Traditional Societies and Entrepreneurship: an analysis of Australian and Tanzanian Businesses

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Refereed Abstract

Traditional cultures are under increasing pressure to build ample and sustainable business enterprises to better provide economic development and social advancement for its citizens. Pressure comes from within as well as from outside such societies. There is pressure from inside such societies in that citizens are now more aware than ever before of how other people in other parts of the world live – other people elsewhere have more robust economies and hence lifestyles. There is also external pressure to the extent that external financial institutions and Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) nations impose conditions on these societies.

The paper argues that individuals and groups in traditional societies are becoming increasingly aware of the need for sustainable holistic economic development and social advancement. To that end, the paper examines the evolution of grassroots small business initiatives in South Australia and Tanzania, with Special focus on the specific processes that facilitate or hinder successful entrepreneurship in these societies.

I argue that traditional entrepreneurship is an area that does not get the attention and focus it deserves. There is an argument for more attention, especially in view of the fact that two thirds of the world's population is categorised as being poor and developing. This developing world, comprising primarily traditional societies, is perceived by developed economies as largely unproductive, yet these developed economies have not stopped pillaging the natural resources of these developing nations. In many ways the underdevelopment of developing countries by developed economies continues unchecked even today, save for a few exceptions such as Singapore and perhaps China.

In examining traditional entrepreneurship, it is arguable that in some cases traditional entrepreneurs can have a competitive advantage. For example, as owners and custodians of cultural resources and heritage, they should be

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able to influence and determine how these resources are used. Within the Australian and Tanzanian communities there is now a growing realisation and recognition of the vital contribution that traditional entrepreneurs make and can make to the growth of small business enterprises and how in turn, the business sector can be used to serve the holistic economic development and social advancement needs and interests of Indigenous peoples.

This paper explores three business enterprises located in South Australia and one business venture located in Tanzania that are traditional in orientation and have successfully established small business enterprises, promoting individual and community holistic development in the process. The research explores the processes, issues and challenges traditional entrepreneurs and their enterprises face. It also examines the factors that influence practice and success in Indigenous businesses and entrepreneurship.

Introduction

This paper examines three indigenous business enterprises located in South Australia and one business venture located in Tanzania that have successfully established small businesses, promoting individual and community economic and social advancement. The paper looks at the processes, issues and challenges Indigenous entrepreneurs and enterprises face and looks at factors that influence practice and success in Indigenous business enterprises. The purpose of this research project was to investigate and ultimately analyse what specific Indigenous business ventures in South Australia in order to determine what works, for Indigenous businesses. In doing so the project identified the following aims:
• The impact of business enterprises and how Indigenous people/communities have responded to it
• Nature and structure of Indigenous business enterprises
• Issues and challenges facing Indigenous entrepreneurs and their businesses
• The role of Indigenous organisations
• Future directions and expectations

In this paper, when referring to the Australian situation, the terms Aboriginal and Indigenous are used synonymously. For example, Aboriginal tourism in

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a business context, may be defined as a tourism product which is either: Aboriginal owned or operated, employs Indigenous Australians or provides consenting contact with people, culture or land (South Australian Tourism Commission, 1995: 5)

The nature and extent of Indigenous business in Australia and Tanzania is varied. In the case of tourism in Australia, for example, while many Indigenous-owned tours and attractions focus on presenting Indigenous Australian culture, Indigenous involvement in other mainstream enterprises, including accommodation or visitor service facilities such as roadhouses, resorts, and regional airlines, is growing. This expansion from culture-based to service-based business ventures is appropriately referred to as 'diversified Indigenous' tourism (Hinch and Butler, in Zeppel 1998b: 24). Indigenous Australians are increasingly presenting their own culture as a tourist attraction in Australia. According to ATSIC, in 1997 there were around 200 Indigenous tourism businesses in Australia, with an estimated value for Indigenous Cultural tourism of $5 million a year. ATSIC also reported that income from selling Indigenous arts, crafts and souvenir products is $200million per annum, with half of this amount estimated from overseas tourists (Hinch and Butler, in Zeppel, 1998b: 24).

Indigenous Australians still experience inequality and are generally politically, socially and economically disadvantaged. From time to time, when it is expedient, politicians and government bureaucrats talk about the need to redress the situation for the benefit of the Indigenous community and Australia at large. It has to be said that Indigenous people in the two study areas are not incapable of doing things for themselves. Indeed, in the context of self-determination, it is important that (survival) skills, experience and knowledge of Indigenous peoples are nurtured so as to create an environment which is conducive to Indigenous communities taking control of their own economic development and social advancement. For the purpose of this paper, the term holistic development means development of the whole person. The term 'holistic' here is used to mean an analysis based on the Indigenous worldview of connectedness and interdependence, similar in many ways to a 'systems analysis' approach.

Background

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While business entrepreneurship is a relatively old, well-established discipline Indigenous entrepreneurship is a 'new' discipline by comparison. Its prominence in recent times can be explained by the awakening of Indigenous cultures around the world coupled with international shifts toward first nations's rights and self-determination. Indigenous entrepreneurship is potentially a powerful tool that can be used to promote economic independence, self-determination and cultural preservation within Indigenous communities (Buttler and Hinch, 1996). At the grassroots level, Indigenous entrepreneurship in areas such as tourism is accessible to individuals and groups, it requires limited capital and skills, and appears to easily accommodate values and environmental concerns shared by many Indigenous groups (Hall, 1996). Furthermore, Indigenous entrepreneurship in tourism, for example, is potentially capable of rejuvenating local economies, minimise the impact of negative tourism through local intervention, and strengthen, support and value national heritage (Brokensha, 1992).

Despite potential benefits, the growth of Indigenous businesses is not immune from controversy. In the case of tourism for example, critics see Indigenous tourism as a 'double edged sword' that promises prosperity on the one hand while potentially exploiting Indigenous people and their cultural heritage on the other. Commercial contact almost inevitably gives rise to the threat of abuse, the risk that external interests or forces will dominate local needs and that through commercialisation, Indigenous culture will be irreversibly contaminated (Butler and Hinch, 1996).

Arguably there are negative and positive impacts of Indigenous business. Some of these have been documented (Brokensha, 1992; Kesteven, 1988; Sofield, 1996) are summarised in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Positive and negative impacts of Indigenous business

POSITIVE	NEGATIVE
Economic base to revive Indigenous communities	Increased cost of living for local residents
Maintenance and growth of income generating arts and craft	Risk of decline in artistic quality and authenticity
Job creation; Indigenous	Domination of external interests and

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entrepreneurship and small business development	control of managerial and decision-making processes
Cultural revival and preservation	Exploitation of human and cultural resources
Investment in environment conservation	Risk and actual desecration of sacred sites and natural resources
Development of remote communities	Exploitation of remote communities and increasing incorporation into mainstream society

While the positive factors tend to encourage Indigenous people into the business or private sector the negative factors have the reverse effect - they discourage and even undermine their rightful involvement into this sector.

Methodology

The research was conducted in the second half of 2002. This is a qualitative (case study) research project that I believe is most suited to this kind of investigation. As Merriam (1988: 10) points out, this approach is especially suited to situations where it is impossible to separate the phenomenon's variables from the context. It is argued here that Indigenous business development fits the bill. The case study method (Fielding, 1988; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stake, 1978); is advantageous and enables:
• an analytical focus on Indigenous peoples' construction of their experiences and attitudes related to holistic development;
• a conceptual framework of holistic development for Indigenous people;
• the provision of contextual thick description which is essential for:
-      transferability of application and comparative analysis within the case study
-      a grounded assessment of the impact of Indigenous business development within an organisational context and in terms of identity.

Three Australian Indigenous business enterprises were identified through networking with the Business Unit of ATSIC (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission), South Australia branch, Adelaide. Two of the three

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are community-run business ventures while the third one is an individual-run (privately operated) business venture. Both community-run business ventures came up with the idea of establishing a cultural (tourist) centre in their respective communities as a business arm designed to tap on the growing tourism and hospitality industry. These cultural centres provide a whole range of artifacts for sale to international as well as local tourists. They also provide cultural workshops to schools and tourists. The tourism business arm compliments other business arms such as market gardening, bush food/tucker, dairy farming, and farming.

The third case study is an individual-run (privately owned and operated) Indigenous tourism business enterprise. It operates tourist tours for schools, international and local tours. It also liases and networks with Indigenous communities in Adelaide and its environs in order to optimise cultural and other resources for the benefit of both parties - the communities, and the privately owned business.

The fourth and final case study is a Tanzanian privately owned and operated Indigenous business enterprises. Its main business is to provide tour guides for tourists and general transport for the public.

Once the four business enterprises were identified formal arrangements were made to contact them in order to request their participation in the study. The requests were granted and both participants and the researcher duly signed consent forms.

Data collection

In-depth interviews were employed as the main method to collect data. Data collection techniques included open-ended semi-structured interviews. These techniques were designed to collect data on:

-       the conditions for success in establishing Indigenous business enterprises
-       the significance of Indigenous business enterprises to Indigenous economic development and social advancement
-       the implications of Indigenous business enterprises for traditional Indigenous society.

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A semi-structured interview format allows the interviewee a great deal of freedom, while covering a given set of topics in a more or less systematic fashion (Moser and Karlton, 1973). Such a format gets away from the inflexibility of fixed and formal questions, yet gives the interview a set form and ensures that all relevant topics are discussed.

To ensure that the research aims were met, participants were treated as co-researchers. Accordingly, the term participants is used, instead of the conventional term, subjects. Here there is an acknowledgement that the participants are the experts not the researcher. Treating participants as co-researchers facilitated their participation in common learning with the researcher in which action, reflection, and theorising are part of the same process and take place as a dialogue between equal partners (Karlsen, 1991: 148). Ultimately, however, the task of analysing data and writing the findings into a coherent finished product rests with the researcher.

Data analysis

Data from the case studies and interviews were collated and recorded in the form of narrative description based on the main concept cues provided during interviews. Further interpretation focused on the significance of Indigenous enterprises and entrepreneurship in the advancement of Indigenous holistic development. In order to minimise the risk of misinterpretation and trivialisation of the results by some readers, this qualitative interpretation transcended the "merely descriptive" (Merriam, 1998:131).

Where relevant, discourse analysis was used to analyse documents essential to this study. These were mainly government policy statements on Indigenous development. According to McHoul (1986, in Fisher and Todd (eds): 187-202) this process

acknowledges that a social fabric is constituted and saturated by discursive formations; that policy, policy-making, policy writers, policy studies, and so on effects of determinate techniques of signification, and that these techniques of signification provide the 'rules', the conditions of possibility for policy.

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This is a qualitative study, which is essentially a type of interpretive research. This type of research presupposes

That reality is holistic, multidimensional, and ever-changing; it is not a single, fixed, objective phenomenon waiting to be discovered, observed, and measured
        (Erickson, in Merriam, 1988: 165).

It is a study about real people with real challenges. Order in their society is often unstable and changeable. Cause and effect are artificial concepts, which oversimplify complex, continuous processes of metamorphosis and ambiguity (Kellehear, 1993: 26-27). From a qualitative researcher's viewpoint, social science should go out into the world but with only a desire to listen and participate and not to impose a pre-structured theory onto the world. Quantitative researchers may have reservations (as this approach forces them out of the 'comfort zone' which revolves around quantitative methods). One must bracket one's former understanding about particular social phenomena and attempt to understand these processes from the point of view of the experience (Kellehar, 1993: 27)

Results

The researcher found that the motives and expectations on the business by the operators of the community-run Indigenous business enterprises were similar to those of the individual-run (privately owned and operated) Indigenous business enterprises. Providing for and maintaining family relationships took priority over profit maximisation. To both types of business enterprises, that is, community-run, and individual-run, preserving and maintaining the 'soul and spirit' through relationships was more important making money. The latter was seen as merely a tool or a means to an end not an end in itself.

When asked: What outcomes did they want from their business?

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There was a definite pattern in their responses. Community-run Indigenous enterprise one responded:

The biggest outcome for us would be to provide employment for Indigenous people. Given a choice between maximising profit and providing employment
for our people the choice is very clear to
us - employment. …

Community-run Indigenous enterprise two responded:

Our main aim, sometimes at the cost of making a dollar, is providing employment for our people; developing and nurturing relationships within our community and also with the local non-indigenous community. …

The third business, an individual-run Indigenous business enterprise gave the following response:

Oh, now this is a tricky one. I want to be able to accomplish and sustain achievable goals or objectives; improved quality of life in 20 or 30 years. Seriously though, the main outcome for me would be to have the capacity to employment Indigenous people. For example, it would be rewarding to be able to take Indigenous students on board for work experience because they need it to position themselves in the job market. …

A similar pattern emerged in the fourth case, the Tanzanian business enterprise:

You know, many of our people are doing it tough these
days. It would very rewarding to be able to provide
employment to our people. God only knows that they
desperately need jobs. We want to make money so we
make a positive difference by creating jobs for our
people.

Clearly, these responses provide testimony to the earlier observation about Indigenous peoples' perception on money and its role. In both the two community businesses, and the two individual-run business enterprises the driving force for their establishment was primarily an attempt to cash on the booming tourism and hospitality industry locally, nationally, and

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internationally. There was also the realisation that non-indigenous operators were profiteering on Indigenous culture and heritage while at the same time trivializing. Alice Springs is a good case in point. However, it is not prudent to discuss this in detail in this paper.

Indigenous communities generally sanction and approve the business activities that are undertaken in their respective communities. Community involvement was critical for the success of Indigenous business enterprises. In the case studies in this paper positive and harmonious relations between Indigenous business enterprises and the wider Indigenous community were evident in situations where the Indigenous community was actively involved in their consensus decision making processes and accrued tangible benefits from the Indigenous business operations. Occasionally, however, friction or conflict can surface over unresolved kinship and quasi-kinship issues, resource allocation, and competing individual or group interests.

In general, the Indigenous enterprises in this study mainly employ Indigenous people. For now at least, in Australia non-indigenous staff occupy such positions as consultants, trainers, accountants, and financial advisers. There is the perception that non-indigenous employees in these organisations enhance organisational capabilities because of their mainstream networks, business experience and skills.

There is something empowering about management in these Indigenous business enterprises. The management style tends to be participative and inclusive of staff and community members. Staff and community members actively participate in making decisions especially on new business developments. This approach enhances commitment by all to the success of the business activities because people seemingly identify themselves with the projects and take pride in their success.

Facilities and services
The following is a summary of the facilities and services the three Indigenous tourism business enterprises provide:

Table 2: Summary of Indigenous business enterprises

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Facility/Service	Community-based enterprise 1	Community-based enterprise 2	Individual-based enterprise
Traditional dancing	*	*	
Cultural training and workshops	*	*	*
School presentations	*	*	*
Bush food	*	*	*
Bush tours/camps	*	*	*
Museum displays	*	*	*
Conference facilities	*		
Retail shop	*	*	
Kiosk/canteen	*	*	*
Accommodation		*	
Multi-media theatre	*		
Indigenous art/painting	*	*	*
Traditional story telling	*	*	*

Note, apart from providing facilities and services to local, national, and international tourists, these business enterprises also provide a wide range of services to the local indigenous community. As one Indigenous manager put it:

Networking is very important for us. Accordingly, we engage in community exchange programs whereby we bring people here for work experience, take people from here to the wider indigenous community to participate in

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celebrations, sports carnivals, festivals, etc. We also recruit people from the wider Indigenous community to work here, and accommodate them so they can get experience in operating business.
(D. Walker, Pers comm, 2001)

Staff Training

Each of the four business enterprises in this study has some form of formal as well as informal staff training put into place. In each of the two community-run enterprises there is an on site consultant who coordinates and facilitates staff training in areas such as business management; marketing; bookkeeping and financial management.

Interviewees from the three enterprises asserted the importance of adopting a holistic approach to skills training which focuses on both personal and professional development. According to the participants, the essential skills required for business success included: cross-cultural management skills, cross-cultural communication skills, assertiveness, public speaking, technical (bookkeeping, financial management, computer, information technology) skills, food handling, and crisis management skills. Participants also emphasized the importance of generating marketable skills and building self-confidence and self-esteem in the Indigenous community.

Staff Training Outcomes (STO)

In the interest of holistic development, participants were asked 'what outcomes they wanted from their work for themselves, their Indigenous community, and the wider community.' The following is a summary of their outcomes:

Table 3: Outcomes of Indigenous participation in business

GROUP	OUTCOMES
INDIVIDUAL	Self-confidence, self-esteem, financial security, respect, educational and skills

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PARTICIPANTS	development, professional advancement, personal growth.
INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES	Increased employment opportunities for Indigenous people. Community skills development. Local and national Indigenous communities networking and cooperation. Promoting Indigenous peoples' achievements and positive images. Empowerment of Indigenous peoples. A 'cultural renaissance.' Promoting Indigenous communities as a vital community resource for the use and benefit of Indigenous and non-indigenous citizens.
THE WIDER COMMUNITY	Dissemination of knowledge. Economic growth through business stat-ups and job creation. Cross-cultural training and development. A meeting place to learn, reflect, and develop networks and friendships.

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Challenges facing Indigenous business

Indigenous entrepreneurship and business enterprises have to wrestle with many challenges. Participants in this study identified several challenges. These are now briefly discussed.

- External forces

The dominance and control by government agencies in particular, was seen as a major challenge. While government funding was regarded as necessary and inevitable in Indigenous tourism, for example, participants had reservations about the stringent conditions on funding contracts that are administered by government bureaucrats, including bureaucrats.

- Lack of education and training

Participants expressed that Indigenous people have limited formal education, lack of self-confidence, low self-esteem, substance abuse, and dependency on welfare are all factors that help explain their disadvantage and disempowerment. They also asserted that the 'handout mentality' perpetuated by welfare had given rise to an attitude of entitlement at an individual as well as community level. Consequently, Indigenous organisations had to deal with problems of absenteeism, high labour turnover and low employee morale.

- Racism

Participants reported that racism, stigmatisation and negative attitudes as one of the major challenges Indigenous Australian businesses encountered. The community-run cases in this study reported that there was resistance from local non-Indigenous residents toward the establishment of an Indigenous cultural tourism centre. In some cases such resistance included threats of sabotage, and offensive comments being made. Indigenous operators also have to deal with stigma and negative attitudes such as:

'Will they (Indigenous people) turn up on time? Will they be drunk? Are they dirty? Are they reliable?, etc.

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- Regional bias

South Australian participants, for example, made the observation that there was bias within the media and the tourism commission when promoting Indigenous tourism. These tend to place emphasis on the 'top end' of Australia, almost at the expense of other parts of this continent. Clearly, this puts operators outside the Northern Territory at a commercial disadvantage. It also perpetuates myths and stereotypes about Indigenous peoples. One participant succinctly summed up the situation as follows:

"people tend to go to the top end (Northern Territory) where they think the 'real Aborigines' are. That is the exotica to them, the ultimate exotica, because these people are still seen as traditional people. Whereas we down here, they do not think we strictly pursue that Indigenous culture – going bush, traditional dancing, singing, story telling, initiation, reaffirming who we are, genealogy, and kinship, etc."
        (D. Walker, Pers comm., 2001)

This perception is further reinforced by the work of Simondson (1995, in Zeppel 1998: 67-81) thus:

… These stereotyped visual images of traditional Aborigines in the northern and central Australia are prevalent in general sales and advertising material produced by large tourism organizations responsible for marketing international images of Australia such as the Australian Tourism Commission, Ansett Australia, Qantas, and the state tourism authorities. This marketing ignores nontraditional Aborigines, particularly in the southern states of Australia, and "denies the reality of Aborigines' lives in the contemporary world."

- Indigenous community dynamics

Participants cited Indigenous community politics as another challenge. Conflicts within Indigenous communities can stem from competing interests of kinship and quasi-kinship groups – competing for scarce community resources, land and counter land claims. Participants also stated that the

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widespread 'tall poppy syndrome' affected Indigenous communities as well. Successful individuals or groups may attract envy and resentment from those who are less successful. At another level, participants explained that traditionally Indigenous communities do not see the need for aggressiveness (that seems to be the norm) in tourism and other forms of business and in fact resent it – they consider it to be arrogance, which to them is quite unnecessary. They believe Indigenous business can successfully be promoted and marketed without aggressiveness.

- Scarcity of resources

In general there is a dearth of resources in the Indigenous communities. Participants cited securing capital and other resources necessary to keep abreast with innovation and the development of infrastructure as one of the main obstacles facing indigenous businesses. Shortage of capital severely restricts business capacity. Limited financial resources made it difficult to market and promote their products and hence unable to expand their business operations.

- Coming to terms with operating a business

Generally, while the thought of running one's own business is exciting, venturing into it was not an instant success for Indigenous communities. They quickly learned it demands perseverance, patience, and compromise. Above all, the business did not offer immediate returns on capital invested. They realized that rewards had to be a long-term proposition. As one participant put it:

'We had to come to terms with operating a business: what is it? It calls for a lot of hard work and training. Many of our people are not up to it because we are shy we have got disadvantages in certain areas. Many cannot read, cannot write, cannot spell, and lack self-confidence.'
(D. Walker, Pers comm, 2001)

Participants reported that their organisations have had to adjust and cope with seasonal fluctuations, increased competition, and pressure to innovate regularly. Employees have had to come to terms with business protocols, overcome personal insecurities and generate enough self-confidence to deal

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with (often) an intimidating (or discerning) public, especially those who are dealing with the public for the first time.

Managing the challenges

Granted that the Indigenous enterprises examined in this study have to deal with many challenges, they all have made steady progress and are becoming success stories. Their success is due to a combination of provision of a quality product and a participative management approach, which empowers staff resulting in their commitment and determination to succeed. The traditional Indigenous consensus decision-making approach is still the preferred way of doing business. As far as community-run organisations are concerned, the injection of capital through government and joint venture partnerships has contributed to infrastructure and market development giving rise to positive outcomes to the wider Indigenous community.

Individual-run Indigenous business ventures tend to remain small and focused. This is mainly because of scarce financial resources and limited support. At any rate, success has also come as a result of strategic partnerships, which allow them to build their products while at the same time cutting on their overheads. They heavily rely on the word of mouth for the promotion and marketing of their products.

Conclusions

This study has examined four Indigenous business enterprises that are reasonably successful. They have had to overcome many challenges in the process. Apart from being an economic resource for their staff and their respective indigenous communities, they are also a cultural resource not only to their own community but also to the wider community. Contrary to negative stereotypes about Indigenous people in relation to 'laziness', Indigenous people involved in these four enterprises have demonstrated capacity for hard work, creativity, and a never give up attitude. They have persevered in situations where it would have been much easier to give up and heap the blame on somebody else-bureaucrats, funding bodies, financial institutions, tourists, etc. Their attitude has been 'if it is going to be it is up to us.' This attitude has guided them through many 'rough' times.

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Data collected indicate that Indigenous business enterprises may provide benefits to its operators in the long-term rather than the short-term. The data also shows that jobs in areas such as tourism are predominantly seasonal or casual and often do not provide financial security. Consequently, people have to juggle between welfare payments and casual work when it is available. In the case of Tanzania, there are no welfare payments. Active participation in Indigenous business presupposes training, compromise, and flexibility. These three factors seem to be the ingredients for success here.

In order for Indigenous businesses to continue making a positive contribution toward holistic development of Indigenous peoples and their communities, the challenges discussed earlier in this article should be addressed. Relevant Indigenous authorities together with the government have to shoulder this responsibility. There has to be goodwill and a genuine willingness to act on developing and supporting Indigenous businesses that transcends rhetoric.

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