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## **Support and Indigenous employment in the forestry industry**

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### **Introduction**

This paper reports the findings of research carried out for an honours thesis on the employment of Indigenous people in the forestry industry. The study examined how employment benefited employees, their family and community, and the challenges that limited these benefits. A case study was used, focussing on the work of Indigenous forestry workers from two community groups in Operation Farm Clear, a government funded relief strategy following Cyclone Larry in northern Queensland. A variety of benefits and challenges were identified which are often interconnected. A key role was held by support staff working with the community groups whose work minimised the challenges, and in doing so, allowed the maximisation of benefits from employment. The findings suggest that the involvement of community-based support organisations is a practical way to encourage Indigenous people to take up employment, and that these organisations provide a supportive environment that encourages improvement in self esteem and skills.

### **Background**

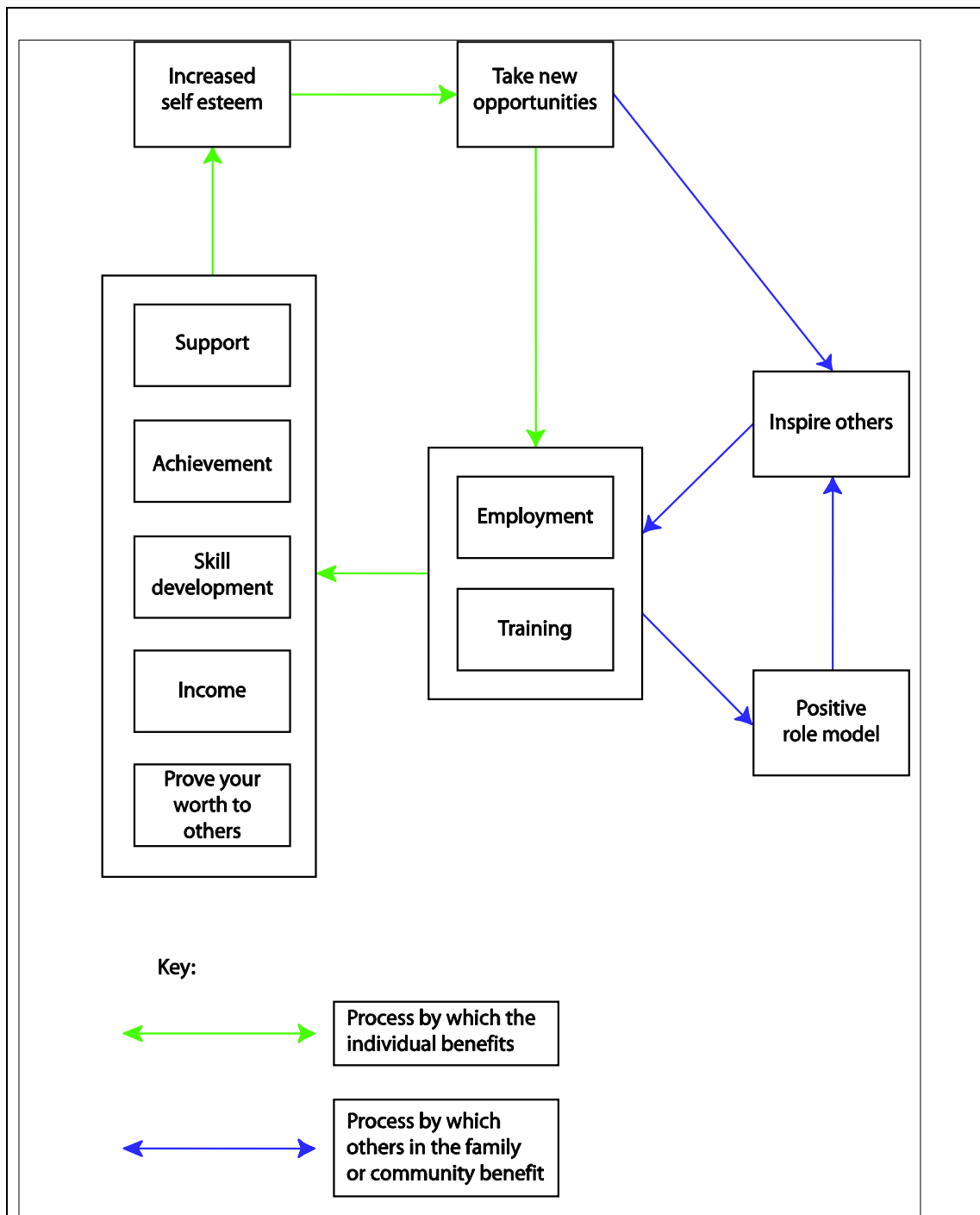
The close connection that Indigenous<sup>1</sup> people have with land, and their strong understanding of land management, has led to increasing recognition and encouragement of Indigenous community involvement in natural resource management. In addition to the potential environmental benefits of this involvement, there is also a growing focus on the social and cultural benefits which may arise from being involved in land management (WTAPPT, 2005). One area in particular is the forestry industry. Much of the literature has focused on issues such as empowerment and capacity development and the conditions required for these development to occur (Hunt, 2005; Lopes and Theisohn, 2003). However little study has been carried out to investigate how Indigenous people in Australia benefit from their work in forestry, how they could benefit more, and what challenges hinder this.

Research conducted in this study focussed on a case study of forestry work undertaken following Cyclone Larry in northern Queensland in March 2006. Cyclone Larry's category four winds swept across a wide area of northern Queensland, from Mossman to Innisfail and as far west as Atherton. The extensive damage led to the instigation of Operation Farm Clear, a government relief strategy aimed to improve landholder and public accessibility and safety. Farm forestry work began in September 2006, and the Department of Primary Industries and Forestry contracted four businesses to undertake work in clearing debris from farm plantations and conducting some salvage logging. One of these businesses, Northern Skills Alliance, is a training and support organisation based in Cairns. The organisation worked with two community organisations, delivering employment and training to a total of 32 Aboriginal workers from Goobidi Bamanga Community Advancement Society and Km Km Aboriginal Corporation.

Semi-structured interviews were used to determine the benefits and challenges of working in the forestry industry from the perspective of the Indigenous workers, support staff, and government representatives. A constant comparative approach was taken to compare interviews within and between groups of interview participants to assess the similarities and differences between the responses and the reasons for these similarities and differences (Boeije, 2002).

### **Benefits**

The Indigenous workers employed in Operation Farm Clear benefited in a variety of ways from the training and employment they received during the program, and from past employment in the forestry industry. Many of these benefits were interconnected, thus forming a positive feedback cycle comprising of two highly connected, but separate cycles, seen in Figure 1, which represent the different processes by which individuals, and members of their family and community benefited from an individual's employment in Operation Farm Clear.



**Figure 1. Benefits for the individual, family and community**

Many of the benefits were general, rather than being specific to the forestry industry. The benefits of employment felt by individuals included skill development and training, achievement and increased self esteem, access to role models and mentors, the development of relationships, a changing work culture, income, social benefits, and the opportunity to work on land. Other benefits more directly related to the forestry industry included the opportunity to work on land, which had cultural implications connected to the importance of caring for country and fulfilling spiritual obligations.

A second positive feedback cycle was formed as Operation Farm Clear workers became role models and inspired other family and community members to become involved in the activities provided by Goobidi Bamanga Community Advancement Society and Km Km Aboriginal Corporation. Relationships in Indigenous communities are very important, and

previous studies have found that Indigenous people often use their network of family and friends to find employment (Hunter and Gray, 2004). Relationships were also related to the establishment and use of role models, who were associated with mentoring and teaching. The importance of sharing knowledge, and respect shown towards people who hold this knowledge, may be connected to the traditional culture of teaching others which involves 'going out into country together' (Hill et al., 2004: 91). The desire to help others ensures that the positive feedback cycle of benefits can be expected to continue with ongoing support, as forestry workers inspire and teach other family and community members.

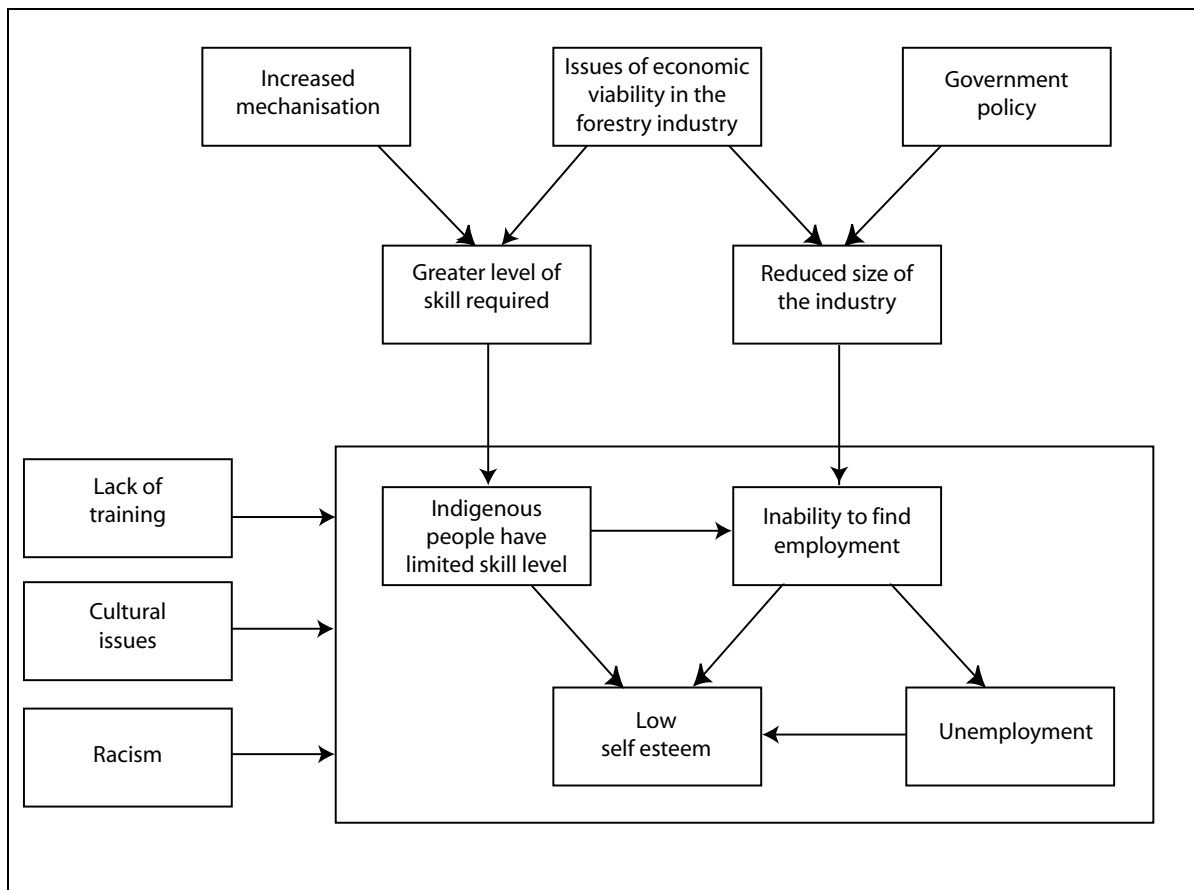
Ongoing support, and close relationships formed with support staff, also contributed to the importance of relationships and mentoring by the Indigenous workers. Support staff from Northern Skills Alliance, Goobidi Bamanga Community Advancement Society, and Km Km Aboriginal Corporation had excellent relationships with the forestry workers they worked with, leading to ongoing encouragement. Encouragement was important because it led to an increase in self esteem in the workers, particularly due to the development of skills.

The economic outcomes of Operation Farm Clear were a practical benefit for the employees and their families, as well as Goobidi Bamanga Community Advancement Society and Km Km Aboriginal Corporation. The income led to greater economic independence, which assisted families, and was a source of pride, particularly as the income was not welfare-based. Goobidi Bamanga Community Advancement Society used its profits to develop other projects including a commercial nursery which will increase the organisation's economic viability and provide further opportunities for training and employment.

Involvement in the forestry industry can result in positive cultural and environmental outcomes because land is believed to require active management. Indigenous people often referred to the environment and culture simultaneously, indicating that they are highly connected. These findings support the extensive body of knowledge which advocates for the increased involvement of Indigenous people in land and forest management (Feary, 2005; WTAPPT, 2005).

## **Challenges**

Some challenges were found to hinder the obtainment of benefits from employment in the forestry industry. Costs which reduced the satisfaction of employment included the physically difficult nature of the work, the requirement to spend periods of time away from family, and some racism. Limitations which can prevent forestry related employment included a lack of skills and experience, lack of self esteem and confidence, difficulty in balancing Indigenous and mainstream culture, lack of business culture, the restricted future of the forestry industry and a lack of job security. These are often connected, and seen in Figure 2.



**Figure 2. Challenges of employment in the forestry industry.**

Limitations resulted from factors including an insufficient level of cultural understanding by some staff involved in Operation Farm Clear, and other cultural issues. Many cultural issues were related to historical factors such as the lack of opportunity given to Indigenous employees to be involved in decision making processes. Continued employment in the Queensland forestry industry is influenced by the economic sustainability of the industry, and government policy. Interviewees provided a spectrum of views regarding the future of the forestry industry, possibly resulting from their differing experiences in the industry and Operation Farm Clear, and the type of forestry being referred to. Many believed there is limited potential for ongoing employment due to the small size of the industry.

Other limitations in the forestry industry include increasing mechanisation and the subsequent need for highly skilled employees. Indigenous people were sometimes considered to lack the skill and education required to gain employment, which is perceived as a common limitation affecting Indigenous employment (Gray and Hunter, 2005: 20). Low skill level, in conjunction with an insufficient level of support, can lead to a cycle of unemployment and low self esteem, thus reducing the probability of undertaking further training or other employment.

The need to balance Indigenous and mainstream cultures were viewed by some support staff and Indigenous workers to hinder Indigenous employment. The findings are consistent with other studies which have found that the ability for Indigenous people to benefit from forestry-based employment may be limited by 'lifestyle and cultural factors' (Gray and Hunter, 2005: 9). Indigenous and mainstream culture were perceived as having "opposite" priorities as Indigenous culture focuses on caring for the land, while mainstream culture was related to income and profit. Balancing these multiple obligations was assisted by the culturally-appropriate support provided by support staff.

A challenge for forestry workers was the need to spend time away from home. Many of the Indigenous participants suggested that they enjoy travelling and working on the land, but some were beginning to tire of being away from home, and both support staff and Indigenous forestry workers spoke of the need to be with family. The wide spectrum of findings related to spending time away from home is evidence that it is a complex issue. Factors such as the amount of time spent away, the work involved, and who they travelled with had an influence on the overall enjoyment of work.

The interview responses suggest that a major role of support staff is to minimise challenges which would otherwise hinder Indigenous employment. Indigenous forestry workers spoke only briefly about these challenges, while support staff elaborated on them much more.

### **The benefits of support organisations**

The Indigenous forestry workers benefited from the commitment of support staff, particularly because these staff reduced many of the potential challenges of working in the forestry industry.

The training provided by Northern Skills Alliance increased the skill level of workers. Skill development, which involved the use of chainsaws and portable sawmills, was considered to increase the Indigenous workers employability. While some government representatives were concerned that the Indigenous worker's skills were not improved enough to allow future employment in the increasingly mechanised industry, most support staff were confident that they would be able to provide ongoing employment. In particular, the development of a commercial nursery by Goobidi Bamanga Community Advancement Society will enable the organisation to provide continued support. Initiatives such as these are evidence of the appreciation of the need for continued economic independence and viability. Support staff often referred to the continuing need to find employment for the Indigenous workers they support, and to take opportunities as they arise.

Support organisations were also able to reduce many of the limitations which hinder the employability of Indigenous foresters. They provided suitable jobs which made use of current skill levels, and increased this skill. In addition to this, support staff appreciated and worked within mainstream and Indigenous culture. In doing so, they assisted Indigenous workers to fulfil cultural obligations, including the need to miss work or training to attend funerals. However, support staff also acknowledged that they had to get the "work done", and that balancing these different cultures could be difficult.

The supportive environment provided encouraged people to work. Support includes the provision of training, as well as other forms of support such as mentoring, providing friendship and working with cultural issues. Indigenous workers were frequently perceived to have a low level of self esteem, and be easily discouraged from employment or training. These issues were affected by historical factors such as welfare dependence. There was an indication from the Indigenous workers that they hoped in the future to continue their work with the support organisations, but did not want to work with programs such as Community Development Employment Projects.

### **Implications**

The results suggest that support organisations can work well to provide skill development and employment to people in the community. The economic independence of the support organisations ensured that ongoing employment is possible, although there was some concern that the forestry industry is restricted, thus limiting employment opportunities.

The provision of ongoing employment requires organisations and businesses to be flexible and opportunistic, which may be assisted through expansion of the activities involved. The development of a commercial nursery by Goobidi Bamanga Community Advancement Society provided the prospect of ongoing productivity and revenue. Support must also be underpinned by cultural awareness, although this needs to be balanced to ensure the economic viability of the organisation. There was some indication that continued access to support reduced the

motivation for Indigenous workers to take on greater independence, such as developing their own businesses, which supports earlier suggestions that the provision of too much support hinders the development of independence (Dusevic, 2005).

There is a need for Indigenous communities, support organisations, governments and industry to develop 'genuine partnerships' (Hunt, 2005: 17). Partnerships may assist the realisation of ongoing support which was a major theme in the findings and literature (Lopes and Theisohn, 2003: 3). Current government policy regarding the employment of Indigenous people in the forestry industry recognises the need for '[c]onsistent government and forest industry direction', which includes support from all levels of government and stakeholders in the forestry industry, and Operation Farm Clear provides a model of how this may function (DAFF, 2005: 10). It suggests that contracting to Indigenous community groups and support organisations is a practical way to encourage them, although there was a lack of recognition of non-government organisations involved in Operation Farm Clear in the government-produced literature.

Government-funded programs require monitoring to allow expansion or necessary alteration of programs. Indicators used in the assessment should be chosen carefully, and this study found that social, cultural and economic factors are significant. It is necessary to find the 'area of intersection' where '[g]overnment reporting frameworks and notions of well-being' intersect with 'Indigenous culture- [including] values and practices concerning individual and community well-being' (Taylor, 2006: 7). Some differences in the interview responses provided by support staff and government representatives indicate that the government may have underestimated the positive effect that Operation Farm Clear had on the Indigenous people involved. However, governments are often limited by short term funding cycles, and positions of management within government can change regularly, making monitoring difficult.

## **Conclusion**

Support organisations can provide significant assistance to Indigenous community members leading to benefits for the individual and their family and community. These benefits include skill development, which leads to an increase in self esteem. Support organisations also have an important role to minimise the challenges which impair these benefits, or hinder Indigenous employment. The results suggest that there is potential for Indigenous employment in forestry, provided jobs are made available. Ongoing employment opportunities require support staff to be opportunistic, and for skill development to continue.

## **Acknowledgments**

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<sup>1</sup> The term “Indigenous” is used throughout the thesis to refer to Indigenous Australians, as opposed to the more specific term “Aboriginal”. This is because, while the study focussed on two Aboriginal communities from the Yalanji language group, the implications of the findings may be equally applicable to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.