

# Local Decision Making Partnership Commitment

## Plain English summary



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**Prepared for:**

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## 1. Introduction

On May 30, 2019, these groups signed an important agreement called the *Yolŋu Region Local Decision Making Partnership Commitment*:

- The NT Government,
- Miwatj Health,
- ARDS,
- ALPA,
- Laynhapuy Homelands,
- East Arnhem Regional Council and;
- The Australian Government's Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet

The *Yolŋu Region Local Decision Making Partnership Commitment* is not written in plain English. ARDS has written this paper in plain English to help explain *Local Decision Making* and the *Partnership Commitment*.

The *Local Decision Making* policy puts Yolŋu culture and Yolŋu leaders at the heart of decisions to benefit Yolŋu in East Arnhem Land.

The Governments and groups that signed the *Yolŋu Region Local Decision Making Partnership Commitment* look forward to the future when local Yolŋu in communities will make more decisions, lead decisions and own decisions.

## 2. Background

This section explains the idea of *Local Decision Making* and where it came from.

### **What is *Local Decision Making*?**

The Northern Territory Government has a new policy called *Local Decision Making*. Some people just call this *LDM* for short.

The policy supports Aboriginal people in each part of the NT to make decisions about things that affect them. The policy aims to move power from government people in Darwin or Canberra and share it with Aboriginal leaders and communities.

In each area of the Northern Territory, the NT Government will work with Aboriginal people to figure out how *Local Decision Making* will work. In the Yolŋu area, the NT Government will work with Yolŋu leaders and homelands to find pathways for *Local Decision Making*.

The Northern Territory Government is planning to work with Aboriginal people on *Local Decision Making* over the next 10 years. The Government understands that making changes will take time.

### **Where did *Local Decision Making* come from?**

In 2017 and 2018, the Northern Territory Government spoke with Aboriginal people all around the NT about decision making in their communities. Yolŋu people told the Government that many policies have changed in northeast Arnhem Land over the last 10 or 15 years. They said that today, Yolŋu clans and leaders have little control over what happens in their home communities.

For many years, governments and other groups have tried to help Yolŋu by starting many different governance groups and committees. It is very difficult for Yolŋu leaders to show their authority because there are so many changing groups and different areas of government. Government groups and other organisations have decided what work is most important in Yolŋu communities, and then they have decided how they will do that work.

The Northern Territory Government sees that these old ways of making decisions do not work. In 2018 at Barunga Festival, Northern Territory Chief Minister Michael Gunner said:

“The old way is finished. At the pace communities are comfortable, the Northern Territory Government is giving decision-making power back to where it belongs – the communities.”

This means that the Government wants to give Yolŋu leaders more power to make decisions in their own places in a Yolŋu way. The Government will work with Yolŋu to decide how to help Yolŋu leaders make more and more decisions about healthcare, education, police and courts, housing, welfare, family support, and other services working in the communities and homelands.

## Local Decision Making in the Yolŋu region

In Nhulunbuy 2018 the Northern Territory government ran three workshops about *Local Decision Making* to start a discussion about *Local Decision Making* in northeast Arnhem Land. At these workshops board members and leaders from Miwatj, ARDS, ALPA and other organisations learned about *Local Decision Making* and put forward their ideas about the pathway it could follow.

Everyone at the workshops said that people from Australian, Northern Territory and Local Government, Land Council and Aboriginal Corporations should all work together. All these organisations made an agreement to work together on *Local Decision Making* in the Yolŋu region.

They said they would start by making an agreement is called the *Partnership Commitment*

This *Partnership Commitment* is the first step on a pathway to give Yolŋu leaders more power over decisions that affect Yolŋu people. The next sections say what is in the Partnership Commitment.

You can read more about the workshops that started the discussions about Local Decision Making in northeast Arnhem land at this website:

<https://ldm.nt.gov.au/about-ldm/east-arnhem>.

Here are some of the main ideas behind *Local Decision Making*, from the Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory (APONT):

- **Community Control and Self-determination:** Yolŋu people and organisations need to be in the 'driver's seat' and have control over services and programs delivered in their communities.
- **Flexible, place-based approaches:** This means that *Local Decision Making* will bring out different agreements and plans in different places. This is because groups around the Yolŋu Region are all different.
- **Co-design:** This means that governments and groups in this Partnership Commitment are drawing or designing the pathway to *Local Decision Making* together.

## Steps on the Pathway to Local Decision Making

The diagram below shows the other steps on the pathway to *Local Decision Making* in northeast Arnhem Land. The *Partnership Commitment* talks about each one of these.

This paper will give you an understanding of each of these steps.



### 3. Partnership Commitment Principles

All of the governments and groups who signed the *Partnership Commitment* agree about many important ideas or principles. Here are the principles agreed in the *Partnership Commitment*:

- Yolŋu people still hold their language, customs and laws, their land and sea ownership and custodianship, their culture, songlines and societies. These systems have existed for over 60,000 years and they continue to exist today.
- All of the Governments and groups agree that the *Local Decision Making* will only happen if Yolŋu leaders are sharing knowledge and ideas and worries openly. Everyone will work hard to make the way clear for strong Yolŋu voices.
- Government representatives agree to listen and learn about Yolŋu ways of making decisions. Yolŋu representatives agree to share knowledge about traditional and modern Yolŋu ways of leadership.
- The Government representatives agree to share knowledge about how government and Balanda make decisions. Yolŋu representatives agree to listen and learn about how Balanda systems work in Australia.
- Everyone in the *Partnership Commitment*, Yolŋu and Balanda, will look at how decisions are made across the Yolŋu region. They will look at what is working. They will look at what is not working. They will think about how to change things to make it easier for Yolŋu leaders.
- Everyone in the *Partnership Commitment* will talk about ways to connect Yolŋu ways of making decisions with their work in the Yolŋu region. They will think about better ways for Yolŋu, Government and Aboriginal Corporations to work together.

When Yolŋu leaders share ideas and ways of working,  
 When Yolŋu people are learning and using their skills,  
 When Yolŋu people are in the right places to make decisions,  
 Then all of the work that happens in Yolŋu communities will be better for Yolŋu people.

- All of the Governments and groups promise to respect each other and talk honestly with each other. Everyone in the *Partnership Commitment* wants to build strong relationships and learn to trust each other.

The *Partnership Commitment* does not mean that communities have to join in with *Local Decision Making*. The Governments and groups who are part of the *Partnership Commitment* will work together to find the best pathway for *Local Decision Making* in the Yolŋu region.

The Partnership Commitment is “not legally enforceable”. This means that none of the Governments or groups can use the law or the courts to force each other to do anything. Instead, this *Partnership Commitment* is a way for Governments and groups to show each other how they want to work together. Everyone is looking forward to sharing stories and listening to each other.

All of the Governments and groups will put the *Partnership Commitment* on their websites.

## 4. The Working Group

The *Partnership Commitment* says that a group will be set up to talk about how to move down the pathway of *Local Decision Making* in northeast Arnhem Land. This group will be called *the Working Group*. A lot of the writing in the *Partnership Commitment* talks about what the *Working Group* will do and how it will work.

Yolŋu leaders, directors and councillors will guide the *Working Group*.

### Who is in the Working Group?

**The Department of Chief Minister:** The *Department of the Chief Minister* is part of the Northern Territory Government. The *Director for East Arnhem Land* from the *Department of the Chief Minister* will be the chair of the *Working Group*.

The *Department of Chief Minister* can choose a senior Yolŋu staff member to guide the *Working Group*. The *Department of Chief Minister* will help to organise the *Working Group* meetings.

The *Department of Chief Minister* will prepare meeting agendas, and send minutes and actions around the whole *Working Group*.

**Other NT Government Departments:** Other people from Northern Territory Government Departments will join the *Working Group* too. The Department of Housing and Community Development will send one person to be part of the *Working Group*. The Department of Education will also send one person.

**The Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet:** The Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet is part of the Federal Government. The manager for Arnhem Land & Groote Eylandt from the Department Prime Minister and Cabinet will join the *Working Group*. The Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet may also put forward a Yolŋu staff member to join the *Working Group*.

**East Arnhem Regional Council:** East Arnhem Regional Council is the local government in this region. The East Arnhem Regional Council will send two members. One of these members will be Yolŋu.

**Aboriginal Corporations:** There are five Aboriginal Corporations who will be members of the first *Working Group*. These are:

- ALPA,
- Miwatj Health,
- ARDS, and
- Laynhapuy Homelands.

Each Aboriginal Corporation will have two members in the *Working Group*. One of these must be a Yolŋu director, councillor or senior staff member to guide the *Working Group*.

Other Yolŋu organisations can join the *Working Group* if everyone agrees. The *Working Group* will sometimes invite other people to the meetings. Anyone can ask to come to the *Working Group* if they want to share particular stories, ideas or information.

### **What will the Working Group do?**

In 2019, the *Working Group* will gather information about Yolŋu and Balanda ways of making decisions. The *Working Group* will think about how to join these two ways of making decisions together.

The *Working Group* will think about the best way to talk to Yolŋu leaders and communities across the Yolŋu region. The *Working Group* will find the right words and stories to help everyone to understand *Local Decision Making*. The *Working Group* will find out which languages to use in different places.

The people meeting in the *Working Group* will bring honest responses straight to the *Working Group*. It is up to each person meeting in the *Working Group* to show clearly what their sending group believes. In this way, the small *Working Group* will help many Yolŋu in the Yolŋu Region to understand and be part of *Local Decision Making*.

The *Working Group* will agree which communities and areas are part of the "Yolŋu Region". This will depend on what the *Working Group* learns about Yolŋu ways of making decisions. The "Yolŋu Region" should include communities, homelands and neighbouring areas that have links to Yolŋu.

Then, between June and November 2019, the *Working Group* ask:

- "What are the different ways Yolŋu people make decisions traditionally?"
- "What are the Balanda ways of making decisions in the Yolŋu region, communities and homelands?"
- "How are Yolŋu and Balanda choosing leaders to represent their people and their places?"
- "What are the special strengths of Yolŋu systems and Balanda systems?"
- "In which areas are Yolŋu systems and Balanda systems weak or struggling?"
- "How can we make it easier for Yolŋu leaders to show cultural and decision-making authority?"
- "How can we make it easier for Yolŋu leaders to make strong decisions for their own people and places?"
- "How can Governments and groups help each other to learn and grow skills for Local Decision Making?"

Then, between December 2019 and June 2020, the *Working Group* will list all of the services working in the communities and homelands around the Yolŋu Region. These services might be run by Australian, Northern Territory or Local Government or other groups that are part of the *Partnership Commitment*.

One year after signing the *Partnership Commitment*, the *Working Group* will have a good plan about how Yolŋu can make more and more decisions about the services and programs in their own communities and in the Yolŋu Region.

## **When does the Working Group meet?**

The first meeting of the Working Group will be in June or July 2019. Then the *Working Group* will meet every month.

## **Where will the Working Group meet?**

The *Working Group* will mostly meet in Nhulunbuy. The *Working Group* may plan other meetings in different communities in northeast Arnhem Land so that other Yolŋu in those places can learn about *Local Decision Making* and the *Working Group*.

The Department of Chief Minister will organise the meeting place.

## **Working Together in Partnership**

The Governments and groups in the *Working Group* will share ideas openly.

Different members of the *Working Group* will also visit communities and homelands to talk with other Yolŋu. All of the representatives on the *Working Group* will talk about *Local Decision Making* with their groups and Boards.

When people in the *Working Group* can see a way to strengthen the *Local Decision Making* Partnership, they will share these ideas with the *Working Group*.

When people in the *Working Group* can see that something might go wrong in the *Local Decision Making* Partnership or in the communities, they will share these worries with the *Working Group*.

If there are any problems in the Partnership, then the senior leaders in the *Working Group* will try and solve the problems. If those leaders cannot solve a problem, then they will bring the problem to the *Regional Strategic Coordination Committee*.

## 5. The Local Decision Making Partnership Agreement

All of this thinking, talking and planning in the *Working Group* will be wrapped up in a new agreement called the *Local Decision Making Partnership Agreement*.

The *Working Group* hopes that it can make this new agreement by June 2020. The *Partnership Agreement* will replace the *Partnership Commitment*.

The *Partnership Agreement* will map the pathway for everyone to walk down to make *Local Decision Making* real. It will say how *Local Decision Making* will work across the Yolŋu region.

Yolŋu leaders must have a strong voice in the making of this agreement.

If there is no *Partnership Agreement* after two years, then the *Partnership Commitment* and *Working Group* will finish. The *Working Group* might choose to keep working together for longer if they want to.

### The Implementation Plans

After the *Partnership Agreement* is signed, different groups will work on *Implementation Plans* for different communities.

The *Implementation Plans* map the individual steps that each government or group must take to walk down the *Local Decision Making* pathway and follow the *Partnership Agreement*. The plans outline the changes each organisation will make to bring together Yolŋu and Balanda ways of making decisions.

## 6. Finally...

There is a lot of work to do to bring together all the ways of decision making in northeast Arnhem Land. There is a lot of work to do to understand Balanda ways and Yolŋu ways and make them work together.

The *Local Decision Making* puts Yolŋu culture and Yolŋu leaders at the heart of decisions to benefit Yolŋu in East Arnhem Land. *Local Decision Making* hopes to stop dividing Yolŋu leaders across many different boards and groups and help them come back together to look after their clans and country.

The Governments and groups who signed the *Partnership Commitment* are looking forward to the future when local Yolŋu in communities will make more decisions, lead decisions and own decisions.