

First Nations VMEL Peer Learning
Community: Knowledge and Practice
Insights for the social enterprise sector

February 2026

Acknowledgement

We honour Elders past and present and acknowledge the many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners who continue to hold Community, Country, knowledge and responsibility in evaluation spaces.

We extend our sincere thanks to the participants of the First Nations UMEL Learning Circles, whose generosity, honesty, and leadership shaped this resource.

Your willingness to share practice wisdom, tensions, and aspirations has made this collective reflection possible.

This resource emerges from the First Nations Peer Learning & Support Community convened by Kowa Collaboration in partnership with Social Enterprise Australia as part of the Australian Government's Social Enterprise Development Initiative (SEDI).

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Background and introduction

This resource emerges from three national online First Nations UMEL Learning Circles convened between September 2025 and February 2026 as part of Social Enterprise Australia's Social Enterprise Development Initiative (SEDI). The Learning Circles were established as a First Nations Peer Learning & Support Community, bringing together Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners working across social enterprise, evaluation, research and Community governance.

The purpose of the Learning Circles was to create space for peer reflection on how Understanding, Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning (UMEL) is being practised in real-world contexts, particularly within First Nations social enterprise settings. Participants shared insights on structural conditions shaping the work, the realities of navigating institutional systems, and the responsibility to strengthen Indigenous-led evaluation practice for current and future generations.

This resource synthesises those reflections. It is intended to be of value to participants and to strengthen capability across the wider social enterprise ecosystem. It functions both as a collective reflection for Gilibanga — Australia's peak First Nations evaluation network — and as an invitation to funders, commissioners and sector leaders to consider how systems can better support Indigenous-led UMEL practice.

The sections that follow provide context for the ecosystem in which this work sits, before outlining the collective insights and their implications.

About First Nations Social Enterprise

First Nations social enterprises operate within responsibilities shaped by Community authority, Cultural governance and connection to Country. While social enterprise is often defined through a combination of social purpose and commercial sustainability, Indigenous social enterprises are distinguished by the central role of Indigenous ownership, control and management in determining how enterprise activity is undertaken.

The literature demonstrates that models with strong Indigenous governance are more likely to strengthen self-determination, reinforce Cultural values and contribute to holistic wellbeing outcomes. Measures of success, therefore, extend beyond financial sustainability or service outputs. They include strengthened Community wellbeing, Cultural continuity, relational accountability and long-term responsibility to place.

Importantly, Indigenous social enterprises often operate as hybrid models, weaving Western business mechanisms with Indigenous governance systems and Cultural values. This hybridity is not incidental; it reflects a deliberate assertion of Indigenous authority within contemporary economic systems.

Understanding these foundations is essential when designing, funding or commissioning an evaluation within the social enterprise sector [\(1\)](#).

About Gilibanga

Gilibanga is Australia's peak Blak evaluators and trusted allies network, established as a self-determining, First Nations-led force within the evaluation sector. The name Gilibanga, meaning "Make/Create Light" in the Darkinyung language, was gifted with permission by the Darkinyung Language Group in 2022, reflecting the Network's purpose to co-create spaces of light within evaluation practice.

Formed in response to long-standing marginalisation of First Nations voices in mainstream evaluation spaces, Gilibanga exists to amplify Blak evaluator leadership, strengthen Culturally grounded practice, and drive systemic reform. As articulated in its 2025 Network Report, Gilibanga positions itself as "a powerful, autonomous, and self-determining force" committed to redefining how impact is understood, measured and valued in Australia.

The Network operates through a network-centred model, supported by a Core Backbone Team, Network Catalysts and an extended membership Community. Its foundational principles — connection, reciprocity, Cultural excellence and integrity, kinship, and justice and equity — guide both internal governance and external sector engagement.

In its first formal year of operations, Gilibanga achieved over 80% membership growth and supported members through specialised training, advocacy, and sector visibility initiatives, positioning itself as a visible and respected authority in Indigenous-led evaluation.

For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander evaluators, particularly those working as sole practitioners or within mainstream institutions, Gilibanga provides critical relational infrastructure: a Culturally grounded space for peer connection, collective reflection, and confidence acceleration.

This resource is offered in recognition of Gilibanga's leadership and as a contribution to its ongoing work in strengthening Indigenous authority within evaluation practice [\(2\)](#).

UMEL in the Social Enterprise Sector

UMEL expands on traditional Monitoring and Evaluation approaches by centring the "U" — Understanding. Understanding prioritises early and meaningful investment in relationships, local context, Community aspirations and governance conversations. Measurement refers to the data points tracked over time. Evaluation involves stepping back to reflect on design, implementation, impact and sustainability. Learning happens continuously, adapting and strengthening practice based on what is discovered.

In First Nations contexts, this approach is inherently relational and Culturally responsive. It values local wisdom, collective sense-making and shared reflection. It recognises that impacts are often seen, heard, felt, and collectively known, not only quantified. It emphasises working with Communities rather than assessing them, and learning over time rather than judging success or failure against fixed metrics.

Within the social enterprise ecosystem, participants reflected that strengthening UMEL requires systems that recognise relational groundwork and Indigenous governance as foundational rather than additional. When commissioning, procurement and reporting structures fail to account for this, quality and integrity are compromised. The insights that follow explore how practitioners are navigating these conditions and where reform is required.

About This Resource

The Learning Circles created a relational space for practitioners to reflect on Community-led evaluation, Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Governance, systems reform, and strengthening pathways for younger Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander evaluators.

Each session was visually captured through digital scribing by Chloe Wegener, whose artwork provides a visual synthesis of the themes and reflections that emerged across the Learning Circles.

This document synthesises those conversations. It is not a prescriptive toolkit or compliance guide. It is a collective signal, articulating what must shift, what must be protected, and where leadership is already present.

Where direct quotes are included, they are presented verbatim. Otherwise, themes have been synthesised to protect integrity and voice.

All Indigenous Data and Cultural knowledge shared remains subject to Indigenous Data Sovereignty and ICIP principles.

How to use this resource

This resource can be engaged with in different ways depending on the reader's role.

For GiliBanga and First Nations practitioners, Part I articulates a Collective Mandate, synthesising shared strengths, tensions and strategic priorities that emerged through the Learning Circles. It offers direction for strengthening Indigenous-led UMEL practice, leadership and ecosystem resilience.

For funders, commissioners, policymakers and sector leaders, Part II sets out Structural Accountability for the social enterprise sector, translating these insights into clear reform imperatives for commissioning, procurement, governance and data systems.

Readers are encouraged to consider how the insights and mandates articulated in this document apply within their own organisations, decision-making structures and spheres of influence.

As this resource is shared across the broader social enterprise sector, the wisdom and knowledge of First Nations practitioners should be recognised and appropriately cited when embedding these learnings into policy, practice, and commissioning frameworks.

Suggested citation:

Trudgett, S. (Kowa Collaboration); McKenzie, M. (University of Newcastle); James, J. (Community First Development); Sharpe, P. (EMU Consultancy); Wagner, J.-L. (GiliBanga); Tujagues, N. (The Seedling Group); Radcliffe, D. (Independent First Nations Practitioner) (2026). First Nations UMEL Learning Circles: A Knowledge and Practice Resource for the Social Enterprise Sector.

First Nations Social Enterprises Learning Circle 1

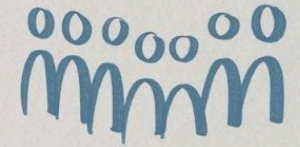
here because of our ANCESTORS

not about MONEY

build role around STRENGTHS

nourish RELATIONSHIPS

collective QUALITY control



Collective OWNERSHIP

shared vision

sharing SIDWAYS

opportunity to say NO

only play with the WILLING

trauma-informed

a GIFT to Gilibanga

how we work

LIFTING each other UP

there isn't such a thing as NEPOTISM

listening to COUNTRY & COMMUNITY

stay to true north

social enterprise limited by Shares

decolonising FRAMEWORKS LANGUAGE

competing with colleagues for TENDERS

working with FAMILY

bringing them on the JOURNEY

BALANCE is key

feel at PEACE with yourself



Part 1: The Collective Mandate



This section constitutes a synthesis of the insights, testimonies, and strategic priorities articulated by the First Nations evaluation Community during the Learning Circles. This section functions as a record of collective wisdom and a foundational gift to Gilibanga, offering a clear mandate for its future role as a stabilising and advocacy-driven entity within the evaluation system.

The discourse addresses the lived reality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander evaluators. It recognises that practitioners do not operate in a vacuum; we function within a complex middle space where the imperatives of Cultural obligation often collide with the rigid structures of Western bureaucracy.

This section explores the following four critical thematic areas:

- **Structural Reformation:** A critique of current procurement systems that mandate competition and a call for "ecosystem thinking" that prioritises collaborative contracting and collective strength.
- **Dual Accountability:** An exploration of the "Two-Worlds" practice, highlighting the emotional and professional labour required to maintain Cultural integrity while navigating institutional frameworks.
- **Succession and Identity:** A broadening of the definition of "evaluator" to include place-based and relational practices, ensuring younger Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners see their existing expertise reflected and protected.
- **Material Decolonisation:** A shift from symbolic inclusion toward the practical transformation of the tangible instruments of the field—contracts, reporting templates, and data governance.

Ultimately, this introduction serves as a formal invitation to Gilibanga. It posits that for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander evaluation to truly thrive, the sector must transition from a model of individual scarcity to one of communal abundance, anchored by a shared commitment to Indigenous Data Sovereignty and relational accountability.

Structural Reform: Addressing the Systems that Force Competition Instead of Collaboration



Across the Learning Circles, a tension kept resurfacing, sometimes quietly, sometimes directly. It was the tension between collaboration and competition.

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander evaluation businesses operate from a place of responsibility first and commerce second. Their work is not simply a service offering. It is grounded in Cultural obligation, relational accountability, and Community trust. For some, family and kinship structures are embedded directly into how the business functions.

For others, decision-making is shaped by Elders, Community expectations, or a deep sense of accountability to place.

Yet the systems within which this work must operate are often structured around competition. Procurement processes require practitioners to compete against one another for limited contracts. Pricing pressures encourage undercutting. Reporting templates assume Western methodologies.

Timeframes are tight. Relationship-building is rarely funded. Collaboration can feel risky when scarcity is structurally embedded.

Over time, this produces lateral strain in a space that depends on lateral love.

Participants spoke about the exhaustion of navigating this tension, wanting to see Mob win contracts and thrive, while knowing the structure of procurement often positions one Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander business against another. What could be a collective strength becomes a fragmented effort.

The question that emerged repeatedly was not simply about fairness, but about design:

How do we build structures that allow Mob to network, support and strengthen each other, rather than compete?

Gilibanga was named as a potential stabilising force in this space. There was strong support for it to:

- Spotlight sole traders and smaller Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses, who often carry deep expertise but limited visibility
- Create collaborative contracting models that allow joint bids rather than forced competition
- Provide forms of relational “insurance” so sole traders are not isolated or exposed on large projects
- Build collective capability and shared reputation rather than individual scarcity

The call was not for protectionism. It was for ecosystem thinking.

If Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander evaluation is to thrive, the ecosystem must support collaboration as a strength, not treat it as a risk.

Dual Accountability: The Middle Space



If competition was one structural tension, the “middle space” was the relational and emotional one.

Participants described the middle space as the hardest part of the work. It is the space between Community and systems. Between Cultural accountability and contractual obligation. Between lived knowledge and institutional frameworks.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander evaluators often hold dual accountabilities simultaneously. They are responsible to Community, to Elders, to relational integrity and to Cultural protocols. At the same time, they are accountable to funders, departments, academic institutions, and Western evidence frameworks.

The weight of holding both is rarely acknowledged.

Sitting in this space requires more than technical skill. It requires Cultural grounding, self-awareness, discipline, clear boundaries, and the courage to push back when expectations do not align with values.

Participants reflected that systems are not abstract entities. They are enacted by individuals. This means systems reform cannot only be external. It also requires internal commitment from

those working within those systems, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners navigating them.

A subtle but important risk was named.

As opportunities for Indigenous-led evaluation increase, there is also an increased pull to conform to Western system expectations, particularly when financial survival is involved. Practitioners may find themselves adjusting language, tightening methodology, or shaping findings to fit what funders expect.

The risk is not always obvious at first. It can feel strategic. Necessary. Practical.

But over time, drift can occur.

Gilibanga was identified as a critical anchor in this context. A space where practitioners can:

- Check their practice
- Reflect collectively
- Name tensions honestly
- Guard against slow conformity
- Strengthen each other to hold Cultural position

The middle space will not disappear. But it can be held more safely when it is shared.

Succession and Identity: Supporting Younger Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Evaluators



The final Learning Circle centred on a guiding question:

How do we create spaces that support younger Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander evaluators to move confidently between worlds — Community and academic/service systems — so they can step into this work safely, strongly, and without losing themselves?

This question shifted the focus from structures to people.

Participants spoke about younger Mob entering evaluation through different pathways, universities, Community organisations, government departments, and feeling disconnected within institutional environments. Some described isolation in academic settings. Others reflected on the pressure to assimilate into professional norms that feel Culturally misaligned.

There was acknowledgement of the emotional labour involved in navigating identity and authority in these spaces. Being Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander in evaluation can mean constantly explaining, translating, justifying, or defending ways of knowing.

The term “evaluator” itself was interrogated.

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners are already doing evaluative work - designing feedback loops, reflecting on program effectiveness, Analysing data, and Holding Community accountability - yet they may carry titles such as Community Data Officer, Project Manager, Research Assistant, Educator, or Cultural Advisor. Because the Western framing of “Evaluator” carries connotations of technical authority or institutional power, some do not identify with the label at all.

This narrow definition creates unnecessary barriers.

There was strong agreement that the field must broaden its understanding of who counts as an evaluator. It must recognise place-based, relational, and lived evaluative practice. It must acknowledge that evaluation has always existed within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance systems, long before Western frameworks formalised it.

Supporting younger evaluators, therefore, is not only about skills. It is about identity, belonging, and visibility.

Gilibanga was positioned as a key vehicle for:

- Making implicit practice explicit
- Naming strengths already present
- Holding safe spaces for reflection
- Providing mentoring and sponsorship
- Accelerating confidence rather than focusing on deficit-based “capacity building”

To younger Mob stepping into this work: you are not entering an empty field. You are stepping into a strong lineage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander evaluation practice. The tension you feel in the middle space is not failure; it is evidence of responsibility. You do not have to navigate it alone.

Material Decolonisation: Decolonising Structures, Not Just Language



Across all three Learning Circles, decolonisation was not treated as a slogan. It was treated as a practical question.

What would it mean to decolonise structures, not just language?

Participants reflected that decolonisation must influence:

- How contracts are structured
- How reporting templates are designed
- How funding is distributed
- How data is governed
- Who defines what counts as valid evidence

It must also influence how shared decision-making frameworks are developed and who is included in shaping them.

There was frustration expressed about influential frameworks being designed without meaningful involvement from Black evaluators, even when those frameworks claim to centre Community. Symbolic inclusion is no longer enough.

Structural inclusion requires that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners are not only consulted, but also involved in designing the systems that shape their work.

This includes influencing funders, departments, and national bodies to recognise that evaluation in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contexts cannot simply be a modified Western approach. It must be grounded in Indigenous governance, relational accountability, and Indigenous Data Sovereignty.

The work of decolonisation is slow. But it is practical. It happens in contracts, in templates, in procurement guidelines, and in everyday decisions.

Invitation to Gilibanga

This resource invites Gilibanga to continue leading in ways that are already emerging:

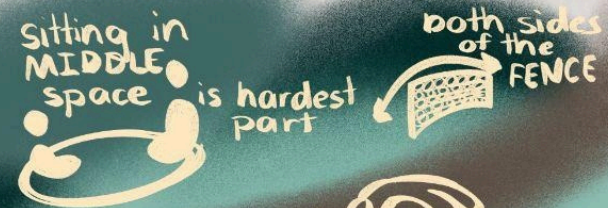
- Broadening the definition of evaluator across sectors and job titles
- Exploring collaborative contracting and ecosystem-strengthening models
- Strengthening mentoring pathways for younger Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander evaluators
- Advocating for structural, not symbolic, reform in funding and reporting systems

The gift is not instruction — it is affirmation and direction.



First Nations Social Enterprises Learning Circle 2

sitting in MIDDLE space is hardest part



both sides of the FENCE

how do we create space to see & feel what it can be?


FLEXIBILITY



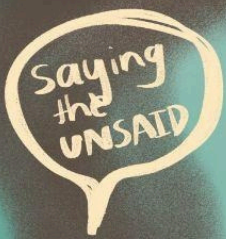
LONG TERM

no TIMEFRAME

just because you're mob, doesn't mean it's community lead



Saying the UNSAID




help see each others PERSPECTIVES



can't evaluate that in a BOARDROOM



EVERYTHING changes when we turn up FULLY



take it back


check alignment with community VALUES



lived manifestation of UMEL principles

quality of the ENVIRONMENT

understanding the →



constantly EDUCATING

translating concepts & meanings

shifting NARRATIVE



↳ understanding & commitment
↳ ACCOUNTABILITY

making a level playing field



LAYERS of community

intricacies of working with community



relationship FIRST

WITH my mob, not ON my mob



Part 2 – Structural Accountability for the Social Enterprise Sector



While **Part 1** articulates the internal needs and aspirations of the First Nations evaluation Community, **Part 2** translates these insights into a specific roadmap for the broader social enterprise ecosystem.

Where Part 1 names the mandate, Part 2 identifies the structural conditions required to uphold it.

These findings are directed toward the architects of the field: the funders, commissioners, policymakers, and institutional leaders whose decisions shape the environment in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners must operate.

If the social enterprise sector is to move beyond the rhetoric of "Indigenous-led" and into the reality of "Indigenous-governed," a fundamental shift in institutional design is required. The current landscape often imposes Western bureaucratic norms that inadvertently stifle the very impact they seek to measure. Genuine support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander evaluation necessitates more than a change in language; it requires a radical realignment of procurement, funding, and data governance.

These reforms are not peripheral to UMEL practice — they are the conditions that determine whether Indigenous-led UMEL can be enacted with integrity.

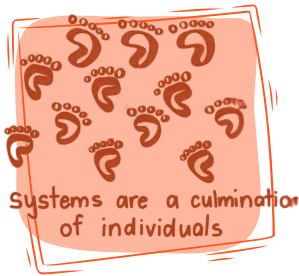
This section outlines five critical imperatives for systemic reform:

- Designing for Collective Strength: Abandoning competitive procurement models in favour of collaborative structures that fortify the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander business ecosystem.
- Investing in Holistic Sustainability: Recognising that the "inner work" of Cultural grounding and relational accountability is a professional necessity that requires institutional investment.
- Expanding Professional Definitions: Validating place-based and lived evaluative practices that exist outside traditional academic or technical titles.
- Operationalising Data Sovereignty: Moving Indigenous Data Sovereignty from a procedural checklist to a fundamental pillar of governance and relational integrity.
- Creating Welcoming Environments: Building institutional pathways that actively sustain the next generation of practitioners rather than exhausting them through isolation and assimilation.

The following recommendations serve as a call to action for the sector to transition from symbolic inclusion to structural transformation.

Current System Feature (Status Quo)	Proposed Reform (Systemic Shift)	Impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Practitioners
Competitive Procurement: Forced undercutting and individual bids for limited contracts. Output-Only Funding: Payment strictly for	Collaborative Ecosystems: Joint bids, consortia, and relational groundwork as funded activities. Holistic Investment: Funding for "inner work," Cultural	Moves from Scarcity to Collective Strength.
Output-Only Funding: Payment strictly for "deliverables" (reports, data points).	Holistic Investment: Funding for "inner work," Cultural grounding, and well-being infrastructure.	Moves from Exhaustion to Sustainability.
Narrow Professionalism: Recognition limited to Western titles and academic credentials.	Broadened Definitions: Validation of place-based, lived, and relational evaluative expertise.	Moves from Exclusion to Visibility.
Assimilationist Environments: Systems that require practitioners to conform to Western norms.	Welcoming Environments: Mentorship-heavy pathways that respect Cultural identity.	Moves from Isolation to Belonging.
Procedural Data Consent: Data treated as a static asset to be managed by the funder.	Active Data Sovereignty: Ongoing accountability and collective rights over how data moves.	Moves from Extraction to Governance.

1. Stop designing systems that force Mob to compete



If collaboration is valued in principle, it must be valued in design.

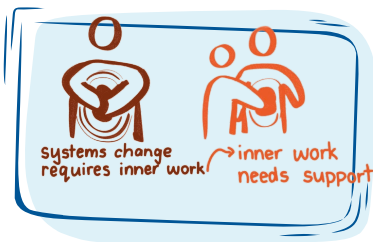
Procurement and contracting processes should:

- Enable joint bids and collaborative consortia
- Avoid scarcity-based funding structures
- Ensure timely payment to prevent financial strain
- Recognise relational groundwork as legitimate work

Competition-driven systems may appear neutral, but in practice, they weaken Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander business ecosystems.

Designing for collaboration strengthens the whole sector.

2. Fund Inner Work, Not Just Outputs

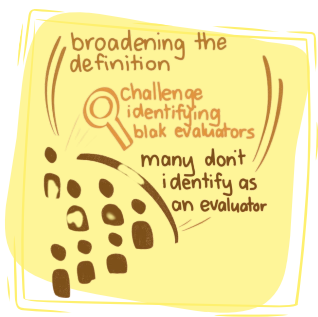


Systems reform is often framed as structural change. But participants consistently emphasised the importance of inner work, reflection, Cultural grounding, and relational accountability.

Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander evaluators frequently operate without institutional supports such as employee assistance programs or wellbeing services. Yet they carry complex relational and emotional labour in their work.

If systems want sustainable Indigenous-led evaluation, they must invest in wellbeing infrastructure and mentoring structures, not just deliverables.

3. Broaden the Definition of “Evaluator”



Evaluation is already embedded in Community life.

It is present in education, health, land management, governance, and Cultural programs. It is practised through storytelling, accountability conversations, collective reflection, and decision-making processes.

The sector must recognise:

- Lived, relational, and place-based evaluative practice
- Titles beyond “Evaluator”
- Diverse pathways into the field

Broadening the definition does not dilute quality. It strengthens relevance.

4. Uphold Indigenous Data Sovereignty in Practice



Indigenous Data Sovereignty is not a procedural step. It is an ongoing responsibility.

It requires:

- Transparent agreements about use and storage
- Recognition of collective rights
- Accountability beyond project completion
- Respect for how data moves across system

Data generated in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contexts carries Cultural, relational, and political significance. Governance must reflect that.

5. Build Systems That Welcome, Not Wear Down



The most consistent question emerging from the Learning Circles was simple:

Do our systems welcome young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander evaluators?

Or do they exhaust and isolate them?

Welcoming systems require:

- Visible Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership
- Collective spaces like Gilibanga
- Clear pathways for younger Mob
- Mentorship and sponsorship
- Contracts and reporting aligned with Cultural practice

If the sector wants Indigenous-led evaluation to thrive, it must design environments where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners can stand strong, not constantly defend their legitimacy.

First Nations Social Enterprises Learning Circle 3



Systems are a culmination of individuals



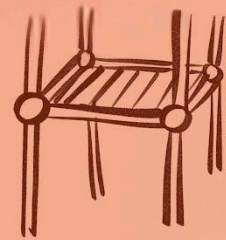
celebrate & amplify each other



spotlight practitioners



Blak evaluators hold space for others



Blak evaluators should be involved in frameworks



funding challenges when not aligned



check we're not conforming to Western systems



lateral love



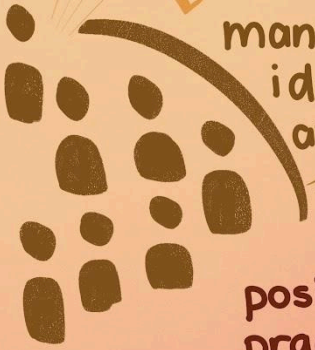
wellbeing support missing

broadening the definition



challenge identifying blak evaluators

many don't identify as an evaluator



progressive, trust-based conversations



humanness back into the work



systems change requires inner work



inner work needs support



change narrative from grassroots up



support navigating Western structures

positive practices often not explicit



Closing Reflection

The Learning Circles affirmed something powerful.

Aboriginal-led evaluation is not emerging. It is already strong, sophisticated, and grounded in deep governance traditions.

What is required now is not “capacity building” in the deficit sense. It is structural alignment. It is relational integrity. It is collective backing. It is the courage to reshape systems, so they reflect — rather than resist — Indigenous authority.

This resource is offered as a gift to Gilibanga and to the wider social enterprise sector, with the hope that systems begin to reflect the strength, depth, and Cultural authority that already exists within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander evaluation practice.

About this resource

This resource reflects collective insights from participants in the First Nations UMEL Learning Circles. It does not represent the formal position of any individual organisation unless explicitly stated.

Commissioning Statement

Commissioned by Social Enterprise Australia as part of the Australian Government's Social Enterprise Development Initiative (SEDI).

Contact Details

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I'm a proud Garrwa woman living on Wadawurrung Country in Ocean Grove, Victoria. As a First Nations, autistic artist, my work sits at the intersection of art, culture, and social change, where visual storytelling becomes a tool for building more just and inclusive communities.

My journey combines lived experience with my background in community engagement and systems change. Whether I'm creating real-time visual records of community consultations or developing commissioned artworks for organisations, my work aims to make space for voices that have been marginalised and conversations that can create meaningful change.

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