsidised by the parents. Extremely limited access to computers for students and teachers, one pit toilet for fifty students, the list goes on.

balanda: From Hollander, a term introduced by the Maccassans to Arnhemland, prior to colonisation by the British.

Yolngu: Aboriginal person from Arnhemland