



Purpose, Community and Enterprise

Exploring Social Enterprise Through a First Nations Lens

Developed by BlackCard in partnership with the First Nations Steering Committee, supported through Social Enterprise Australia's Social Enterprise Development Initiative (SEDI) and available through Understorey.

About this Resource

Many First Nations organisations and enterprises are already creating social, cultural environmental and economic impact through the work they do every day.

This resource has been developed to help explore the connections between First Nations enterprise and the social enterprise sector, providing practical information, reflections and pathways for those interested in learning more.

Whether you are just starting out, growing an existing enterprise, supporting community-led initiatives, or exploring new opportunities, this resource is designed to help you understand where you fit and how you may choose to engage.

First Nations people have long practised forms of enterprise grounded in reciprocity, collective responsibility, care for Country, cultural knowledge, trade and community benefit. While the term 'social enterprise' may be contemporary, many of its principles are deeply familiar within First Nations ways of working.

What will you find?

- Practical Information
- Reflection Tools
- Examples and Insights
- Pathways for Engagement

Who is this for?

- First Nations entrepreneurs
- Businesses and social enterprises
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations
- Community-led initiatives

What is the goal?

- Build understanding
- Explore opportunities
- Strengthen connections
- Support self-determined futures

Many First Nations organisations are already creating positive impact through business, community development and cultural practice. This resource is an invitation to explore where that work connects with the social enterprise sector.

You May Already Be Part of the Story

Many First Nations organisations and enterprises are already creating positive social, cultural, environmental and economic outcomes through the work they do every day.

For many, purpose sits alongside income generation. Success is often measured not only by financial outcomes, but by the benefits created for Community, Culture, Country and future generations.

While not every First Nations organisation or enterprise will identify as a social enterprise, many share values and practices that align closely with the social enterprise sector.

The purpose is not to re-label First Nations enterprise as social enterprise, but to support organisations to decide whether social enterprise language, networks or opportunities are useful to their own goals.



This resource is an invitation to explore where your work connects with the social enterprise sector. It is about exploring where our ways of doing business, community development and impact creation intersect with the sector.

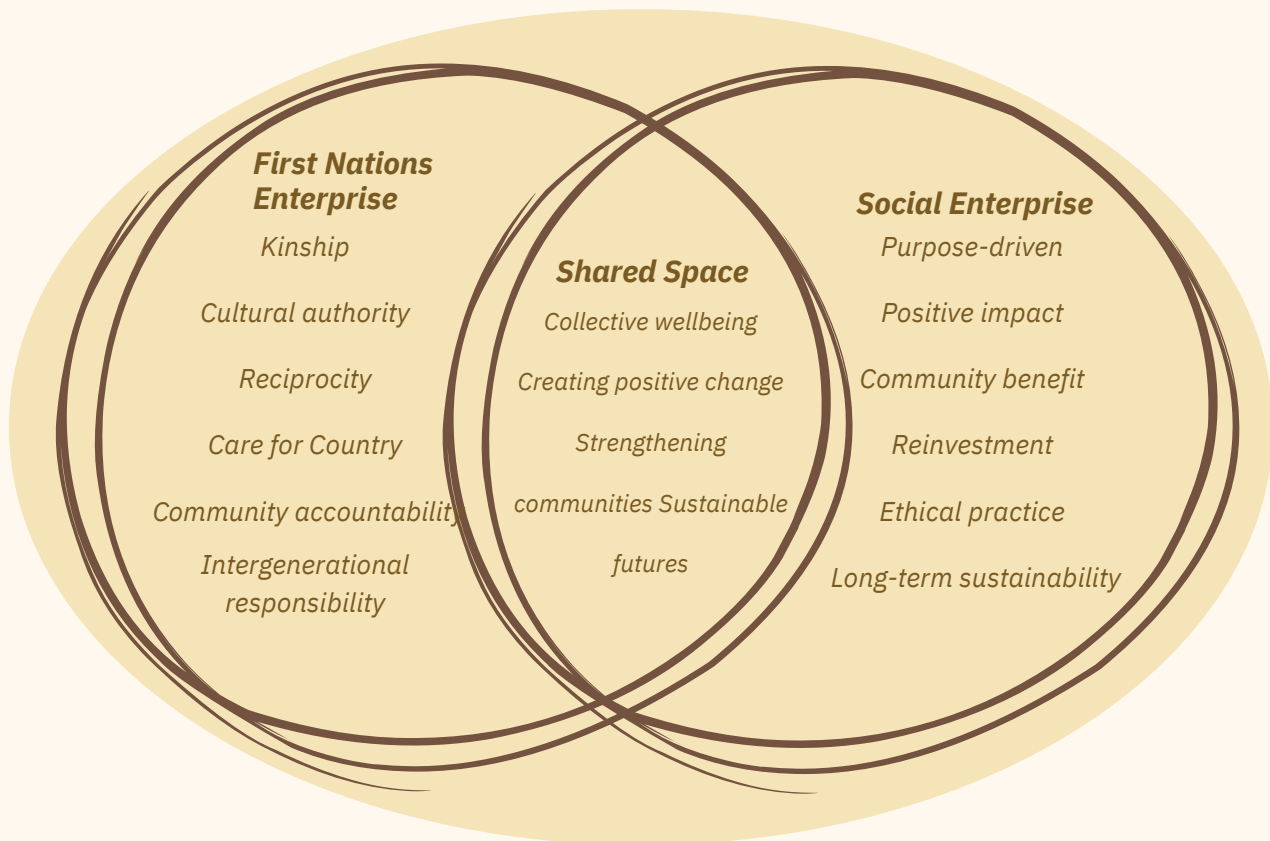
At the heart of both First Nations enterprise and social enterprise is a commitment to creating positive impact for people, community and future generations.

Understanding Where You Fit

There is no single way to be a social enterprise, and there is no single definition that fully reflects First Nations ways of doing business.

Many First Nations organisations and enterprises already share values and practices that align with the social enterprise sector.

Rather than asking whether you fit within a social enterprise definition, it can be helpful to explore where the values and practices overlap.

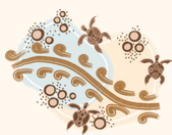


A social enterprise is generally understood as an organisation or business that trades to create social, cultural, environmental or community benefit, and reinvests resources back into its purpose.

For First Nations organisations, this definition should also be understood alongside cultural authority, community accountability, obligations to Country and self-determination.



Strengthening culture



Connection to Country



Community wellbeing



Opportunities for future generations



Kinship and caring responsibilities



Knowledge sharing

For many First Nations organisations and enterprises, impact includes cultural, social, environmental and community outcomes.

Different Ways of Doing Business

There is no single structure that defines a First Nations organisation or enterprise.

Some focus primarily on commercial outcomes. Some exist to create social, cultural or environmental impact. Many operate somewhere in between.

Exploring different models can help you identify where your organisation currently sits.

Hybrid Model

Primary focus

Combining trading activities with community, cultural or charitable objectives.

May include

- Multiple income streams (trading + grants)
- Enterprise & community program activities
- Community & cultural impact
- Mixed governance/ownership structures

Social Enterprise

Primary focus

Creating positive impact through trading activities.

May include

- Trading revenue, reinvested as profit
- Community benefit
- Employment pathways
- Community & cultural outcomes
- Mission-locked governance structure

Charity / Not-for-Profit

Primary focus

Delivering mission-driven programs and services.

May include

- Grant & donor funding
- Service delivery
- Community support & advocacy
- Not-for-profit governance structure

Commercial Business

Primary focus

Economic opportunity and business growth.

May include

- Revenue from trading
- Business growth & employment creation
- Community & economic contribution
- Wealth generation
- Private/commercial ownership structure

Reflect

Which model best describes where your organisation is today? Where would you like to be in the future?

Does this model support our cultural responsibilities, governance, community expectations and long-term sustainability?

There is no right or wrong model. The best structure is the one that supports your purpose, community aspirations and long-term sustainability.

Exploring Opportunities in the Social Enterprise Sector

Engaging with the social enterprise sector can create opportunities to learn, connect, collaborate and grow. For some organisations, participation may involve joining networks or attending events. For others, it may lead to partnerships, capability building, funding opportunities or increased visibility.

How you choose to engage should align with your purpose, priorities and community aspirations.



Before You Engage Ask yourself:

- Does this opportunity align with our values?
- Does it strengthen our purpose and impact?
- Does it respect culture, community and Country?
- Is it sustainable for our organisation and people?
- Who benefits from this opportunity?
- Who holds decision-making power?
- Is cultural knowledge being recognised and protected?
- Is there fair payment for time, expertise and cultural labour?
- Does this align with our community priorities?
- What risks does this create for our people, staff or organisation?
- Can we say no or negotiate the terms?

Strong relationships are often the starting point for new opportunities, partnerships and collective impact.

Staying Grounded

Participation in the social enterprise sector should strengthen, not compromise, your purpose, values and community aspirations.

Taking time to reflect can help ensure decisions, partnerships and opportunities align with what matters most to your organisation and community.

Engagement with the social enterprise sector should not require organisations to disclose, translate or commercialise cultural knowledge in ways that compromise cultural authority, community protocols or obligations to Country.



Self-determination means being able to choose what aligns, what doesn't, and when to say no.

Opportunities and Things to Consider

OPPORTUNITIES

- ✓ Networks and relationships
- ✓ Learning and capability building
- ✓ Funding opportunities
- ✓ Increased visibility
- ✓ Partnerships and collaboration
- ✓ Access to new markets

THINGS TO CONSIDER

- ⚠ Cultural Safety is it understood & demonstrated?
- ⚠ Tokenism - is input sought or just presence?
- ⚠ Certification - does it recognise our governance?
- ⚠ Western measures of success - whose definition of impact counts?
- ⚠ Power imbalances - who holds decision-making power?
- ⚠ Time & capacity - Is our cultural labour recognised?
- ⚠ Certification can create visibility and access to opportunities, but organisations should consider whether the process recognises First Nations governance, cultural authority, community benefit and cultural measures of impact.

RED FLAGS

- First Nations voices are absent from decision-making.
- Cultural knowledge is sought without recognition or benefit.
- Community outcomes are secondary to organisational goals.
- Expectations feel extractive or one-sided
- Cultural safety is not understood or demonstrated.
- First Nations knowledge is treated as free advice.
- Cultural input is requested after decisions have already been made.
- The organisation is asked to represent all First Nations peoples.
- The opportunity creates unpaid cultural load.
- Funding or partnership expectations do not match the time and capacity required.
- Community benefit is unclear or not resourced.
- Cultural authority is bypassed.

We know the strongest opportunities are those built on trust, reciprocity, shared benefit and respect.

What This Can Look Like

There are many ways to create impact through enterprise. Across Australia, First Nations organisations and enterprises are creating positive social, cultural, environmental and economic outcomes in different ways.

The examples below highlight how purpose and enterprise can work together to create impact for community.

Impact may look different across different communities, places and enterprise models. For First Nations organisations, impact may include cultural continuity, connection to Country, language, kinship, confidence, community trust, employment, economic participation and intergenerational outcomes.



Chocolate on Purpose

A 100% Aboriginal-owned certified social enterprise founded by Wiradjuri woman Fiona Harrison Chocolate On Purpose combines native botanicals, culture and enterprise to support Indigenous growers and create opportunities for economic self-determination.

Impact - Cultural knowledge sharing, Indigenous supply chains, Economic self-determination

Indigenous Futures Foundation

A First Nations-led organisation using food, training and enterprise to strengthen community wellbeing and food sovereignty. Indigenous Futures Foundation combines community-led programs and enterprise activities to support stronger local economies and self-determined futures.

Impact - Food sovereignty, Employment and training, Community wellbeing

Yarn'n

An Aboriginal-owned business turning an everyday product into positive social impact. Yarn'n produces Australian-made recycled toilet paper and directs 50% of profits to First Nations education through the Yalari Foundation.

Impact - First Nations education, Sustainability Community investment

There is no single model for success. Every enterprise has its own journey.

Your Next Steps

Whether you're just starting out or already creating impact in your community, there are many ways to explore and engage with the social enterprise sector.

Learn More

Just starting out?

- ✓ Clarify your purpose
- ✓ Identify who your work benefits
- ✓ Map your community, cultural and enterprise goals.

Explore Opportunities

Considering certification, funding or partnerships?

- ✓ Check whether the requirements align with your values.
- ✓ Understand the time, reporting and governance requirements.
- ✓ Seek advice before committing.

Connect

Already trading?

- ✓ Review your business model.
- ✓ Consider your impact story.
- ✓ Explore networks, procurement and partnership opportunities

Strengthen Your Foundations

Looking for Support?

Understorey is a platform that connects social enterprises, support organisations, capability builders and opportunities across Australia. First Nations organisations may use it to explore resources, networks and opportunities, while deciding what level of engagement is right for them.

What's one action you can take in the next month to strengthen your impact, connections or enterprise journey?

Acknowledgements

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Developed By



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