

Community Planning in the Torres Strait: From Dependency to Development

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1996.

This is an updated version of the original paper which was an extract from a much longer report. That report fully documented the implementation of three of the community plans which were done in the Torres Strait Island communities during 1993-4. The update refers only to the contextualization of that published in *The Journal for Quality and Participation*, 19.5. 26-35. Some details have been added and some minor editing has been done for ease of understanding. The spelling has also been changed from American to Australian. *None of the substantive details of the report have been changed.*

We believe an update is useful not only because these methods have proven reliable and successful but also because there is a dearth of such evaluative studies in the literature. There are plenty of articles claiming success immediately or shortly after an event or intervention but remarkably few documenting results in the longer term. This is, of course, required for any sort of final appreciation of success or degrees of it.

Statements such as 'from dependency to development' or 'the housing situation has improved dramatically', do not sound very grand but when you understand they refer to a people whose culture had been suppressed and who had been dependent on government for nearly every aspect of material living, you will see that it is indeed quite dramatic. The fact that Saint Pauls now has their own builder, painters, plumbers and maintenance people as was identified in their original plan is a radical departure from decades of history. That people now have more responsibility for the homes they live in illustrates the fact that this is not just a superficial shift, it goes to the core of replacing the colonial system with genuine, responsible self government, the system they used to have prior to colonialization. Indeed, when during the Participative Design Workshop part of the process when the diagrams illustrating two fundamental design principles went up, Sam Kris pictured below in Saint Paul's new gardens, pointed to the diagram for the second design principle, DP2 which produces self management, and laughed and yelled out "*That is the one, that is the one we used to have*". The others all nodded and laughed. And that was the one they chose, overturning all those years of dependency.

This story of five communities overcoming years of dependency by using participative planning processes begins in 1993. Between May 1993 and March 1994, five communities on the Torres Strait Islands, at the Northern tip of Queensland in Australia, used the two stage model* to plan and then organize themselves to implement that plan. That work encompassed several steps, it was to:

- Explore their most probable and desirable worlds...
- Examine their history...
- Explore their communities as they are at the moment, decide on their most desirable future...
- Do action planning to collectively achieve their most desirable future, taking into account the changes in the world about them.
- Then, look at the alternative ways of organizing their communities to most effectively and effectively put those plans into action*.

*The two stage model consists of a Search Conference followed up with a Participative Design Workshop (PDW) modified for design rather than redesign. When we worked on TSI, the modified PDW was only in its testing and did not at that stage have a name. As described below, we just followed the Searches up with PDWs, significantly modified in this case, not only for design but also because they acted as a bridge from the five individual Search Conferences to a whole TSI perspective which could, and did, lead to action at this level. These PDWs were referred to in the original report as 'training' workshops - we have changed this to the more accurate 'organizing' workshops.

To our great delight, the modified PDWs worked like a dream. The diagrams for the design principles were recognized immediately as the one they used to have and needed to get back to, rejecting the top down structure which had been imposed upon them.



The Ground Before

The ground consists of those basic factors of population, health and physical infrastructure, particularly housing and basic services. They impose very real limits on what can be achieved in areas such as education and economic renewal. Improving them creates widespread opportunities for development in other areas.

Place: Torres Strait is the most northern region of Australia. It extends from the Jardine River on Cape York in the South, to the international border with Papua New Guinea in the North, to the edge of the Great Barrier Reef near 144°E in the East, to the reefs and uninhabited islets near 141°E in the West. There are many islands, reefs and coral cays but only 16 islands are currently inhabited. There are also two communities on the tip of Cape York. The total population is roughly 8000.

Physical environment: Torres Strait is a region of great beauty, a genuine tropical Island Paradise. It is also to a large extent an undeveloped paradise and a place of great marine riches.

People: Most of its people are Melanesian in origin, others, the Kaurareg are closer to mainland Aboriginal peoples. There are three traditional languages and a local creole. They are easy going and happy people with a quick sense of humour. They are also strong and dignified and have a long heritage and unique culture, *Ailan Kastom*, of which they are rightfully proud.

External environment: They have had contact with white European culture since 1770 and this contact has been increasingly intensive since the beginning of World War II. Their heritage and culture has, therefore, been under siege for some time. In 1992, Eddie Mabo of Mer (Murray) Island in Torres Strait won a decision in the High Court of Australia which finally overturned *Terra Nullius*, the myth that Australia in 1770 was an empty land, with no owners.

The underpinnings of an unhealthy community — The history of Torres Strait since the English invasion is a tragic one and its legacy today is continuing high birth and death rates. Life expectancy of Islanders is 23 years less than for non indigenous Australians and for women it is 30 years less. The major causes of death are circulatory, respiratory, nutritional and metabolic diseases, perinatal conditions, and cancer. It is estimated that over 40 percent of adults have diabetes and both suicide and sexually transmitted disease rates are high.

Environmental conditions are a major contributor... Housing is in short supply and overcrowding is rife. Our team recorded 28 people living in one house on one of the outer islands. Basic facilities such as water quantity and quality, sewerage and waste disposal are inadequate. There is a doctor:population ratio of 1:1303 which compares to an average ratio across Northern Australia of about 1:100. In the last few years, an increasing amount of money has been poured into Torres Strait Islands to improve this infrastructure.

However, much of this ill health is preventable as it springs from lifestyle. Nutritional quality has decreased over the last fifty years although Islanders are still one of the world's greatest consumers of fish and seafood. Breakdown of culture and easy access to Western junk food, alcohol and Coca Cola point to the importance of education.

Underpinnings to dependency — Most island communities have a Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) a system where people work for the dole or welfare and the community receives associated capital and recurrent funds for development.

CDEP Jobs... Most of the CDEP workforces are heavily supervised. Two we looked at in the training had six and seven levels of management and supervision above the 40-60 actual workers. The jobs in terms of quality, therefore, are very low. In terms of content, most are also low quality as many involve cleaning up and labouring jobs. Not surprisingly, work proceeds in a pretty desultory fashion. In addition, many CDEP jobs are part time to allow for subsistence and commercial fishing.

Physical activity is down from traditional levels, for the reasons above and also because gardening has declined. Watching TV has also seriously contributed to a more sedentary life and breakdown of community. TV is the perfect medium for a dissociated, dependent community and furthers the cycle.

Self-government — The Torres Strait Islanders achieved a form of limited self government in 1995 with the setting up of the Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA) of 20 members. There is still a link to the Australian and Torres Strait Islander Commission, as one of the TSRA members is also a commissioner. Seventeen of the TSRA members are Chairpersons of Island Councils and the other three represent populations on Thursday and Horn Islands through forms of association. Thursday Island is the administrative centre and Horn is relatively industrialized with the major airport. The current system has evolved from the traditional pattern into an over governed representative democratic structure.

Overcoming dependency* — Although the picture described above sounds pretty bad, Torres Strait Islanders are retaining parts of their culture well relative to other indigenous peoples and are maintaining their thirst for recognition and rights. But all of the above cultural, political, social, and environmental factors have resulted in endemic dependency. While remedying the situation requires long term commitment from governments and the wider community, it also requires the long term commitment of the Islanders themselves (Getano Lui in TSRA, 1995).

Dependency is now a major obstacle to improving life in TSI. Until Islanders take responsibility for their own development, other material assistance will be less than effective. The participative community planning was designed to overcome dependency and relocate responsibility for development with the Islanders.

*In 1952 Bion defined dependency as the basic group assumption of a great and powerful being which protects the group from its own irresponsibility and sloth.

The Ground After

In 1996, the condition of the ground on its own does not support particularly optimistic conclusions about the economic or other futures of Torres Strait. The situation as described below is confused in so far as many basic statistics are disputed. But even when one takes the best of the available statistics in terms of population and health figures, a pretty grim picture is painted. However, the situation is improving and implementation of the action plans for these areas will make a significant difference.

Continued high levels of population growth, continuing high levels of disease and ill health, and improving but still inadequate levels of basic infrastructure which contributes to poor health, are not conducive to a vital and energetic effort by the population to dramatically improve its economic viability. More sensible policies and practices in regard to infrastructure development, and major efforts put into education for prevention of some fundamental lifestyle diseases are both required.

Considering the state of affairs at the start of the project, some considered it as overly ambitious, others felt it was ludicrous.

The overall experience and actions taken by Saint Pauls and Kubin on Moa Island and the Murray, Mabuiag and Saibai Island communities demonstrates that communities which have experienced years and years of dependency can make significant social and material progress in a relatively short time using this method.

During the planning itself and post-planning implementation phase, the communities relearned that they have the ability to work out what needs to be done, how it should be done and most importantly, that they can do it. We use the word *relearned* because this is how Torres Strait Islanders did things in the past — they noted this in the Searches and the organizing workshops. Two of the three communities discussed here mentioned self sufficiency explicitly. It is implicit throughout Mabuiag's goals and their emphasis on maintenance of environment. They understand their interdependence with the environment. *All communities wanted an end to dependency.*

In February, 1996, John Paton spent four days with the three communities of Saint Pauls, Kubin and Mabuiag, evaluating the outcomes of this process through participative

community meetings. The information gathered then and the detailed reports of the original searches make up the remainder of this sharing of the impact of participative democratic planning on community development. Here we will describe the implementation of these community planning processes by highlighting how several action plans were carried out in Saint Pauls, Kubin and Mabuia.

Action plans and implementations

The action plans they developed were short, medium or long term. As a result, some plans were very quickly implemented and required little or no outside help or financial assistance while others required longer time frames, consultation with people from outside the community and varying amounts of financial input. Often the original action plans evolved over time, which is to be expected, and other changes going on at the same time have affected them in various ways.

1. Saint Pauls

Saint Pauls has a population of about 200 people. We used a community reference system to identify a core of people and then extended an open invitation to the community. The community system is a participative method whereby the community picks its own participants.

The reality of the concept of community may have faded but we learnt early on that it is still strongly held. Regardless of who was chosen in advance for these events, often the entire community, or close to it, showed up. Because of their still extremely effective oral memories, different members could readily substitute for each other without loss of time or meaning. In this case, a stable group of participants attended the entire Search Conference and the organizing workshop. They were highly representative of families, male and female adults and children through to elders. This does not mean they were there as representatives; all participants in a Search are there just as themselves.

Saint Pauls' desirable future — The *desirable future* for Saint Pauls was made up of the following strategic objectives:

1. Saint Pauls to become self sufficient...
2. More accommodation and housing so that every family has their own home. *This is for those who are here and those who want to come back.*
3. Saint Pauls and Kubin to share the land and water
4. Good transportation so we can improve health and industry
5. We want people to be more qualified and have skills in areas such as industry, commercial, residential, education, etc.
6. To have people more involved in traditional and cultural activities and at the same time look at the future
7. We want people to be healthy, happy and have a law abiding *Ailan Kastom* (Island Custom)/European) community.

Action plans were written for all of the above strategic objectives with the exception of good transportation. More accommodation was dealt with in detail through the action plan for self sufficiency. Once implementation starts, action plans merge and spin off other ideas and actions so that strict accounting becomes difficult.

Two action plans which illustrate how well the implementation of the Saint Pauls strategic plan went are represented by the implementation of the housing and the cultural activity action plans.

More housing so that every family has their own home. This action plan was developed for those who are already living in Saint Pauls and for those who want to return. Four participants developed the plan and took responsibility for initiating the action with its two fundamental requirements :

- The use of local materials...
- The use of local labour.

Using local labour was seen as a practical way to further develop local skills. They have achieved this and more.

Difficulties were initially experienced with local government (Queensland) and the Federal Housing Department. As a result the Council decided to do it locally themselves. The Council now oversees its administration but it is the combined efforts of the community and Council which have made the outcome to date so remarkable.

The level of local involvement is continually increasing in the areas of design (also identified as a desirable outcome by the community in the plan), ordering and construction. People can now be involved from the initial design stage if they wish. They can use Council assistance for selecting and working with builders and architects.

Self-help housing allows for various levels of involvement from working with the builder to owner-builder options. The combined approaches have several benefits:

- Avoids the difficulties and rejection of housing loan applications...
- Provides an opportunity for genuine home ownership
- Income is used for loan repayments rather than rent
- Home owners are responsible for their homes which includes maintenance costs
- Provides an opportunity to be involved and make choices for themselves.

The housing situation has improved dramatically, partly because Saint Pauls now has their own builder, painters, plumbers and maintenance people as was identified in their original plan.

There has been a change in the maintenance of the accommodation. People now have more responsibility for the homes they live in. They also do more of the maintenance work themselves instead of them going to rack and ruin or relying on and waiting for the Council to fix them up. Council maintenance staff will still help for a fee if required.

They are now building *dongas* (like modular or mobile homes) for single people and small families. Saint Pauls have clearly demonstrated how to overcome many of the barriers to reducing housing shortages.

To have people more involved in traditional cultural activities and look at the future. This action plan involved gardening which together with fishing was the traditional basis of survival (deserted gardens are one of the major signs of cultural decline).

The carrying out of this plan also demonstrates the evolution of seemingly simple beginnings over time. The community had identified education, self-motivation, encouragement, discipline and self-pride as important characteristics to be built in and they achieved this and more, as well as growing their own food. Many parts of their desirable future converged as a result in ownership of and commitment to the community's future.

The Parks and Garden Gang. Three members of the community decided a mini-market garden would be beneficial not only for Saint Pauls but also for other island communities (knowledge from the elders was not used in the first stage as they just wanted to see what was

possible using contemporary gardening methods). Council organized a trainer for six weeks. Seven people (two men and five women) aged from twenty to thirty years volunteered for the project and became known as the *Parks and Gardens Gang*. Their original intentions were twofold:

1. Self-sufficiency (their first strategic objective) in as many fruit and vegetables as possible (which also involved strategic objectives 5 and 7).
2. To generate some cash from the sale of their produce from the market garden to purchase more plants, seeds and gardening tools.

A community member made their land available for a small garden at the end of the village. The *Gang* were able to cut the grass down, make mulch and dig the garden bed in one day. The site was selected near Boo Boo Creek and accessible to an existing water pump. They built a greenhouse and planted beans, tomatoes, sweet potatoes, yams and pumpkins. The produce was shared among the community.

The elders get involved. After training in contemporary gardening, the elders became involved, sharing their knowledge with the youth, how to plant, what to plant and how to garden — the whole community learned.

Another action plan in Saint Pauls was led by Sam Kris. His prescription involved walking children through the bush to identify *bush kai kai* and bush medicines. This elder knows about bush medicine to cure and kill. He knows his children like *wait around food* (packaged junk food) but the old people who believe in *gadin kai kai* and buy only tea from the shop die *the old age* because: no sugar, no heart attack, no disease.

“We did it!” The most important aspect identified by the community was that the youth learned how to look after a garden. And they proved that they could once again have their own fresh fruit and veggies.

The *Parks and Garden Gang* still has many members of its original group who have now been joined by new people. The new members include elders to integrate the best of the old and new ways. Now the younger people know both ways of gardening and they have a real choice about which knowledge they use. The knowledge of the old ways also allows for future flexibility in relation to different locations of additional gardens. Membership in the *Garden Gang* was voluntary so that gardeners actually wanted to be there and involved in the project. At present the enterprise is Council controlled but could be controlled by the workers themselves in the future.

As a follow on, a second *Community Market Garden* has been started which is larger than the first and involves, on a regular basis twelve people aged from twenty to sixty years. Almost three acres were set aside in the centre of the village (this meant the garden was handy for everyone) through the generosity of four to five members of the community. Other community members have also assisted, including all Council members in both a hands-on and support role.

With time, the produce will be sold to the community and other islands. (At the moment, i.e. before the plan, most fruit and vegetables come from Brisbane by boat. By the time they arrive on the islands, they can be at least two to three weeks old).

This strategic goal has merged with the next. More people are gardening which supplies fresh fruit and vegetables that has direct impacts on health within the community. Improvements have been made with both drainage (in and around the community) and septic containment (with alternatives being tested). Both of these were identified in the original planning. The results of these plans have been recognized and diffused across the region by a front page feature in the *Torres News*.

2. Kubin

As Kubin has a population of only about 150 people, the whole community was invited to both the Search Conference and organizing workshop. A stable group of participants attended the entire Search, representative of different families, males, females and children through to elders. Some of these also attended the organizing workshop.

Kubin's desirable future — The *desirable future* for Kubin comprised the following strategic objectives:

1. That traditional culture be strengthened and maintained and taught to the young...
2. Improving daily living through better facilities such as housing and community buildings, to meet family and individual needs
3. To be a village where we are self sufficient...
4. Moving towards more full time employment and less reliance on CDEP
5. Through training and education, improve the skills required to develop our community
6. To create a healthy, hygienic environment...
7. To upgrade transportation within and to other communities...
8. To maintain harmony, unity and peace within the community.

The two action plans which illustrate how well the implementation of the Kubin's strategic plan went are represented by the implementation of the self-sufficiency and healthy environment action plans.

To be a village where we are self sufficient

This plan was also directed to growing vegetables. Eight people took responsibility for it. The project was to be large scale, requiring a lot of equipment and relied heavily on a highly qualified European horticulturist who was to supply expert knowledge. When the European left, the plan was no longer possible in its original form.

Community gardening. The community responded by putting in an estimated twenty individual or family gardens. They have achieved the originally intended outcomes without the large capital outlay, exotic plants or reliance on sophisticated irrigation systems:

- Costs were minimized through innovative approaches such as using spoiled produce from the local shop to obtain seeds.
- They grew predominantly *island tucker* which included yams, cassava (sweet potatoes), paw paws, water melons, lemons, cucumbers, mandarins, coconuts, mangoes, and tomatoes.

There were some good results with island varieties but it was quickly realized that tomatoes for example die very quickly in the local conditions.

Their gardening efforts clearly demonstrated they had relearned how to be actively adaptive to their changing environment.

To create a healthy, hygienic environment — This required the village to be cleaned once a month. It worked for a while, then motivation declined. Reasons were suggested but these sound as if the sense of community has diminished, e.g. people now expect money for work. However, the Search highlighted a change of attitude as desirable and people now clean their front and back yards which didn't happen prior to the planning. Also, there have been some clean up days for special events such as *bad news*, tombstone openings, etc

The following health and hygiene issues were also identified during the planning and addressed to varying degrees:

- They wanted to find a safe place for the disposal of rubbish. *The dump is no longer on the beach as it has been relocated to an area behind the village*
- Proper treatment and storage of water: *They now have a 40,000 litre storage tank and the water is appropriately treated with chlorine*
- More involvement from health centre staff: *Nurses do home visits now and provide workshops on diabetes, diet and exercise. There is now an ambulance— a large four wheel motorbike*
- More rubbish bins and signs around the village: *New houses have wheelie bins*
- Pest control for mosquitoes: *There is now a visiting mosquito officer who will be doing more training*
- There were too many dogs and cats. *Some people have limited the number of their dogs but others still have quite a few. Unfortunately the excess cats are simply wandering off into the scrub.*

3. Mabuiag

Mabuiag has a population of about 120 to 150 adults. The Mabuiag people are very traditional and the planning had to stop once so that local crayfish fishermen could go diving when the moon, currents and visibility in the water were just right. However, a stable group of participants attended the entire search conference together with a large number of stop by and look-see participants. A smaller group attended the organizing week. The planning at Mabuiag was extraordinarily difficult, even by Torres Strait Islands standards.

Overcoming extra roadblocks — During the planning sessions, we experienced more than the normal amount of disruptions:

- There was *bad news* (the death) of a priest on a neighbouring island which meant the planning (and everything else in the village) stopped
- There was a traditional village to village visit (gift giving and communal feasting) from Papua New Guinea. Most of the thirty chairs for the Search left at the same time as did the traditional visitors from Papua New Guinea
- There was no suitable place to hold the Search. Their community hall had been demolished the week before the Search so a hallway (2 meters by 20 meters) in the Council office building was used. One meeting room was available for small group work.
- We ran into Council elections, announcement of election results, results dispute, second announcement of election results, change of Council office bearers and associated uncertainty about other positions in the community...
- *Dugong* hunting, etc.

With all the breaks, the Search took about two weeks (instead of two or three days) to finish. However, the community still managed to agree on twenty four action plans.

School children's participation. During the *Mabuiag search*, more school children than in earlier Searches participated with the main group, or in parallel, for the entire planning process. The results of the eight and nine year old's work shows that all members of these communities have the ability to be self determining — if they are provided with the opportunity.

A final glitch to overcome. Unfortunately, a Commission officer took the community's only copy of the planning results and forgot to return it. The Mabuiag community had to implement the plan, therefore, from memory. Their excellent results demonstrate one of the many advantages of participative planning, particularly in an oral culture. With other forms of planning, we believe the community would have been completely in the dark.

Mabuiag's desirable future — Mabuiag's *desirable future* was made up of the following strategic objectives.

1. We will see continuous infrastructure development so our community will be more similar to other Australian communities
2. We will assist people providing us with services to improve their service to our community*
3. We will improve recreation opportunities for the benefit of the community
4. We will achieve a better standard of health in our community
5. We will upgrade the standard of education and training for our community
6. We will ensure that our culture, heritage and tradition will be recognized and understood by both *goemulgal* (white people) and foreigners
7. We will maintain our environment through management of land, sea and air
8. Our community will have unity through social justice and humanity.

*2 is a clear indication of capacity building delivered by a community for service providers. I am unaware of this in any other literature or endeavour until work in the WA Goldfields in the early 2000s. JP 2026.

Two action plans which illustrate how well the implementation of the Mabuiag's strategic plan went are represented by the implementation of the recreation and health action plans.

We will improve recreation opportunities for the benefit of the community. The plan was developed to provide an opportunity for football, basketball and volleyball. One person took responsibility for implementation and the community is currently organizing an incorporated body to arrange sport for Mabuiag people. This is seen as a vehicle to assist in obtaining funding for activities that include volleyball, basketball, softball and football. A site was scheduled to be selected before the end of March 1996 in conjunction with an engineer as part of the Local Government Grant for Recreation Centres.

Additionally, three people took responsibility for an action plan to educate the youth on recreational activities. Mabuiag Primary School now competes in *The Friendly Games* (called the *Bamboa Sports*) with Badu and Saint Pauls. The school has introduced new sports that include baseball, hockey and skill development activities. They also have a new water slide, soccer nets, cricket equipment and a baseball set.

We will achieve a better standard of health in our community. Four people including the past and present chairpeople of the Council took responsibility to revive the *Health Action Group*.

The Health Action Group and its systems view. The *Health Action Group* recognized that many health issues cannot be viewed in isolation, therefore hygiene, garbage, housing, child abuse, drugs, alcohol, nutrition, sexual abuse, community awareness, cleanliness, environmental health, sewerage and dietary advice were seen to require improvement. There

have been numerous nutritional workshops and the new nurse's aides are local people. There is now an *Islander* manager and two *Islander* trainees in the health centre. As a result people are more inclined to go to the centre.

Four additional people took responsibility to provide more of their own fruit and vegetables and since the workshop have planted gardens and enjoyed watermelons, cassava, paw paws, pumpkins, sweet potatoes, sugar cane, bananas, grapefruit and lemons.

Another related action plan concerned high levels of diabetes. One person took responsibility with assistance by doctors, registered nurses and health workers. Education and screening were seen as important and a *Women's Action Group* was set up to organize a workshop, decrease sugar in the local diets and organize a talk at the primary school. There have been two workshops and increased diabetes testing.

Taking charge of their own destinies was seen in all three communities.

These island communities are now once again taking responsibility for their own development and futures. This has been the element missing in the last fifty years of Torres Strait history. No amount of money can compensate for this. While there has always been a consciousness of this need, the forces of dependency have weighed against its mobilization. The key to releasing the latent desire and will lies in the principles and practices of the Search Conference and the accompanying organizing week, namely that:

- Those who must implement and live with planning outcomes must do the plans — they take responsibility for themselves and their collective future
- The planning encapsulates the unique and living culture of each community which is a part of Australia's culture and heritage
- The planning builds on their historical experience, environment and lifestyles
- The planning establishes common ground and distinguishes carefully between what was agreed and not agreed — it was based on the shared ideals and values of the community
- The participants look at the context of their island communities, that which would inevitably influence their futures
- Their planning focuses on ends and means simultaneously
- The planning be recognized as a continuous process so that active adaptive planning becomes a *way of life*
- Participative democracy and active adaptation for continued self respect, dignity and meaning depend on the ability to consciously conceptualize the requirements for these basic human phenomena.

All three communities volunteered to develop a plan which is an obvious precondition for accepting responsibility. Without genuine community involvement, the plan will not break the cycle of dependency. Because the Search is so carefully researched and designed to break this dependency cycle, it can succeed even in extreme situations. The addition of the participative training week ensured that even when Kubin and Mabuiag experienced their difficulties, they had the conscious conceptual knowledge with which to discuss, and in some cases, rise above them.

Measurable results over three communities

The Search Conference method has produced effective change in the Torres Strait from small projects such as gardening (with implications for health, traditional knowledge, exercise, culture etc.) as well as larger infrastructure issues such as housing and water.

The children's planning had a success rate of at least 50%. Their successes included improved education, tree planting and tending, a cleaner village, increased involvement in cultural activities, and an improvement in the provision of sport. This was a conservative evaluation as the kids may have remembered more.

The three communities collectively developed thirty eight action plans. After only two years of the 5 year plan, the average implementation rate across the three communities was 83.3%; Saint Pauls 100%, Kubin 62.5% and Mabuiag 87.5%.

The Saint Pauls community were elated with their progress:

The Saint Pauls community were elated with their progress:

- They could see and feel the changes in the community — people getting on better than before.

The action plans that primarily involved community and lower levels of financial input were quickly achieved with many evolving into larger projects (66.6%) and included housing, gardening, water and exercise. It is worth noting that these were identified as important at the regional planning Search Conference in November 1995 and February 1996.

- The final two action plans (33.3%) have been partially implemented (business management and first aid kits).
- All six of the action plans (100%) were implemented well within the planning time frame.

The community now has the confidence to do the next planning phase unassisted. Nothing like this has happened in the last fifty years.

The **Kubin** community's general consensus was that the plan worked well for about twelve months:

- Three of the action plans (37.5%) were implemented in full (traditional song and dance, village day and growing vegetables). These action plans did not require much in terms of council support, outside help or financial assistance.
- Overall, five of the eight action plans (62.5%) were implemented.
- After the initial twelve months everything seemed to fall apart. There was less communication and people were not getting on in the community because of political differences. The total loss of CDEP also had a drastic impact.
- The combined effects of these were detrimental to at least three of the eight action plans (37.5%).

Mabuiag had twenty four action plans!

- Even without a copy of the plan, only three action plans (12.5%) were not addressed at the 2 year mark of the 5 year plan.
- Twelve action plans (50%) have been fully implemented.
- Ten (41.5%) are continuing with benefits for the community.

Three action plans (12.5%) have all the ground-work accomplished and will be completed by the end of 1996.

Four action plans (16.5%) were addressed but with lower levels of success. Three of these required long time frames and working with outsiders on legal or engineering matters (sea rights, airport upgrade and recreational facilities). The fourth was assisting service providers to the community.

The critical differences between these three communities

Saint Pauls is about to update its first community plan, completed well before time and above expectations. It is clearly ahead of the other two communities followed up so far. They have achieved an open participative relationship between Council and community, and the confidence to update their plan without outside assistance. The Participative Design Workshop obviously took better root here, with more effective knowledge transfer and higher levels of self management and development. The question is why.

During the planning, Saint Pauls showed no particular pathologies apart from the endemic dependency and dissociation. Mabuiag experienced a lot of political difficulties during the planning but they were not as disruptive as those experienced during implementation. Kubin also ran into intense political instability 12 months after implementation started and this proved destructive.

However, some community members continued with their action plans irrespective of what the political climate was at the time. The numerous gardens in Kubin are an example. Even when a community fragments, not all is lost, but the most powerful effects of a united achieving community are.

Political conflict is a critical factor. The critical difference between Saint Pauls, and both Kubin and Mabuiag, was political conflict. In small communities where the traditional system of governance can be fairly characterized as a benevolent autocracy and where the most powerful families competed to produce what is now the Chairperson of the Council, these conflicts are not just *political*, they are a part of the community.

When conflict breaks out between ruling families, it splits the community and inhibits both traditional and representative forms of democratic working. Political conflicts within a small community which is highly politicized in terms of family identification can disrupt even the most powerful forces towards community building.

The Searches set up strong forces toward common community goals and futures which cut across family loyalties and politics.

Other lessons. Other lessons included the following:

- Faith in high tech/high cost solutions is misplaced. Communities should not rely on external/foreign experts.

Economics definitely impacts on community self confidence. The loss of CDEP income on Kubin and Mabuiag has had traumatic effects on community. All this proves is that indigenous communities suffer the same dynamics as all other communities undergoing forms of economic deprivation regardless of whether it is caused by economic rationalism, reengineering or the global waxing and waning of industrial priorities.

- After years of oppression and dependency, more than one shot may be required to restore community responsibility, self-esteem and dignity. There are good reasons for alternating the focus between the larger whole which is the region and the community which is a small part of it.

Organizing workshops following the original Searches

In April 1994 the individual community planning was followed up with two five-day workshops designed specifically to assist the transfer of knowledge and practice between the participating communities and to further assist the communities to be fully taking control of their planning and implementation. These were forms of Participative Design Workshops modified for design. Kubin and Saint Pauls attended the first workshop, Mabuiag, Murray and Saibai attended the second.

This second stage project was designed to achieve two main goals. Together these goals could establish self-sufficiency in a continuing process of active adaptation to changes to their environment.

1. The responsible development of their own realistic strategic plans using local knowledge and aspirations. This meant the community had to take responsibility for the implementation of the plans, not falling back into dependency.
2. To pass on all the conceptual and practical requirements for continuing self management from the research team, us, so that the implementation did not flounder on lack of skills or in particular, from using organizational forms such as committees which destroy motivation to continue.

The workshop used a very simple and flexible design beginning with communities sharing their desirable futures and their progress towards implementation. They then surveyed changes since the planning and considered their implications —common themes emerged from both these activities.

The communities then jointly planned action to meet the challenges. We then debriefed the Search and active adaptive process. When everybody had this under their belts, we ran a Participative Design Workshop redesigning their workforces. During both workshops, the participating communities identified council/community meetings as a major target for redesign. They then redesigned these in detail as participative rather than representative democratic forums.

Conclusions

Community planning was an opportunity for Torres Strait Islanders to bring about purposeful change in a manner that was meaningful to them at the community level. It is local action that will eventually change many of the undesirable situations that exist on the outer islands in particular.

Their *desirable futures* contained the most fundamental goals for development, those that have the greatest consequences and multiplier effects. Fresh food, adequate accommodation, adequate supplies of clean water and a clean, healthy and beautiful physical environment are the absolute basics of wholistic health and well being. The collective activity of pursuing these goals has already built community.

Self-sufficiency in planning. As a result of the planning and the organizing, Saint Pauls has already completed their first plan ahead of time and are about to do their next plan themselves. They are now self-sufficient in producing their own desirable future.

The other communities have progressed reasonably well given the powerful obstacles they faced. It is quite possible that all three communities will have full implementation within the five year planning period. This is quite remarkable for planning in Torres Strait Islands.

The dependency cycle is broken! Although the Islanders have occupied the Torres Strait for thousands of years, they have experienced increasing dependency during the last fifty. For these three communities at least, the cycle of dependency has been broken.

In addition to the more tangible aspects of the plans, the process showed that the worrisome trends among the islands kids can be halted by including them in the purposeful planning and action toward their own future, as full participants in their own right.

Participative community planning can help them prevent future problems of maladaptation, aggression on the one hand and dependent, apathetic behaviours on the other. The *Search Conferences plus Participative Design Workshops* created a chance for Islanders to regain their ideals and their culture through active adaptation.

It worked! The Searches created the positive emotions and energy to fuel the continued implementation and diffusion. Now there is a solid foundation for a genuinely sustaining and self-managing Torres Strait. ♦

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John Paton developed his experience in participative processes during the 1980s. Paton has used the search conference across a broad range of government, business and community initiatives at the local, regional and national levels. Paton's current interest centres on successful implementation of plans through enhanced participative processes. His consulting firm, Futureview operates outside of Perth in Western Australia.



Merrelyn Emery has been at the forefront of the development of the search conference and participative design methodology for over thirty years. Her most recent efforts have focused on the development and refinement of effective training programs for both methods.

The report of the project, up until John Paton returned to TSI for these evaluation workshops: ***Torres Strait Development Plan, 2000, Merrelyn Emery, John Paton, Tony Barbaro, Peter Muir and Sue Konarik, March 1996, Centre for Continuing Education, Australian National University***, remains unpublished. The TSI administration of the time refused permission to publish on the grounds that it was too negative and painted TSI in a poor light. The reader of this later evaluative study can judge for themselves whether there was a possibility that the report of the work evaluated here could have been negative. For our part, we simply refute that judgement.

I concur with John Paton's belief expressed below that we were all too naive at the time as the administration's decision to ban publication came as a shock. Whatever really lay behind that decision can only be speculated upon but as time went on, a pattern began to emerge across different communities in different states. It is not dissimilar to that found in white communities in that the powers that be usually have no interest in relinquishing control or even sharing it: it differs in that there is a decided note of what must sadly be called racism. ME, July 2026.

In Retrospect.

One of the great outcomes of the planning was the unequivocal demonstration that communities could plan without anybody holding their hand, no government department etc present to 'help' them. It showed that 'ordinary' indigenous communities could indeed:

- do their own planning,
- write sensible and achievable.
- could implement their own plans in their entirety.
- adopt a new approach that worked with good outcomes.

The communities made sensible decisions that led to their desired changes. I naively thought that the demonstration of a new approach that worked would be adopted, particularly as it was across multiple communities. However, while quite successful, there was no subsequent continuation outside of the communities involved. TSTA did not pick up on it although so much more could have been done on TSI. I found the same reluctance later in WA.

Subsequent successful work in both Queensland and Western Australia also failed to lead to the adoption of the results of this work by funding bodies. I talked to many departments and authorities over the years but there was no interest. The level of inertia was evident for all to see and nothing changed that.

My disappointment is that the dissemination outside the communities didn't seem to happen because there is a collective official disinterest in what works. Even after each annual report on closing the gap, the decision makers lament nobody knows how to fix things. We do of course and it was demonstrated across multiple TSI communities 30 years ago!

Why don't these authorities adopt, change or innovate? How can we overcome this inertia?

Unfortunately, many decision makers seem trapped in a false belief about indigenous capabilities and so continue to do what they have always done. The basic belief in some quarters appears to be that they are unintelligent, uneducated and, therefore, couldn't possibly do their own strategic planning. This is possibly why various authorities believe that communities can't think, plan or pursue their own change or futures without government 'help'. However, when confronted with the unequivocal evidence of their capabilities in all these regards, there is a still reluctance to even acknowledge this let alone work with it or build on it. This level of racism in Australia is rarely openly recognized as such.

To me it all feels like unfinished business, with thousands of people living with a lower quality of life than should be the case. JP, July 2026.

