Background

This research update presents findings from the PhD thesis ‘Sustainability of Remote Aboriginal Art Centres in Australian Desert Communities’, which examined the critical factors contributing towards the sustainability of remote Aboriginal art centres. Despite over four decades of policy and program initiatives by Australian governments, Aboriginal people remain the most disadvantaged Australians. This issue affects the sustainability of remote communities and local enterprises such as art centres.

Liddy Walker painting at Warlukurlangu Artists Aboriginal Corporation Yuendumu (Photograph Kim Petersen)

This summary contains images and names of deceased people. Please use caution before sharing this work in Aboriginal Communities as it may cause sadness and distress for family members.
Industry context

Remote Aboriginal art centres are community-centred cooperatives. Many of them focus attention on social programs and welfare services and have art production and marketing as an ancillary activity. They are the primary means for Aboriginal artists to engage with audiences and mainstream markets.

The sustainability of Aboriginal art centres is of critical importance to remote communities as they contribute to economic, social and cultural capital and provide artists and their families with benefits of enhanced economic security and access to training and employment.

Research and research framework

Fieldwork for this research was undertaken during two fieldwork trips in May 2014 and June and July 2014. Three Aboriginal art centres formally took part in the case study research: Ikuntji Artists Aboriginal Corporation at Haasts Bluff in the Northern Territory, Warmun Art Aboriginal Corporation based in Turkey Creek in Western Australia and Warlukurlangu Artists Aboriginal Corporation based at Yuendumu in the Northern Territory. Case study methodology was utilised at the three art centres, and structured and semi-structured interviews were undertaken. Interviews were conducted with art centre managers, staff, artists, art workers, chairpersons, volunteers and external community staff. Additionally, a range of art centre documents were utilised, including financial records, historical information, digital texts and including electronic databases.

This research developed a Combined Research Framework that can be used as a research tool to investigate and analyse the functions and business practices that underpin the performance of remote desert Aboriginal art centre cooperatives to identify opportunities for increased sustainability.

The Combined Framework for Research into the sustainability of remote art centres
Remote art centre sustainability

Sustainability can be seen as economic, social, cultural and environmental, and art centre cooperatives need to integrate these four pillars into their general business practice:

- economic activities that focus on viability, income generation, business efficiency, business models, productivity and profit
- social activities that focus on maintaining and developing trust and mutually beneficial relationships with artists, the Board of Directors, the community, employees, service providers and customers
- cultural activities that focus on the ability to retain cultural identity, intergenerational equity, keeping culture strong and intergenerational learning
- environmental activities that focus on the impact of resource usage (e.g. power, water and natural products used in art production) and the natural environment.

Research learnings

Aboriginal art centres play a significant role in generating social capital. They link individuals to a broader economic market and by investing in the development of human capital, training, employment and infrastructure.

Remote desert Aboriginal art centre cooperatives need to develop a more comprehensive view of business management and measure the costs and benefits from existing and prospective influences on their business. While sales of Aboriginal art have fallen since 2007 – due to a range of issues, particularly, the global financial crisis and changes to Australian Government policy – art centre cooperatives can benefit from a range of management and business practices to enable ongoing sustainability.

Seven factors can help art centre cooperatives achieve long sustainability:

- establishing competent business management (including financial and human resources)
- adequate resourcing
- good corporate governance
- a continued emphasis on cultural policies
- marketing expertise
- the development of trust
- entrepreneurial and innovation strategies (including developing new economic opportunities).
Further reading


Contact

Feedback and questions are very welcome.

Contact Kim Petersen at kim.liz@bigpond.com.

Sara Diane (Studio Manager) discussing colour with Liddy Walker and Kim Petersen, May 2014 (Photograph Kim Petersen).