



# SHIFTING GROUND

## First Nations Social Enterprise Findings Report

First Nations Social Enterprise Circle

June 2026



**WE ACKNOWLEDGE ALL FIRST PEOPLES ACROSS THIS CONTINENT AS THE SOVEREIGN CUSTODIANS AND TRADITIONAL OWNERS OF THE UNCEDED LANDS ON WHICH WE WORK AND LIVE.**

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The Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property within this report doesn't solely belong to Shifting Ground, it is a collective work. We wish to acknowledge Regina Jones, Samantha Paxton, Joyce Palmer, Fiona Harrison, Liandra Gaykamangu, Ben Graetz, Britt Silvester, Chloe Owen and Libby Collins for their wisdom, love and support through their participation in the First Nations Social Enterprise Circle.

The recommendations in this report are a starting point. We ask those with the power – funders, policymakers, and sector partners – to take action. To be part of the growing First Nations Social Enterprise Community or to support this work, contact Shifting Ground at [info@shiftingground.com.au](mailto:info@shiftingground.com.au)

This learning community was commissioned by Social Enterprise Australia as part of the Australian Government's [Social Enterprise Development Initiative](#) (SEDI) to help build social enterprise sector capability and grow social impact. This work was carried out as part of the.

## **SECTION I: ABOUT THE FIRST NATIONS SOCIAL ENTERPRISE CIRCLE**

The First Nations Social Enterprise Circle (FNSEC) was designed and delivered by Shifting Ground as a two-day gathering for First Nations social enterprise leaders. Its aims were threefold:

1. To connect community members and create space for peer knowledge exchange
2. To contribute to the development of a First Nations Values Framework and Values Map for the social enterprise sector
3. To strengthen recognition of, and participation in, First Nations leadership and practice across the sector

In designing and delivering this convening, including in every decision we made about who it was for and how it was run, we were guided by an underlying intention: to expand the sector's recognition of the solutions and creativity of First Nations enterprise, and to increase the belonging of First Nations practitioners within an ecosystem whose structures, definitions, funding mechanisms were not designed for First Nations ways of doing, being and knowing.

The social enterprise sector speaks often about positive social change and we took these commitments seriously. Meaningful social change on this continent cannot be separated from the ongoing presence and motion of colonisation – the dispossession, extraction of resources, wealth and knowledge, and structures that continue to concentrate harm in First Nations communities.

The word “resilient” carries some weight, since it can be used to absolve structural harm or failure, and celebrate endurance under conditions that contradict policy. When we identify First Nations Social Enterprises (FNSE), we are talking about something that is rich and active: survival, of course, but also adaptation, innovation, missions to serve community – and therefore all – under pressure.

Resilience is the frame for what needs to be built in a period of compounding uncertainty, navigated by First Nations people for nearly 240 years. The FNSEC was built on the premise that these are blueprints for the sector, Australia, and the world.

### **Why Garramilla**

The Northern Territory is already living the consequences of a warming world, falling the hardest on First Nations people. Every intensifying act of extraction, contamination, displacement is equally cultural and spiritual. The pressures are real and escalating: the Beetaloo Sub-basin is being opened for large-scale gas fracking, breaching both environmental and cultural heritage obligations, risking water, Country and climate.<sup>1</sup> Early

2025 saw Nauiyu, or the Daly River, flooded, with 350 residents displaced from their homes into an evacuation centre<sup>2</sup> with what have been described as brutal conditions.<sup>3</sup>

Garramilla, the Larrakia name for Darwin, is one of Australia's most significant and contested landscapes, and we chose to convene here as an act of recognition of this place as a frontline of the climate emergency on this continent. The stakes are high and the case for First Nations-led solutions is urgent and alive.

### **Shifting Ground's Approach to the Circle**

Before the convening could be designed, the question of who it was for had to be answered carefully. Our intention was twofold: to expand the sector's recognition of what First Nations enterprise looks like in practice, and to ensure that First Nations enterprise leaders who would not normally see themselves reflected identified with the program. From Shifting Ground's own experience, social enterprise definitions have a tendency to centre certification and legal structure, reflecting processes and criteria that have historically functioned as gatekeepers rather than gateways for First Nations enterprise.

Our working definition was deliberately broad: a First Nations enterprise is a business, organisation or collective that is First Nations owned and led, trades to generate some income, and creates social, cultural or environmental benefits. No certification was required, and enterprises at any stage, operating across any industry or way of working, were encouraged to apply.

The EOI process was designed to the same standard, accessible, brief, and available in multiple formats in recognition that written applications are not the right tool for everyone, and outreach was targeted rather than broad.

Underpinning all of this was a set of commitments that shape how Shifting Ground works: to the primacy of process alongside outcome; to building relationships at the speed of trust; to First Nations self-determination as the foundation; and to the understanding that getting this work right has benefits that extend well beyond the First Nations context.

Seven First Nations enterprise leaders participated in the FNSEC, drawn from across Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and Northern Territory. They came at different stages of their enterprise journey and operating across different industries and models, and this was deliberate, embedded in our assessment criteria. In the spirit of reciprocity, lead facilitator, Genevieve Grieves, shared her experiences as co-founder of Garuwa and therefore is included as a contributor.

Those who participated in the FNSEC are referred to as 'community members' throughout this report. Together they represented the full breadth of what First Nations

enterprise looks like in practice: from enterprises just taking shape to established operations evolving or experimenting with their model.

ENTERPRISE NAME	LOCATION
<a href="#"><u>The Disappeared Project</u></a>	QLD
<a href="#"><u>BRG Productions</u></a>	NSW
<a href="#"><u>Chocolate on Purpose</u></a>	NSW
<a href="#"><u>Garuwa</u></a>	NSW
<a href="#"><u>Weenthunga</u></a>	VIC
<a href="#"><u>Murran</u></a>	VIC
<a href="#"><u>Liandra</u></a>	NT
<a href="#"><u>Purple House Bush Balm</u></a>	NT

## WHAT WE DID

The two-day Circle was structured as a space for deep reflection, listening, and learning. We took a strengths-based, trauma-informed approach underpinned by the understanding that First Nations people bring not only our own knowledge to generative spaces but also the voices and wisdom of ancestors and Community. Enterprise, and what we create, is often tied to responsibility, obligation, culture and care for our communities, so we knew the circle would have to be created in a way that enabled community members to bring their whole selves, as well as their work. As such the program was designed with plenty of space for reflection and stillness alongside the deep conversations and work.

## PROGRAM OVERVIEW

### DAY ONE - TUESDAY 21 APRIL

**Session One: Connecting in**

Day one was about finding our ground together – this included understanding why we had gathered, and building the cultural safety and trust that would allow us to share openly.

**Session Two: Visiting the Past and Present to Dream a Brighter Future**

Working in small groups, community members mapped their own enterprise journeys across the five stages of Social Enterprises [developed by the Council of Australian Social Enterprise Intermediaries \(CASEI\)](#), namely, Vision, Validation, Development, Growth, Established. This was an opportunity to reflect on their own journey and share their challenges and lessons with one another.

**Session Three: Dreaming of the Possibilities (part one)**

Community members were invited to dream and create an artwork that imagined a future in which First Nations ways of working were meaningfully and systemically valued.

### DAY TWO - WEDNESDAY 22 APRIL

**Continuation of Day One/Session Two: Activity 2 | How the Past Impacts the Current**

Day two started with deeper reflections on the Journey Maps. We explored the barriers and challenges experienced by FNSE and the impact of historical systems and policies on current day barriers and challenges.

**Session Four: An Exploration of Values**

Session Four consisted of a number of activities focused on values. In small groups, community members were invited to explore their Journey Maps further. Discussion prompts centred around what values, community and cultural protocol had supported community members at each stage of the social enterprise journey. Groups identified the five values they saw as most integral to their journey. This fed into a broader group discussion to begin mapping our collective values.

**Session Five: Dreaming of the Possibilities (part two)**

Community members were invited to further reflect on their vision for their Community and share their artwork. Heartfelt visions filled about all the possibilities were shared with people's artworks as the vehicle for expression. This set us up well for our last session together.

**Session Six: Journeying from Dreams to Reality**

The final session consisted of two activities. The first explored the key components of enacting our values – our principles. This was rich but complex territory, and more time was needed to fully develop and discuss what these meant in practice. The second activity, Our Values Tree, aimed to bring all the work from the two days together. The tree gave form to everything we'd built: roots as our non-negotiable foundations, a trunk of shared values, branches representing the support we need, and fruits as the outcomes we're growing toward.

## SOFTENING INTO THIS SPACE



A swarm of voices, smiles and familiar faces fill the space  
Recognising my ancestors in their voice and in the contours of their face  
Beads of sweat as the morning wraps around us like a warm hug from our great grandmothers  
Patterns, shapes and colours brushed against the backdrop of luscious green and flowering beauty  
Let us abandon rules and conventions of western structures of conversation  
This feels like family, feels like community – this is ancestral connection  
Let us unpack, shift and dream into ways of sustainably moving to a place of abundance  
Let our guiding principles fall beneath us, as does the pollen and the leaves outside  
Honouring the work of those who have come before us, embedding our ways of doing, being and knowing through our collective work here  
These are not typical hallmarks of a Social Enterprise gathering

Creative writing by Kate Douglas (Gunditjmara), Shifting Ground representative who was present for the Gathering.



## OUR APPROACH TO THE REPORT

Shifting Ground approached the report with the same heart, warmth and Decolonial energy that the FNSEC community members brought to the Circle. Rather than separating Shifting Ground as “the convenors” and those invited as “community members,” we chose to write this report using collective language. Similarly, quotes are at times coded to denote different community members, and at others, left uncoded. Some quotes are left uncoded where one voice may have led, but collective agreement was present. Many of the quotes included speak for themselves, and give sovereign voice to all those present. For this reason, we have chosen not to overinterpret them, letting them provide both voice and context.

The information presented here is the culmination of our time, stories, and work together. We captured our time together using:

- audio recordings of large group conversations, transcribed verbatim
- notes captured by Shifting Ground staff member, Kate Daglas
- photos of butchers paper, notes and post-it notes

Please note: The “Dreaming” session was very emotive and personal. We therefore chose not to record audio from the session. Given small group conversations were not recorded, those who were more confident presenting their work to the group may be more prominently represented in the quotes.

The notes and transcriptions were sorted into themes separately by two different staff members and then spoken about within the team and cross referenced to ensure accuracy. Themes were then presented back to the FNSEC community members and opportunity was given for both written and verbal feedback – all suggested changes were incorporated in the final report.

### How to read the report

The themes presented in this report do not exist in isolation, instead, they overlap, inform, and are deeply intertwined with one another. We have done our best to organise them clearly, but the reader will notice threads that run across sections. The reader will notice that many threads lead back to the same place: colonisation and its ongoing impacts – on our economies, our relationships, our sense of what is possible, and what we are still working to reclaim. This reflects and echoes the nature of the conversation itself.

### The context of First Nations Enterprises

We begin by situating this work within existing literature on First Nations enterprises.

The context for First Nations enterprise in Australia is shaped by a long history of colonial dispossession. Entrepreneurship was firmly embedded in Aboriginal and Torres

Strait Islander society through trade and commercial activity long before European colonisation. The imposition of Western legal and economic systems not only eliminated traditional economies but destroyed social systems alongside them.<sup>4</sup> Colonial subjugation of political, property, and sociocultural rights has resulted in ongoing suffering, which continues to impact Indigenous communities' rights and, in turn, the experiences of First Nations enterprises.<sup>5</sup> Trust in Australia's economy is conditional on membership of groups deemed worthy of trust — assessed not only by race but by proxies such as networks, intergenerational assets, business experience, and educational qualifications — all of which are less accessible to First Nations people because of historic and ongoing racism.<sup>6</sup>

First Nations enterprises — whether for-profit, profit-for-purpose, social enterprise, or not-for-profit — are consistently oriented toward community benefit, driven by deeply held cultural values of reciprocity, kinship, and collective wellbeing, as well as by the ongoing imperative to address the socioeconomic disadvantage produced by colonial subjugation.<sup>4-9</sup> First Nations ways of doing business are not a new concept but arguably an original form of social enterprise, one in which people traditionally worked collectively and traded goods for community benefit long before Western social enterprise theory was developed.<sup>4,7</sup>

The more deeply Indigenous cultural values, ways of knowing, and ways of doing are embedded into the design, governance, and daily operation of an enterprise, the more likely that enterprise is to generate meaningful, lasting, and holistic benefit for its community.<sup>5,7-9</sup> However, cultural embeddedness must be accompanied by stable and flexible funding,<sup>8-10</sup> appropriate governance frameworks,<sup>7,8</sup> financial literacy,<sup>4</sup> access to capital,<sup>4,6</sup> and policy environments that respect rather than override Indigenous self-determination.<sup>5-7,9</sup>

This report on the 2026 First Nations Social Enterprise Circle (FNSEC) echoes the existing literature, highlighting the need to understand and value First Nations peoples' ways of being, doing and knowing.

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## **SECTION 2: WHAT WE FOUND**

“If our ways were centred  
[navigating being a First Nations social enterprise]  
would feel less like pushing against a system  
and more like standing in a system that holds you”

The findings of the FNSEC are fundamentally captured in the above quote. First Nations Social Enterprises (FNSE) have a very different experience to non-Indigenous Social Enterprises due to the challenges and complexities of operating within colonial systems designed to, first eradicate, then assimilate, and finally marginalise and replace First Nations worldviews and ways of working. In this section of the report, we share the stories and experiences of those present at the FNSEC to demonstrate how FNSE simultaneously deliver social impact while contributing to political sovereignty and self-determination, serving as vehicles for challenging colonial structures and narratives.

## THE STRENGTHS OF FIRST NATIONS SOCIAL ENTERPRISES

FNSE are driven by a passion and love for their Community. FNSE bring their whole selves to their work and with that, draw heavily on their own lived experience. As one community member stated when feeding back their group work: *“our vision really came from our life journey and our experiences in our own life.”* The way in which everything we do is passionately centered on our Communities informs the need for our social enterprises, and naturally creates the underpinning principles of how we work and function as a social enterprise. Tears were shed as visions for healthier, happier and connected communities were shared. Each community member was coming from a strong place of care – self, Community and Country.

P03: For us telling people's stories, it's like you change their whole life if you tell it in a positive way. But that's not something you can really measure... that change in someone's heart, you know, or the spirit or the healing comes from that.

P05: Your self-expression of self-determination [as a First Nations person and Social Enterprise] can be [...] a beacon to somebody else to see that they can also do it differently.

P07: [we] hold people in relationships with love and care. We spoke about the word love that it's not used enough.

For many, there was a strong focus on young people and/or intergenerational knowledge and skill sharing. When speaking about young people, one community member stated the following:

P02: For me seeing someone come in to [our enterprise] that is quite fragile and then build their skills up to be able to then go out into the real world. Yeah. Like there's no amount of money that can be placed on that.

Conversations about community-led and community-controlled responses to issues such as education, physical health, mental health and wellbeing were weaved through each day.

P08: we really focused on [...] collectively what we [...] have been able to achieve. I think for us, like the type of work that we do is really responding to community and being led by community. So that was something that was really interesting that came up, but also a lot of us being told no when it's too hard and stuff like that, we've all experienced. So that was really nice to hear, but also how resilient we are as Blackfellas, and that we can create jobs outside of what the Western idea of you know, work and impact looks like.

For-profit enterprises articulated their movement towards being recognised as a social enterprise or not-for-profit, with social/environmental impact outcomes organically part of their work. This was directly linked to the fact that they bring their wholeselves, including First Nations ways of being, doing and knowing to everything they do.

P04: So once you're established, it's about, I suppose it's the work we do. It's the impact isn't it? And what are we giving back and how are we creating that change? It's inspiring others to do it. It's inspiring them to grow. Like for me, you know, we created a drag pageant called Miss First Nation, which has been going since 2017. And so that's really flourished the blak drag scene. And a lot of them are now doing their own businesses and taking on their own stuff. And that's just, you know, why I created it. So then they could do the work and take it over.

P01: we created opportunities for six individuals during that one set of projects (we have done this twice in-community and about to do our third). Since that particular project, some of those six have since gone on to continue their work and professional development in the industry.

The community members articulated that First Nations people value flexibility and responsiveness, which leads to First Nations Enterprises having a solid capacity and skill in pivoting or diversifying to create profit.

P03: We've just had to pivot from challenges, learn from mistakes, respond to the opportunities. We've had to reinvent ourselves. We've had to restructure twice. We've had to meet the market, you know, so a lot of the money we get at the moment is... through education and consultancy [not the enterprise core business]. So we've had to shift, but in that time, we built our brand and our reputation.

P05: But I managed to reverse engineer out of it because during that time regionally, regionally-based made a difference. Then Black Lives Matter happened, then female-led became important. Then there was real support of

Indigenous business. So I'm really fortunate that I sort of weathered those storms and I was able to pirouette, but many businesses weren't able to achieve that.

This section of the report and the voice of community members, speaks to the holistic ways of being, doing and knowing for First Nations entrepreneurs; even when we are setting up a First Nations for-profit enterprise, our cultural and relational responsibility guides us and drives the work. Importantly, it is our love for our Community that drives our passion, commitment and tenacity.

While bringing our whole selves to our work is seen and understood by us as a strength, it can also prove difficult to find the balance between our passion for our Communities broadly, and the need to look after ourselves, our enterprise, and our immediate relationships and family.

P04: we've got personal storms, financial you know, family and life, you know get in the way of- not get in the way, but are a part of who we are. So how do we manage? You know, we're trying to run businesses, but then how do we also ensure that we're there for our families, that we're also there for your husbands and your wives or your partners? How do you make sure that you're also, you know, flourishing in your personal life, not just investing everything into your business? Creating [...] your own opportunities with the growth and right time.

This powerful tension sits at the heart of our work and is reflected across the experiences we explore in the following section.

## WHAT MAKES IT DIFFICULT FOR FIRST NATIONS SOCIAL ENTERPRISES

“there's a huge amount of risk and, and then also holding the weight of expectation to be an advocate”

The following section explores the challenges that First Nations Social Enterprises face. First Nations enterprises carry a distinct burden that is rooted in the ongoing impacts of colonisation and systemic racism. Community members were surprised to find that although their "vessel" (industry or product) for creating change differed, and their personal strengths varied, the underlying issues they experienced were strikingly similar. This consistency points not to individual circumstance, but to shared structural conditions that First Nations enterprises must navigate simply to operate, let alone thrive. Two major, interconnected themes emerged from these conversations. The first, **Colonial Load**, captures the ongoing labour (that is practical, emotional, and relational in nature) of operating within systems built on white ways of being, doing, and knowing, and the toll this takes on First Nations enterprises. The second, **Colonisation's Legacy**,

speaks to the more specific and practical barriers this history has created in accessing business knowledge, networks, funding and support. Together, these themes illustrate how operating within a settler-colonial context continues to shape the conditions under which First Nations Social Enterprises must operate.

### **Colonial load: Challenging white systems and thinking**

First Nations ways of being, doing and knowing are not valued in grant applications, by philanthropists, potential partners, or by customers and clients – where funding does recognise First Nations ways of being, doing and knowing, it's often siloed, leaving communities competing for limited resources while mainstream philanthropy, partners, and customers remain largely unchanged. Challenges were identified in the tensions between ways in which First Nations people think of success and impact versus “Western” measures of success. These are linked to the ongoing impacts of living and working within an enduring settler colony. Navigating this takes up significant time, emotional investment and energy. Non-Indigenous Social Enterprises do not need to contend with this same structural exclusion or marginalisation. This leads to extra work for FNSE which can be understood as colonial load. Although this is presented as a standalone theme in this section, please note, evidence of the colonial load and systemic racism are weaved through the entirety of this report. This lack of understanding is encapsulated in the following quote:

P03: They don't have the cultural knowledge or understanding of the value of the work people are doing. So how do they even make those decisions? [...] they don't have any of the cultural frameworks to be able to even read our applications properly in the way that we can. **So who are they giving money to and how are they assessing their value?**

### **Ongoing education about our ways of being, doing and knowing**

A core component of colonial load is the ongoing need to educate clients and funders about our ways of being, doing and knowing. Both clients and funders require clear pathways and structure, reflecting “Western” (output and market driven) notions of accountability. Community-led work, by contract, requires flexibility and responsiveness, following the needs of people and relationships. The below quote explores this:

P03: So we wanted to show a different model way of working that's ethical. And we're sort of seen as a breath of fresh air in a sector that was doing things in a really extractive colonial way... [it is difficult] to hold true to that model and work with clients who are like, “oh, we want this.” And it's like, well, if you're really collaborating or co-creating, you don't know that you want that, you know, like, so having to educate people all the time.

## Negative impact of politics and public discourse

First Nation people are too often used as political footballs and the impact of this, even if movements are well intentioned, is not considered and certainly not managed well. One example highlighting the impact of political discourse on our communities is the 2023 referendum. In the lead up to voting discrimination and racism worsened, and subsequently continued in the wake of the “no” result<sup>11</sup>. Although some funders and clients responded with invigorated support of First Nations Enterprises<sup>12</sup>, community members at the Circle spoke about the fall out of this on relationships with philanthropists.

Journey Map, Group 1: we also talked a lot about the referendum and how much that impacted us. But yeah, like. For [our enterprise] that was actually a [...] huge decline in work and business. And that notion that philanthropists had because they invested so much in the referendum... and then they didn't want to invest in us in the same way because it didn't work.

The failure to be recognised by Australia rippled outward, creating failures of its own, in funding, in partnership, in the willingness of institutions to invest in First Nations-led work. The full extent of that damage has not yet been measured.

## Trust deficit

The issue of trust is echoed in other literature. Evans and Polidano describe how the long shadow of Australia's racist past means that many First Nations Australians are shut out of attaining credentials and are excluded from the benefits of a high-trust economy<sup>6</sup>. Bodle et al. note that a trust deficit can impact First Nations entrepreneurs in many ways, including difficulty in attracting low-cost finance, building a customer base, winning contracts or establishing links with reliable suppliers<sup>4</sup>. A community member reflects this in their own experience.

PO1: there's a lot of financial stress and also challenging stereotypes of ideas of a black brand, you know? So customers were nervous to buy from black brands and it's like actually having to build trust with customers so that they buy the products.

## Bureaucratic burden

The bureaucratic burden is particularly acute, with FNSE navigating complex grant applications and certification processes that don't recognise our unique value propositions.

“we’re doing the low bono pro bono work and all our obligations and responsibilities to community. And then all the labour are fitting into those white systems. And that that burden is huge for us.”

“when we’re trying to go for a grant or we’re trying to access something, we have to fit into a system that’s not ours. And then we’re trying to report back to say, this is actually how I did things which doesn’t fit into their system again. Yeah, yeah. This is why we have to be flexible because with a lot of our projects we’re developing, we don’t know what we’re doing because we’re not meant to, because we’re co-creating...We need to work in our way.”

## Reactive prioritisation

We, as with many First Nations industries in "Australia", are still getting rolled out like fine silverware<sup>13</sup>. It’s only when global events happen that we feel prioritised. When this happens, responses and supports for us are driven reactively rather than through proactive, relationally centred, strategic organisation.

“globally when, when it was asked what do people want to learn about when they come to Australia? Everybody was like, we want to hear from the people of the land. You know, we want to hear about what’s happening in First Nations spaces in Australia. So it was a really high priority. And off the back of that, that committee was like kind of eager beaver to like spin out and create something.”

“what is the reality of the social enterprises [sector] priority on us? I think it should be high given we are First Nations people of this country, but I don’t believe that will necessarily be the case, because there have been things trying to get off the ground for years now”

## Resistance and advocacy

The ongoing colonial load, broader impacts of politics and racism create an environment where First Nations people are required to be staunch advocates for our Community, Country and our enterprises whilst also navigating the ordinary challenges of business. The additional emotional and psychological burden of this can’t be understated.

P01: You know, there's a huge amount of risk and, and then also holding the weight of expectation to be an advocate. So, you know, having to change everything and stand up for everything

P06: Resistance is a constant job, to be empowered to remain true to our ways. And like in everything we do, just make sure we don't lose our identity... But we have a space at [our enterprise] that doesn't necessitate resistance because it's

our sovereign space... the resistance is because of the systemic, systematic oppression that we face.

In addition to the themes present here, it is important to note the reality of how colonisation has impacted the Communities that we serve. We must find ways of working meaningfully with our Communities to create impact whilst holding space gently and thoughtfully.

P03: it [the social enterprise] was actually about working with a pretty fractured community as well and providing a space for people to heal and come together.

P04: there's a lot of people dealing with a lot of trauma.... there's a lot of mental health, but also a lot of that community feel very unheard and unseen. So it's, you know, it's a really complex place to be in. So it's about how do we do it in a way that's protecting us, our business, but also looking after community at the same time?

The challenges described above — navigating systemic undervaluation, a persistent trust deficit, bureaucratic burden, reactive prioritisation, the need for resistance and advocacy, and tensions in how success is measured — all point to the significant, ongoing labour First Nations enterprises carry simply to operate within systems not built for them. This labour does not exist in isolation; it compounds a second, related legacy of colonisation: unequal access to the business knowledge, networks, funding and support that many non-Indigenous enterprises can draw on more freely.


The following section explores this legacy in more detail.

## **Colonisation's legacy: unequal access to business knowledge and networks**

“We don't start from a place of equity, so we have to be given some sort of leverage to start from a place where we can at least compete competitively.”

Throughout our Circle, many weaved stories of navigating significant gaps in business and financial literacy. We recognise that these hurdles are not a reflection of any lack of capability within our people, but are the direct, cumulative result of colonial dispossession and systemic exclusion. For generations, our ancestors were intentionally

locked out of mainstream education, financial institutions, and professional networks, while policies of control actively worked to dismantle the intergenerational wealth and economic knowledge that non-Indigenous people often inherit as a given. This historical legacy means we are frequently forced to navigate critical enterprise milestones without the same access to established mentors or "insider" expertise. Consequently, many of us find ourselves learning through a constant cycle of trial and error, expending immense emotional energy and time to bridge divides created by historical racism, rather than beginning our journeys from an equitable starting point.



P03: It was very hard for us in the early days because we didn't have all the skills that we needed to set up a business. So finding the right people to support us and we didn't always find the right people, you know, so going down these different alleys, you know but learning all the time.

P04: [we don't have] knowledge and skills around building a social enterprise or a or not for profit things like basic tax, financial literacy, all of that stuff, you know, understanding business. I think a lot of us just get into it and we just keep doing it [and] making mistakes, but we never really get an opportunity to sit down and learn and have mentors and be taught properly.

In addition to this, the lack of generational wealth for many First Nations people, due to impacts of colonisation, was raised. This limited access to financial resources like bank overdrafts and credit facilities which, at times, hindered the creativity of community members and their capacity to grow and pivot.

"if you don't have generational wealth, you don't have houses. Those sorts of things, you can't get bank overdrawn or anything like that. There's a lot of we have that problem because we don't have any houses...we couldn't get any other draws or overdrafts at the bank, which you need as well... You need that to access that."

### **Culturally safe support deficit**

It was seen as a challenge but critically important to find accountants, lawyers, and bookkeepers who understand First Nations contexts and can provide innovative, culturally aligned solutions rather than just standard business advice. When these key support people understood our cultural and historical context, doing business felt safer and the enterprises were stronger for it.

One community member shared that they heard of an enterprise where:

"they were able to work innovatively with their accountant and bookkeeper to create something that allowed them to still fulfill [kinship] obligations, but do it in a way that wasn't going to sink their business."

These relationships are pivotal to enterprise success but they can be sites of shame. A professional who understands our context can be transformative, and one who doesn't can set us back significantly.

"every time I have a meeting with my accountant, I'm always like, I'm so nervous. I'm scared you're going to tell me I did something wrong every time.... I think for me, the biggest change was finding the right accountant that could nurture my, you know, my lack of confidence there. I've had an accountant say right in the thick of trying to invest and pivot and, and grow. "Oh, I think you should probably just wind this business down." I was like, I need to find somebody else because if you don't believe in my, my dream and my goal, you're the wrong person to be on my team"

This was a sentiment shared without exception across the circle:

"It's Holistic care isn't it? So [we need the people we work with] to look holistically, not just see you as a spreadsheet."

These quotes speak to the importance of finding the right people to work with who understand our culture and context, understand us as individuals, and support the long term vision of the enterprise.

## Financial risk spectrum

"it was a huge amount of risk financially, like leaving a full time job to set up a business. You know, people not understanding what she's doing, you know, family pressure, like what are you doing? Why are you doing this?"

Financial risk weighed heavily on everyone present. How each person held that risk was deeply personal and formed long before they became enterprise owners.

P05: my parents were so anti-debt, you know, because **that meant you were in trouble**, that, you know, debt wasn't seen in the same way. And so I find it hard to manage my cash flow because I fear letting my balance run too low.

P01: money, at least from my experience, is valued differently [from a First Nations perspective compared to mainstream business expectations]. So it **comes and it goes**... my value on it is probably different.

P02: The biggest challenge [social enterprise] had immediately was [that we were] reliant on funding [and that] became a big problem. But the vision was to be self funding.

The cumulative weight of the themes discussed here clearly demonstrates how the persistent legacy of colonisation dictates the field on which we must operate. When added to the colonial load we carry, these structural hurdles represent the immense and compounding labour required of us simply to exist within this ecosystem. However, our Circle was not defined only by these challenges. With equal heart and clarity, community members turned their focus toward the restorative actions and systemic shifts required to transform these conditions. In the following section, we explore those shared priorities.

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# SHIFTING GROUND

First Nations Social Enterprise Circle - Findings Report



## SECTION 3: WHAT FIRST NATIONS SOCIAL ENTERPRISES NEED

The horizon that all First Nations Social Enterprises are building toward is economic self-determination and self-reliance; to operate on our own terms, outside of colonial structures. Getting there requires significant systemic change, and there is much ground still to cover.

### Storytelling as a strength

We are strong storytellers and being grounded in our Indigeneity positions us well to take others on a journey with us.

P04: being able to tell our story and tell the story of the business and, you know, what is your story? And I think that's really important for all of the work we do is having a really grounded and strong story [...] that really helps to build the business in the development sections.

P01: I think our secret sauce in all of this is [...] we are good at telling stories, but also we do good. Like at the core of whatever it is we're trying to do. And people are inspired and want to jump into that.

Some community members felt more confident to do this than others but it was seen as an essential skill to develop in order to secure funding, find the right professional supports and partnerships, and innovate.

P05: you ought to be admired because you have learned through your business journey and it's probably part of your personality as well, where you are very good at. I feel that you'd be a good networker. You're very good at having the conversations. Those who aren't, it's a skill that you need to have... So how do we learn those parts of being. They're all like cogs in a wheel of success.

Learning **how to harness this innate storytelling strength** was identified as a need.

### Improved access to support

Access to First Nations business support and social enterprise supports was varied and uneven. Some had great experiences, while others struggled getting the support they needed. The level of support from one state to the next varied significantly. Finding the right supports can be time consuming.

P04: they [Northern Territory Indigenous Business Network ] help support you and guide you with your business. So they've partnered with me, and I've got an organisation that's helping me to build my constitution. They're going to help me register the business. I can ask them questions around all of these things. So it's been really great to be able to work with them on the growth of my business.

P05: our peak Aboriginal body business body... their main concern is construction and infrastructure and that doesn't help me at all. So that's why I think we need an organisation that just umbrellas everybody, makes it their business to find out who their members are and what's available.

The issue is not only absence of services but their fragmentation.

"We need them to be talking to each other. I mean, I don't know what else is out there, but [...] there needs to be some communication around [...] the opportunities that are out there because everything kind of operates in silos as well."

Community members identified skill sharing and mentoring as practical pathways to improve this.

"sometimes it's hard to even get the mentors [...] and there's all these people with skills. But imagine if you could get little teams around businesses, you know, for the grant writing for the networks, because all of that stuff's not easy for us to access. Skilled people who can volunteer."

"we need dedicated people who are really skilled and want to give back and who work with us over years and actually support us like advisors. Yeah, I did a program but as soon as it ended, you never saw them again. Like they're all over your social media. And then as soon as it finished, I never heard from them ever again."

"I've been doing so much of that [pro bono or low bono work]. But there's not that reciprocity that's given back... it'd be good to have like a, yeah, like a portal or like access, where you can book in for like coaching or mentorship or like professional advice not at the expense of the business and for it to be like quite timely as well."

One Community member encouraged others to think about leveraging our social capital, which links back to the ability to network and tell your story.

P01: So I think like investing in the social capital and being able to show up where we can physically because I'm like, how hard is it to cold call on an email and try and get an intro? But the minute you can have a real conversation with somebody, they're going to fall in love with what you do because it's incredible.

## **Peer learning and Community connection**

Consistent with the systemic barriers to business knowledge and networks described earlier in the report, community members pointed to peer learning and community gathering as a powerful way of closing these gaps. The potential benefits of such events

were, “power in being able to share”, to learn from one another’s challenges and solutions, and importantly to gain the necessary affirmation that “I’m on the right path” or the awareness that “other people feel like that.” Such events reduce isolation, and provide the community connectedness that sustains us through the work even with the odds stacked against us.

“I think opportunities for us to come together nationally to share like a conference... a gathering... I think it's essential. Because otherwise you just, you end up in a silo because you're so busy doing what you need to get done.”

Peer learning and community gathering is not to replace formal training, but complement it by being a space where knowledge, experience, and solutions could be shared on First Nations enterprises' own terms.

### **Funding systems need reform**

The systems and pathways for accessing funding were seen as a major barrier because “it's still very much white centric and they are paid [to deliver funding] to us. So it's all diluted before it reaches us.” We dreamed of our own entities and community governance systems to hold and assess applications and distribute funds. Models such as First Nations Futures and First Australians Capital, which have built First Nations–governed entities to hold capital and assess funding, offer early, real-world, partial examples of what this looks like in practice.

It is important to note that this conversation was had whilst simultaneously acknowledging that grant reliance is not the goal. In a landscape shaped by colonial dispossession, we must acknowledge that access to funding is one mechanism for beginning to redress what was taken; but funding cycles for all businesses create their own form of dependency, where the life of an enterprise can be tied to – and cut short by – decisions made outside of our control. The aim to be supported to be self-sustainable,

“what we all actually really want is a sustainable business where we thrive. Yeah, we don't want them to hand out.”

### **Self-determination and power redistribution, First Nations leadership is essential**

The need to redistribute how power is held and conceptualised was spoken about across both days, and the need for white systems and organisations to hand back resources was seen as integral. Importantly it was acknowledged that, “the only reason we have to ask for it [resources/funding/support] is because of colonisation and [...] the resources that have been stolen.”

As part of this conversation, we spoke about the importance of white organisations and services needing to understand us, our community and our values by physically being present with us.



“you need to prioritise seeing all of Australia if you're going to advocate for all of Australia. And they don't. So it's like there's one thing for us to all get together. But those structures that are there to support us to create the change also need to do the work too.”

However, this quickly pivoted back to First Nations peoples needing to lead in this space given that the pace of current supports and changes have been slow and eroded trust. There was a clear sense that precious funding and time had been, and could continue to be, lost on educating and bringing others along, when the skills, cultural protocols, and knowledge to lead this work already exist within our communities.

### Unified voice

Aligning with our values of “knowing our place” (as discussed in the value map below), those present at the circle recognised that we were a small cross section of the larger First Nations Enterprise community. As such, the desire to connect with more FNSE, particularly those who were funded under the same grant scheme [the Social Enterprise Development Initiative] to deliver their own Learning Circle. One community member stated, and all agreed, “It would be nice if we were unified even in this [our report and advocacy].”

In closing the two days, we held a key discussion about moving forward. The group expressed a strong desire to continue this work as a collective by sharing our stories with key stakeholders. We do not want our stories to go unnoticed by those in power.

“I think those other bodies that have been set up to help us and we're identifying are failing should hear it because why are we having this need to be trying to look for solutions when they're meant to be there providing them. So they should hopefully have a bit of a moment to think, well, hang on a sec. Like, should we look at ourselves?”

“The other thing I think we could do if we want to is we did a talk as well, like a public talk online, like a forum. Like once we've got the report done, if a few of us wanted to speak and actually then invite all of those people, you know, and philanthropists and you know, all of that and actually speak back to the report”

These insights send a strong message: FNSE are not seeking integration into current frameworks, but claiming the sovereign right and necessary resources to manifest our own. From storytelling to reshaping funding governance, the resolve from Garramilla was firm: true transformation demands a shift in power. We already possess the cultural authority and lived expertise to lead this movement. Ultimately, moving toward economic sovereignty is about more than navigating structural hurdles; it is about ensuring First Nations Social Enterprises are fully trusted to define our own success and curate the sector's future through our own ways of being, doing, and knowing.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE SECTOR

### 1. Deliver a response to the report

Those present at the FNSEC are seeking a response from the sector to this report. As an overconsulted and over-researched group of people, First Nations people have a lack of trust in action and change. A response to the report is a critical step in transparency and demonstrates relational accountability. As one community member stated, and all agreed: *"I think that so often these reports [...] don't even get read. We put our heart and soul and spirit into these and they just sit there."*

### 2. Create regular opportunities for First Nations Social Enterprises to gather

Facilitate opportunities for FNSE to gather for community building. These gatherings are critical for peer support, learning and validation.

### 3. Support First Nations Social Enterprises to advocate for our needs to be met

Facilitate opportunities for FNSEC to share our stories with other stakeholders such as philanthropists, funders, relevant government officials. Not as consultation, but as pathways to funding, procurement and policy change.

### 4. Improve access to information and support for First Nations Social Enterprises

Investigate the most appropriate mechanisms for improving access to capacity building resources, peer learning platforms and a registry of culturally safe industry professionals. Suggestions from the group included a portal, website "clearing house" or newsletter.

### 5. Increase First Nations representation at Social Enterprise Australia and in other social enterprise leadership and policy organisations

Without First Nations voices shaping the sector from within, the decisions that govern it will continue to reflect the worldviews of those who built them, and we will continue to be governed by frameworks that are never designed for us.

### 6. Formalising opportunities for skill and knowledge sharing between business experts and First Nations Social Enterprises

Access to skilled expertise, including but not limited to, financial, legal, media, marketing professionals, was identified as critical. The group pointed to models like [Jawun](#) as worth investigating, asking what it might look like to resource FNSE with this kind of targeted and expert support.

### 7. Further investigation into the development of a National First Nations Enterprise body

A national First Nations Enterprise body would address one of the sector's more structural problems, fragmentation. Providing a structure of our own, built from within our frameworks, would coordinate services, provide a unified voice with funders and government, and shift our work from reactive to strategic.



## BEING HELD IN THIS SPACE

Shared stories of resistance – stories that are always leading back to family, to community and Country

“

Conversations filled with purpose and received with love and mutual understanding

Softened voices, open hearts, slow movements and busy hands

Immersed in creative dreaming, our bodies calmed by grounding presence

This space is calm, filled with the soft hum of synergy

This is generational and holistic work, a sovereign rhythm

Creative writing by Kate Daglas (Gunditjmara)

## SECTION 4: FIRST NATIONS SOCIAL ENTERPRISE VALUES MAP

The Garramilla First Nations Social Enterprise Circle is proud to present our values map. We assert that First Nations ways of being, doing and knowing naturally position our Enterprises as Social Enterprises because we live and breathe our values in everything we do. We present this values map as a contribution to the ongoing work that the Social Enterprises sector is doing, and needs to do, to get in right relationship with First Nations people and knowledges. We recognise that we are 8 social enterprises, and for this map to be nationally representative of First Nations peoples, many more First Nations social enterprises would need to engage in safe, respectful, and robust discussions about what grounds and guides our work. In acknowledging this, we are leading with integrity and demonstrating our collective commitment to the collective wellbeing of the First Nation Social Enterprise sector. We present this with the trust that this expression of our commitment will be honoured by the Social Enterprise Sector.

As with the report themes, you will note some repetition of language in the value map. This is done purposely as each value is interrelated. Our ways of being, doing and knowing do not fit into neat boxes. Rather than rigid lines connecting each one, they float in the ecosystem, crossing over and interacting with one another.





## THE VALUES MAP EXPLAINED

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### CONNECTION: THE COOLAMON

The living web of relationships between people, family, kin, community, Country, ancestors, and spirit that holds everything together and carries it forward. Connection is not one value among many; rather it is the vessel that makes all the other values possible, and the reason we do any of this work at all.

Without connection, there is no knowing your place, because it is our relationships that dictate to us where we stand and who holds us accountable. Without connection, there is no right way – protocol is not a rulebook but a living practice that flows through relationships. Without connection, humility has no anchor, sharing has no direction, and collective good has no heart. Connection is what makes self-determination meaningful because our sovereignty has never been about the individual, it has always been about our people, our Country, and the generations who came before and after us.

Connection is also how we understand wellbeing. It is not enough to tend to the body or the mind in isolation. Wholeness comes from being in right relationship across all seven domains: to land and Country, to family and kinship, to community, to mind and emotions, to ancestors, to spirit and spirituality, and to culture. Colonisation has deliberately sought to sever or weaken our connection to our whole selves and to each other. Connection is not a passive act. Connection is one of the most profound ways we resist, heal, and maintain who we are.

This is why connection sits at the centre of everything. It is the Coolamon itself – the thing that holds, carries, and nurtures all that we value.

The Coolamon artwork used within the Values Map was created by artist Maggie-Jean Douglas (Kabi Kabi, South Sea Islander). We are grateful that Douglas made this artwork available for use on Canva.

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### RESISTANCE: THE SHIELD

Resistance is the active, ongoing commitment to staying true to our identity, values, and ways of being in the face of systems that seek to erode them. It exists because colonisation and its ongoing impacts have continuously sought to strip our people of our rights, our humanity, our land, our culture, and our voice.

Resistance is enacted through Respectful Courage. Respectful courage means speaking up when something is wrong, challenging harmful systems and language, and pushing back with strength while still honouring the dignity of all people involved.

Resistance fights for dignity, the right of our people to be seen, represented, and spoken about as who we truly are, and for the full recognition of our human rights, sovereignty, and self-determination.

Resistance is not confrontation for its own sake. It is the shield that protects everything we carry.

## Respectful Courage — how resistance is enacted

- Speaking up when something is wrong, even when it is uncomfortable
- Challenging harmful systems, structures, and language — in a way that still honours the dignity of all people involved
- Not abandoning your own values just to be accepted
- Staying grounded in identity when operating within Western systems and structures
- Challenging stereotypes and pushing back against every conversation that seeks to diminish our ways



## SELF-DETERMINATION: THE CENTRE

The right of individuals and communities to control our own stories, decisions, and futures. We do this not as individuals alone, but as a collective. Self-determination is not a destination we are moving toward but a living practice we are constantly tending, protecting, and growing. It is the measure against which we test every decision: does this contribute to our people's power, agency, and sovereignty?

First Nations Social Enterprises are themselves an act of self-determination, led by us, for us, and for our communities. FNSE are how we build economic freedom on our own terms, fund community-driven responses to community-identified needs, and reduce our dependence on systems that have historically sought to control us. When we build enterprises rooted in our values, we are practising sovereignty.

## What this looks like in practice

- Asking of every decision: “how does this contribute to self-determination?”
- Ensuring community voices, agency, and sovereignty are at the centre of all work



- Leadership and governance structures that reflect the communities they serve
- Communities owning the data, stories, and knowledge that belong to them
- Moving between communities as a visitor, not as someone with the authority to act on behalf of others
- Building others up to achieve self-determination

## THE CORE VALUES

### The seven values that surround and nurture self-determination

#### I. INTEGRITY

Acting in honest alignment between who we are, what we believe, and what we do, and being transparent when we fall short. It means understanding and acting in accordance with law, holding ourselves accountable to community, and having the courage to name when something is not right.

##### What this looks like in practice



- Being honest and transparent about your story, including the lived and living experience you do and don't have
- Holding yourself accountable and being open to feedback from the community around you
- Understanding and acting in alignment with lore
- Naming when something is wrong, even when it is uncomfortable
- Ensuring your personal values and your organisational values are in alignment and being honest when they are not
- Looking for patterns and threads that exist in relationship to each other, rather than operating in silos

#### 2. COLLECTIVE GOOD

The commitment to working, deciding, and building in ways that serve the present and future community, rather than the individual. It is the practice of community over competition: planting seeds for the next generation, lifting each other up, and recognising that we are all stronger as a unit than alone.


### What this looks like in practice

- Making decisions based on the impact on future generations, not just immediate outcomes
- Embodying “community over competition” by actively building other people and organisations up
- Mentoring and growing the next generation as a standing responsibility
- Measuring success by what the community says, not by what external frameworks or funders define
- Working as a unit by recognising that everybody brings something, and that the collective is stronger than any individual

## 3. CARING

The active commitment holding our relationship to others, including family, community, land, and future generations with love, respect, and attention. This means taking a holistic approach, not just considering our needs as they relate to an outcome or a system. It includes caring for self, because we cannot give to others what we have not first tended to in ourselves.

### What this looks like in practice


- 
- Centring the person and community, not the outcome or the system
  - Using positive, uplifting language and holding people in relationships with love and care
  - Practising self-love and self-care – understanding that caring for yourself is not selfish, nor does it contradict our responsibility to community – is necessary for maintaining the capacity to show up for others
  - Refusing to speak to yourself in ways you would not tolerate from others
  - Never harm Country
  - Always maintain balanced, reciprocal relationships that give and receive
  - Community over competition: building everyone up, not gatekeeping resources or opportunity
  - Understanding that some knowledge cannot be shared and honouring that boundary as an act of care and respect

## 4. RIGHT WAY

Right way means following the right cultural processes or protocols, seeking the right permissions, and being accountable to community and Country rather than to external systems. Right way is not a rulebook; it is a living way of being that guides how we move, act, and relate. It includes knowing your place by understanding where you fit in the broader context of what it means to be First Nations in so-called “Australia,” This

encompasses knowing your place culturally, geographically, professionally, and relationally, and moving with honesty and humility about the authority and experience you do and don't hold.


### What this looks like in practice

- 
- Seeking cultural authority and permission before acting on Country or in community that is not yours
  - Being transparent about the lived and living experience and authority you do and don't hold
  - Respecting leadership structures and knowing your personal and professional limitations
  - Approaching every community and Country as a visitor until you are invited otherwise
  - Understanding and acting in alignment with law
  - Safeguarding Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property
  - Holding yourself accountable to community, not just to external organisations
  - We honour the fact that not all First Nations knowledge, protocol and culture can be, or should be shared

## 5. HUMILITY

Recognising one's place within the larger web of relationships with all living beings, including the land, animals, plants, and ancestors. The understanding that we are always learning, always being taught, and that none of us holds the full picture alone. It means owning our mistakes, knowing our limitations, and remaining open to guidance from Elders, Community, and young people.

### What this looks like in practice

- 
- Accepting that you will be taught, including by those younger than you, and being open to being corrected
  - Owning mistakes honestly and asking for help rather than performing competence
  - Knowing your limitations and naming them
  - Not claiming ownership over knowledge or practices that came to you through lineage
  - Understanding that humility is what makes genuine collaboration possible
  - Showing respect to those who founded and built before you

## 6. DEEP LISTENING

A way of being that requires setting aside personal agenda to truly hear Elders, community, Country, and the whole picture. It means sitting, observing and deep reflection before acting. It means learning through doing and watching rather than simply being told. Deep listening is what makes everything else possible: you cannot know your place, follow the right way, or hold knowledge with humility unless you have first listened deeply enough to understand what is actually being asked of you.

### What this looks like in practice



- Learning through sitting and observing before acting
- Privileging the voices of Elders and to community over institutional structures
- Setting aside personal agenda in a conversation to hear the whole picture
- Understanding that some things will only be shared with you once you have demonstrated you can truly listen
- Recognising that deep listening is less a skill to be learned than a practice to be lived

## 7. SHARING

The responsibility to pass on knowledge, experience, and resources freely – not gatekeeping what has been entrusted to us, but growing the collective through generosity. Sharing is rooted in the understanding that knowledge came through our ancestors before us, and our role is to tend it and pass it forward. It is the practice of community over competition.

### What this looks like in practice



- Sharing knowledge and experience openly rather than holding it as personal property or currency
- Remembering that what you carry came through your Elders and ancestors, it is not yours to gatekeep
- Collaborating rather than competing with other First Nations organisations and enterprises
- Mentoring the next generation and planting seeds for those who come after
- Building a self-sustaining ecosystem of shared knowledge, resources, and opportunity

# SHIFTING GROUND

First Nations Social Enterprise Circle - Findings Report



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The recommendations in this report are a starting point. We ask those with the power – funders, policymakers, and sector partners – to take action. To be part of the growing First Nations Social Enterprise Community or to support this work, contact Shifting Ground at [info@shiftingground.com.au](mailto:info@shiftingground.com.au)

*MARRANGBU*  
*Yaarri Yarraang*  
*SHUKRAN (شكراً)*  
*ευχαριστώ*  
*Grazie*  
*(THANK YOU)*

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