

# Beyond Access: The role of microfinance in enabling financial empowerment and wellbeing for Indigenous clients: lessons from remote Australia

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## Abstract

*Access to microfinance alone cannot enable poverty alleviation and empowerment for Indigenous clients living in remote Australia. Providers must look beyond access and incorporate user-centred financial capability and resilience-building supports into their service provision. This paper discusses lessons from the field, citing practical examples drawn from two research projects, which describe culturally informed ways in which adopting this approach can empower Indigenous clients and communities to enhance their own financial resilience and wellbeing.*

## Keywords

Financial capability; financial resilience; Indigenous empowerment; financial wellbeing, Indigenous Australia.

## Introduction: Microfinance in Australia

Despite living in a developed economy with a high standard of living (United Nations Development Program 2016), almost 2.4 million people in Australia experience severe or high financial stress or vulnerability, and more than 18 per cent are either severely or fully financially excluded

(Centre for Social Impact 2016). Similar to the experience of other high-income economies, the financial needs of these underserved consumers are often met by higher-cost 'alternative' financial services, such as payday lenders, rent-to-buy firms and pawnbrokers, with the global market share for such short-term, small-amount loans growing twentyfold in the last decade (Packman 2014).

In Australia, a small microfinance sector aims to address this gap, offering safe and affordable alternatives including personal credit, micro-business credit, savings and insurance solutions for people on low incomes. These solutions, offered primarily through collaborative partnerships between corporates, governments and the third sector (Voola 2013; Banking Code Compliance Monitoring Committee 2017), cater primarily for basic asset-building, rather than income generation.

Good Shepherd Microfinance is Australia's largest microfinance provider, offering no-interest and low-interest loans, micro-insurance for essential household items, savings, debt consolidation and other services to over 30,000 people each year at over 600 locations nationwide. Adopting a Capability Approach (Voola 2013), these products and services are designed to support people on low to medium incomes to move away from financial crisis and hardship, and towards stability and income generation, helping them achieve 'financial resilience' and 'economic mobility' (Good Shepherd Microfinance 2016).

The Good Shepherd Microfinance service delivery approach combines microfinance products with a financial conversation (typically between 30 and 60 minutes), during which the microfinance worker discusses the applicant's financial circumstances (Randrianarisoa & Eccles 2016). This personalised support, when combined with a microfinance loan, can have a positive impact on the clients' mental and emotional wellbeing (Brackertz 2012), as well as their financial capability and confidence (Eccles 2015). Four out of five No Interest Loan Scheme (NILS)<sup>1</sup> clients experience improved economic wellbeing, moving towards stability and resilience (Bennett et al. 2013).

Indigenous Australians are more than twice as likely as non-Indigenous people to be financially excluded, reporting a disproportionate reliance on non-mainstream credit and a higher degree of difficulty accessing

bank accounts due to identification document requirements (Connolly 2012). Indigenous Australians also represent a significant proportion of Good Shepherd Microfinance clients, accounting for 23 per cent of all microfinance loans delivered in 2016. While many of the Indigenous clients live in urban and regional communities, Good Shepherd Microfinance has focused on expanding the delivery of microfinance in remote locations since 2012, to meet service delivery gaps in areas of high economic disadvantage, including Far North Queensland, Rockhampton, Darwin, East and West Kimberley, Alice Springs and the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands.

This paper describes key learnings from Good Shepherd Microfinance's experience in delivering microfinance to Indigenous clients in remote Australia, drawn from two research projects. The authors explore how microfinance can enable financial empowerment and wellbeing, and offer practical recommendations on 'culturally informed' ways that microfinance can better meet the needs of Indigenous clients.

We conclude that access to microfinance alone cannot enable poverty alleviation and empowerment for Indigenous clients living in remote Australia. Providers must look beyond access, and incorporate user-centred financial capability and resilience-building supports into their service provision. This approach can empower Indigenous clients and communities to enhance their own financial resilience and wellbeing.

## **Financial services delivery in remote Indigenous Australia**

While we acknowledge that not all Indigenous Australians living in remote communities are vulnerable, research shows that they can experience disproportionate socio-economic disadvantage compared to non-Indigenous people living in regional and urban areas (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2015, 2016). This is a major contributing factor in higher rates of financial stress (Marks 2009), and is interconnected with reduced access to banking services (McDonnell & Westbury 2002; Connolly 2011) and health services (COAG Reform Council 2012), income inequality (Biddle 2011), poor digital infrastructure (Kohen &

Featherstone 2015); lower literacy and numeracy (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2010) and housing shortages and overcrowding (Buergelt et al. 2014).

Specific challenges experienced by Indigenous users include language barriers (McDonnell & Westbury 2002), differences in cultural understandings of money (Godinho 2014), and the ongoing intergenerational consequences of colonisation, which kept many Indigenous people out of the money economy (Martin 1995; Queensland Government 2015). Vulnerable Indigenous consumers can also be targeted by predatory companies selling higher-cost, lower-value products and services door-to-door, including funeral insurance, cash loans and goods rentals (Australian Securities and Investments Commission 2013). Remote areas have specifically been identified as a 'consumer harm hotspot', with companies taking advantage of low access to goods and services, further compromising Indigenous consumers' financial wellbeing (Consumer Action Law Centre et al. 2017).

Financial services provision in remote Australia poses ongoing challenges, including higher costs due to transportation expenses and the cost inefficiencies of servicing small and sparse populations (Reconciliation Australia 2007), processes that do not meet customer needs (i.e. identification requirements that cannot be met by many Indigenous people), a lack of information on Indigenous clients (McDonnell & Westbury 2002) and a need for greater cultural awareness among staff (Code Compliance Monitoring Committee 2017). Banks and government agencies have developed initiatives to increase access for remote Indigenous consumers, including dedicated call centres and fee-free Automatic Teller Machine (ATM) services (Code Compliance Monitoring Committee 2017), yet more work is required to remove barriers and coordinate efforts, as many remote Indigenous banking customers continue to experience financial exclusion and high costs for financial services.

Addressing these challenges is an ongoing policy priority, with calls for urgent action from the Australian government (2017), as well as Indigenous organisations (National Congress of Australia's First People 2016) who advocate for Indigenous-centred solutions to be

developed. Designing ‘culturally informed’ financial products, services and education which build upon Indigenous strengths and cultural identity is recognised as key to enhancing health and wellbeing for Indigenous Australians (Godinho et al. 2017).

## **Towards Indigenous-centred design: Evidence-based practice in action**

Research on Indigenous Australians and money matters has been limited (Demosthenous et al. 2006; National Indigenous Money Management Agenda 2007; Gerrans et al. 2009), with few studies exploring Indigenous views on money, yet evidence is growing as the importance of prioritising Indigenous perspectives is increasingly acknowledged in academia (Saunders & Piper 2011; Lambert 2015; Dreise & Meston 2017; Godinho et al. 2017). Emerging insights suggest a culturally distinctive view of money among some Indigenous users, as a ‘white-fella’<sup>2</sup> concept which has been imposed from the ‘outside’ (Godinho 2014). Financial practices such as saving for longer-term individual goals can clash with Indigenous cultural norms of reciprocity and sharing of resources to meet the present needs of extended family and kin (Schwab 1995; Godinho 2014). Pressure to share money with others can exacerbate the stress that many people associate with money management (Senior et al. 2002), which may explain why many Indigenous users report avoiding dealing with money matters. Studies suggest that these tensions between Indigenous cultural understandings and mainstream money concepts may be ameliorated, in part, by redefining the relationship that Indigenous people have with money, in ways that empower their cultural identity and facilitate Indigenous agency (First Nations Foundation 2011; Godinho et al. 2017).

Policymakers and service providers in Australia have put many of these learnings into practice, developing ‘culturally informed’ programs – such as MyMoola, MoneyMob Talkabout, MoneyBusiness and Yarnin’ Money<sup>3</sup> – to support Indigenous financial capability and wellbeing. By adopting approaches including the use of plain language, and content which incorporates Indigenous cultural knowledge, values,

norms and imagery; by translating materials into Indigenous languages; by adopting a narrative/storytelling delivery; and by allowing for local adaptation, such programs are building greater confidence among Indigenous users (Moodie et al. 2014; Dreise & Meston 2017).

Yet these culturally informed practices have not been fully incorporated into the design and delivery of microfinance in Australia. While some programs supplement microfinance delivery with financial education, more needs to be done to adopt ‘culturally appropriate’ approaches that empower Indigenous users to use money in ways that nurture cultural identity and enhance financial wellbeing. This paper aims to contribute to this ongoing debate by describing findings from two research projects based on Good Shepherd Microfinance’s experience of delivering microfinance programs in remote Indigenous Australia.

## **Research project 1: The Wunan Financial Hub in remote Western Australia**

Wunan, an Indigenous organisation offering microfinance services, financial counselling and one-on-one money management support to Indigenous users via a dedicated hub in remote Western Australia, partnered with Good Shepherd Microfinance and Ninti One to explore the hub’s impact on client wellbeing. Aboriginal community researchers worked with Good Shepherd Microfinance to develop a mixed-methods research design, adapting a theoretical framework for understanding wellbeing among Indigenous people living in remote Australia (Cairney et al. 2017) to suit the context of financial services delivery. As described in Table 1 below, 58 Wunan users and five staff were surveyed, with questions mostly measuring program outcomes and impact. Quantitative data was supplemented by two focus groups with staff, yielding rich qualitative understandings.

Statistical analysis utilised structural equation modelling to map connections between components of wellbeing,<sup>4</sup> identifying a statistically significant pathway ( $p < 0.001$ ) between clients’ social and emotional wellbeing and feeling they ‘understand money’, including understanding

**Table 1** Wunan Financial Hub research: demographics and key findings

Study information		
Sample size	Hub users	58
	Hub staff	5
Type of study	Mixed methods	Hub user surveys Staff surveys Staff focus group
User demographics		
Gender	Male	47%
	Female	53%
Cultural origin	Aboriginal	100%
Location	Kununurra, Western Australia	72%
	Wyndham, Western Australia	28%
Assistance provided	Money workshops	55%
	Financial counselling	2%
	One-on-one financial capability coaching	34%
	Microfinance	26%
Frequency of visit to the Hub	Once	19%
	A couple of times	40%
	Monthly	24%
	Weekly or fortnightly	17%
Key findings from surveys with Hub users		Improvements
Economic wellbeing	Doing things that are most important	69%
	Knowing about scams and money loans	38%
	Knowing how to budget money	55%
	Feeling good about financial future	53%
	Saving for other things	39%
Numeracy and literacy	Filling in forms	33%
	Understanding numbers	37%
Empowerment	Feeling good about yourself	23%
	Making changes in life when needed	24%

how to manage household finances and avoid money scams. Survey analysis also demonstrated that understanding money is also strongly correlated with feeling empowered and having literacy and numeracy skills.

Hub staff are aware that feeling empowered and enhancing numeracy are fundamental to building money knowledge. They proactively incorporate this into their service delivery, taking a purposefully personal and patient approach to building their clients' confidence about managing money.

A weaker connection ( $p>0.05$ ) was observed between overall wellbeing and financial behaviours such as 'spending wisely' or 'saving'. This suggests that, for the Indigenous clients, wellbeing was more strongly associated with their ability to learn and understand the things they want to know about money.

A key success factor identified by clients was that the hub provided a 'culturally safe' environment for them to learn more about money, with most clients surveyed (95 per cent) reporting that having Indigenous staff to support them was very important. Wunan's Indigenous staff similarly reported that their mutual cultural connection allowed them to build relationships and offer good support to clients, as 'people can relate to their own mob'. They build upon the strength of Indigenous cultural values by enabling clients to learn about 'money culture' from an Indigenous perspective, and by managing caseloads in a way that eases any privacy concerns.

## **Research project 2: Delivering microfinance in Far North Queensland**

Good Shepherd Microfinance evaluated the expansion of microfinance in remote Far North Queensland over a sixteen-month period between November 2015 and June 2017. This evaluation aimed to better understand the needs of Indigenous clients, including the ways in which microfinance met these needs, and to explore the impact of microfinance on the lives of clients. Ninety-four clients were surveyed, 84 per cent of whom were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, as described in Table 2 below. Non-Indigenous clients were included in the study as the program was available to all people on low incomes in Far North Queensland, and it was not possible to limit the evaluation

**Table 2** Far North Queensland research: demographics and key findings

<b>Study information</b>		
Sample size	NILS clients	94
	NILS providers	9
	Stakeholders	3
Type of study	Mixed methods	Survey / Interviews
<b>User demographics</b>		
Gender	Male	47%
	Female	53%
Cultural origin	Aboriginal	60%
	Torres Strait Islander	10%
	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	15%
	Neither	16%
Location	Kuranda	32%
	Palm Island	1%
	Mareeba	11%
	Port Douglas	20%
	Mabuiag Island	10%
	Northern Peninsula Area	26%
Number of microfinance loans	1	37%
	2	17%
	3	19%
	4	6%
	5+	20%
<b>Key findings from surveys with NILS clients</b>		<b>Improvement</b>
Economic wellbeing	Use of consumer leases	33% (reduction)
	Get/keep a job (themselves or a household member)	35%
	Keep household budget	65%
	Compare costs of credit	68%
Social wellbeing	Supported to manage money	83%
Self-confidence	Feeling good about the things you have	90%
Mental and physical health	Eating healthy food	68%
	Have worries in your life because of money	83%

due to funder requirements. Quantitative data was supplemented by 23 interviews conducted with clients, community providers and key stakeholders, including government representatives and large community development organisations.

Analysis of client surveys and client and stakeholder interviews found that when service providers are responsive not just to clients' financial needs, but also to their social and cultural needs, microfinance can influence positive change in the lives of Indigenous clients living in remote Far North Queensland. Microfinance providers and workers with high levels of cultural awareness and experience of life in remote Australia offered tailored services for clients (including flexibility in loan assessments and assistance with arranging delivery of items) which enhanced their wellbeing.

The evaluation found that to tailor services, microfinance workers needed sufficient resources and time to build strong client relationships, provide intensive financial capability-building support, and provide support and/or advocacy to improve a prospective borrower's financial situation prior to a loan application. The evidence suggested that the return on this investment of additional resources is high (Voola 2013), as workers helped to divert clients away from predatory lenders (a 33 per cent drop in use of consumer leases), and improve clients' financial capability (65 per cent increased budgeting) and self-confidence (91 per cent feel more confident).

Clients also reported better health outcomes (92 per cent improved at least one physical health indicator, which included sleeping, eating healthy food, preparing meals and managing health problems), as they often used the loans to purchase essential household items that enable healthier living, which they previously lived without. For example, refrigerators enabled clients to store medicine in their own homes, and buy, store and cook fresh food; washing machines enabled sick and elderly clients to stop handwashing clothes or needing to carry baskets across town in hot weather to use others' machines; and new beds enabled people to sleep on mattresses that were clean and free of dust mites.

## **Beyond Access: How microfinance can enable financial empowerment and wellbeing for remote Indigenous clients**

Indigenous empowerment has been described as a complex process through which Indigenous people feel they have control over their lives and environment, can acquire resources that they value, can realise basic rights, can achieve their goals, and can experience reduced social marginalisation (Haswell et al. 2010). The emphasis is on providing the resources ‘that may enable self-determination in political, economic and social settings’ (Haswell et al. 2010). Much of the research on money management among Indigenous Australians (Martin 1995; Gibson 2000; Godinho et al. 2017), however, points to participants feeling disempowered, disengaged and powerless to control money.

Financial empowerment is particularly pertinent for Indigenous people living in remote Western Australia and Far North Queensland, as the government has introduced ‘income management’ programs in these regions, whereby recipients of government payments do not have full control over their personal finances.<sup>5</sup>

Good Shepherd Microfinance’s experience suggests that when delivered in culturally informed ways which incorporate financial capability and resilience-building supports, microfinance can empower Indigenous clients and communities to enhance their own financial resilience and wellbeing. Specifically, microfinance can empower remote Indigenous clients by providing opportunities to build their money knowledge, set and achieve financial goals, attain goods and services they want and value, and feel more in control of money. Each of these elements is explored in more detail in the following paragraphs.

Linking microfinance with opportunities to build financial capability has been identified as a way to maximise program impact, particularly for clients with low initial financial capability and confidence (Randrianarisoa & Eccles 2016; Ling et al. 2017). The microfinance programs described in this paper both offer highly personalised financial conversations and intensive support to empower clients to gain more

knowledge about money and feel in control of their finances. For example, the Port Douglas Neighbourhood Centre runs a 'Blue Box' program alongside microfinance, providing a filing box decorated with local Indigenous designs to support Indigenous clients to better manage their paperwork.

Offering such one-on-one support can take up to fifteen hours per loan application in remote locations, however findings of participant surveys suggests that this significantly helps clients to build knowledge and skills over time, and achieve longer-term behaviour change such as saving money (58 per cent increase in Far North Queensland) and comparison shopping (52 per cent increase in Far North Queensland).

Microfinance also enables clients to set and achieve realistic goals and acquire resources that are needed and valued, factors that are central to the notion of Indigenous empowerment (Haswell et al. 2010). Goal-setting in an Indigenous context can be collective (Godinho 2014), such as the purchase of household appliances or furniture that can be used by the wider family. Indigenous clients in remote Far North Queensland reported increased self-confidence and pride (90 per cent) in achieving their goals, purchasing new household items, and successfully repaying loans. In the words of one borrower, '[Microfinance] has really helped me in making my home look and feel beautiful. I really love seeing where my money is going.'

Designing and delivering programs that are culturally informed and collaborative, and that privilege local aspirations and ownership, is critical to engaging and empowering remote communities (Empowered Communities 2016; Wilson et al. 2017). Practical examples observed during our fieldwork included loans to purchase products and services distinct to remote Indigenous contexts (e.g. camping equipment, generators, funeral needs), the incorporation of flexibility in assessing eligibility criteria, and the allocation of adequate support and resources to enable strong, trusting and ongoing relationships to be built with clients.

Some microfinance support staff in remote Australia also say that connecting the circular community-credit model<sup>6</sup> employed in NILS, with the Indigenous cultural norm of reciprocity, encourages individuals to repay their loans so that others in the community can also benefit by

accessing affordable credit. They feel that this understanding contributes to keeping their repayment rates on par with those in non-remote locations, despite the tyranny of distance. Many clients in Far North Queensland (66 per cent) also feel that their community is proud of them.

While employing workers with high cultural awareness is important, our research finds that it is ideal for microfinance to be delivered at the frontline by Indigenous staff, with almost all respondents (95 per cent) in the East Kimberley region reporting that it is 'very important' to them that they can be assisted by an Indigenous support worker. The two studies described in this paper demonstrate how Indigenous support workers are deeply aware of the way in which a shared cultural understanding helps them to better support Indigenous clients to navigate 'money culture'. One Indigenous worker stated: 'We had to learn about money, we didn't learn it in our family like in a European family. Our strength was our culture. We've had to learn those [money] skills and our clients can learn them too.' Previous studies have also identified that Indigenous support workers can be positive role models for clients and the wider community, as they can transcend language, cultural and geographical needs, and clients can relate to people within their own communities (Anderson 2012). However, recruiting for Indigenous staff is an ongoing challenge due to a scarcity of Indigenous workers in the sector, therefore cultural training for non-Indigenous staff is also important (Code Compliance Monitoring Committee 2017).

Shifting control to Indigenous communities themselves is another key way for microfinance to be culturally aligned and meet local needs (Empowered Communities 2016). Partnerships with two Indigenous-owned organisations in the research projects described in this paper, Wunan Foundation and the Mabuiag Island Women's Network, demonstrate that Indigenous ownership has resulted in individual and community empowerment being placed as central to local service delivery approaches (Warrior 2014; Short & Hill 2017). This includes delivery in local languages, often within the home, by local workers and volunteers who act as role models within their community, and are driven by shared cultural values and community aspirations.

Incorporating the culturally informed approaches explored in this paper into program delivery in remote Indigenous contexts can be resource-intensive, not just for microfinance but also other examples of wellbeing programs (Whiteside et al. 2014). However, adopting an Indigenous-centric approach generates more effective outcomes and can influence wider flow-on benefits, such as encouraging communities to work together to address wider issues (Whiteside et al. 2014; Lambert. 2015).

Finally, these practical examples of community-led and delivered microfinance demonstrate that when remote and local priorities are privileged, microfinance can offer a new reality for using money in a way that is safe, affordable and harmonious with cultural values. This also aligns with the arguments of authors like Bhabha (2013) and McRae-Williams et al. (2016: 9) that 'culture is fluid and hybridity possible'.

In other words, reimagining microfinance in ways that honour and nurture cultural identity can 'enable culture to acquire new forms that simultaneously affirm old ways' (McRae-Williams et al. 2016: 9), and can in turn empower individuals and communities.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has explored the delivery of microfinance to Indigenous clients in remote Australia, focusing on ways in which microfinance offers opportunities to empower clients to enhance their own financial wellbeing and resilience. Drawing from two research projects exploring Good Shepherd Microfinance's experience in remote service delivery, the paper identifies common findings from the projects and explores ways that engaging with microfinance can be empowering for Indigenous clients.

We find that there are three key ways in which the process of delivering microfinance can empower Indigenous people living in remote Australia. First, the loan offers clients the opportunity to safely and affordably acquire household items they have reason to value, while at the same time setting and achieving goals. Second, the personal support provided by microfinance workers through the financial

conversation can help to build clients' understanding of money and, as a result, help them feel more in control of their finances. Third, microfinance can be delivered in ways that are culturally aligned, and even community-owned, and so can become a means by which money can support cultural identity and cultural values, contributing to meeting the challenge set a decade ago for the Australian banking sector to 'work towards building a model that creates ownership by Indigenous people of the financial institutions'.<sup>7</sup>

The practical examples presented in this paper, based on our long experience of delivering financial services in remote Indigenous contexts, illustrate our central premise that microfinance, when supplemented by user-centred financial capability and resilience-building supports, and delivered in culturally informed ways, can better respond to local Indigenous needs and priorities. This approach can empower Indigenous clients and communities to enhance their own financial resilience and wellbeing.

## NOTES

1. The No Interest Loan Scheme (NILS) provides individuals and families on low incomes with access to loans, with no fees or interest charges, of up to \$1500 for essential goods and services such as fridges, washing machines and medical procedures. See <http://nils.com.au>.
2. An Aboriginal Australian term for non-Aboriginal people of European descent.
3. MyMoola, MoneyMob Talkabout, MoneyBusiness and Yarnin' Money are examples of financial literacy training programs created specifically for Indigenous Australians, with topics including budgeting, setting financial goals, and understanding consumer options and making choices.
4. Statistical analysis used was conducted to identify statistically significant correlations between variables, as well as to conduct structural equation modelling. The technical process is described in detail here: <https://equityhealthj.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12939-017-0563-5>.
5. This refers to the trial of a cashless debit card in the East Kimberley region, and income management in Far North Queensland in which users receive only 20 per cent of their government payment in cash and the other

- 80 per cent on a debit card that cannot be used for alcohol purchases or gambling. See [www.dss.gov.au/families-and-children/programmes-services/welfare-conditionality/cashless-debit-card-overview](http://www.dss.gov.au/families-and-children/programmes-services/welfare-conditionality/cashless-debit-card-overview).
6. NILS works through a process called 'circular community credit'. This means that when a borrower makes a repayment to NILS, the funds are then available to someone else in the community. See <http://nils.com.au/#works>.
  7. Paul Briggs, AFCCRA Conference, June 2007, National Indigenous Money Management Agenda.

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