



HealingFoundation

Strong Spirit • Strong Culture • Strong People



Iama Healing Forum Report

SEPTEMBER 2018

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The Iama Healing Forum was established through a partnership between the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation and Mura Kosker Sorority.

The Healing Foundation

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation is a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation that partners with communities to address the ongoing trauma caused by actions like the forced removal of children from their families. Our work helps people create a different future.

Mura Kosker Sorority

Mura Kosker Sorority (MKS) is the peak women's organisation in the Torres Strait region, protecting and promoting the rights of women, children and families.

We provide programs and services that improve the social, emotional, educational, economic, cultural, spiritual, health and welfare needs of women, children and their dependants.

We are a regional community controlled organisation that provides services premised on human rights, self determination, cultural respect and safety.

'We are beginning a process of breaking out and being our own nation of people but until then we can still move forward as people.'



Introduction

In May 2012, The Healing Foundation held its second healing forum on Horn Island in the Torres Strait. More than 30 participants from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities, including government and non-government agencies, came together to discuss healing needs and start a healing process to address the pain caused by the impact of colonisation in the region.

This was followed by The Healing Foundation's Torres Strait Healing Gathering, Iling Sidaun, in May 2014. More than 60 community members from across the Torres Straits attended, and more than 600 people from across Island communities contributed to the design in the lead up to the gathering.

Iling Sidaun was an opportunity for community members to share their stories, identify the causes of disharmony in the community, articulate healing needs and aspirations and suggest ways to achieve their healing objectives.

The input from these two gatherings, along with significant further consultation across the Islands, informed the development of the *Torres Strait and Kaurareg Aboriginal People's Healing Strategy*, which was launched in 2015. The healing strategy identified five key areas for healing:

- child safety and wellbeing
- community safety
- spiritual healing
- self determination
- leadership and governance

In 2017, The Healing Foundation formed a partnership with Mura Kosker to further the healing priorities outlined in the strategy, by implementing community healing forums.

Torres Strait communities were invited, through an expression of interest process, to nominate to host their own healing forum. The successful islands were Kaurareg Community (Thursday Island), Iama Island and Masig Island. The forums were a place for constructive dialogue between a diverse range of key stakeholders, including community members, leaders, Elders and representatives of government and non-government agencies.

The forums aimed to build:

- strong community leadership and governance that fosters pride in Torres Strait and Kaurareg Aboriginal People's spirituality and culture
- a self-determined community with the skills, capacity and support to proactively promote and ensure child safety and wellbeing, and broader community safety

The objectives of the Torres Strait and Kaurareg Aboriginal People's Community Healing Forums initiative are to:

- support the community to create and lead healing opportunities
- establish a healing network with champions and leaders who are recognised as the key interface between community and service providers
- empower the community to understand, access and exchange information with services that can support mutually beneficial healing outcomes
- embed healing within government and non-government initiatives already being provided

This report outlines the key findings from the Iama Healing Forum that took place on Iama Island on 2 August 2018. There, 45 people representing community and agencies came together to talk about healing needs and solutions.

Setting the scene for culturally safe yarning

Creating a culturally safe space for conversations is a critical element of healing forums. This can be done through cultural ceremony, cultural performances, acknowledgments and Welcomes to Country.

In Iama, community members and visitors were welcomed through the Sibwanan/Omar Welcome Ceremony led by Frank Cook, The Healing Foundation project lead. This was the first time the ceremony had been performed on Iama Island for more than 100 years. It is an old ceremony that was customary in the Torres Strait for when Island communities sought permission to enter other communities. It had been eroded by the fact that when colonised, Torres Strait communities had to seek permission for implementation of their customary ways. The Healing Forum was an important opportunity to reinstate a cultural ceremony that returned power to Elders and allowed the community to renew an important tradition.

The ceremony began with the laying down of a mat, as a place for meeting, and the exchange of gifts. This provided permission to The Healing Foundation, from the Elders, to come and work amongst us'. It formally welcomed those from outside the community to come and visit and/or work with the community and recognised them as friends who were no longer strangers.

All participants were accorded permission to be in the community and to receive protection from the Elders, and with this a culturally safe environment was secured. The forum formally commenced with introductions from representatives of Mura Kosker and The Healing Foundation.

Prior to the discussions taking place, further context was provided by local Elder David Ned David, who described what healing means today for the Iama community:

Today it's not about saying you will be healed, it's about reviving the past. But today we can make a difference. We are witnesses today but we remember what happened to our grandparents and today we can talk about it. We have to come out and say what is wrong even though the community is better. Today it will help us and the input will be invaluable ... today we have started to talk.

Key findings

The participants at the Iama Healing Forum were initially asked for reflections on the 2015 *Torres Strait and Kaurareg Aboriginal People's Healing Strategy*. They noted that there was little awareness of the strategy among those participating in the forum and, accordingly, discussions focussed first on the most pressing issues currently causing distress and disharmony, and then second, on the healing solutions that can best address these issues. The issues and solutions are reported below and are done so for further consideration by the community.

Issues causing disharmony and distress

The following are the issues participants identified as most important to them, their families and community.

(i) *Looking after those who pass*

It was reported that deaths on the island were common and families are distressed about the lack of an appropriate keeping place for those who pass. Transportation and the associated costs are challenging for families and affect their ability to grieve and mourn in traditional ways. This becomes traumatic for families and community and is reported as a significant barrier to peoples' healing. Recovering the ability to conduct funerals in traditional ways is a high priority for community members and needs to be addressed immediately.

(ii) *Loss of spiritual place and connection*

Participants reported that there had, over time, been a loss of cultural identity across the community and also a loss of spiritual connection to place. Spiritual connection between Elders and young people has also been lost and with that respect from young people towards Elders:

We need Elders mentoring our young ones ... mentoring them culturally. They can't respect culture and Elders because we don't teach them respect.

The community reported that opportunities were no longer available for young people to learn cultural practices and language from Elders. It was suggested that through engagement with cultural practices respect for Elders will be strengthened.

Notably, loss of traditional languages was a source of significant distress for community, as was the loss of Iama's cultural traditions:

Our youth must learn language and know language if they are to know themselves and their culture. They will start to feel like they belong and have a strong identity. They must learn our ways, their roles and learn respect.

The processes of colonisation were reported as having caused the loss of traditional language and traditions and as 'being in the past but with present consequences' and 'still continuing today'. These processes were believed to be the source of many of the additional challenges participants identified at the forum:

Colonialism is repeating itself again in policies and with our kids going away at Grade 6 and getting mainstream education instead of local community and cultural education.

Participants reported how Elders no longer had the cultural authority they had before colonisation took control away from communities. Elders no longer felt empowered to take ownership and control of community issues. They reported feeling that they do not have a voice or platform to advocate for change. As reported below, participants were in agreement that there is a need to establish a Council of Elders that has cultural authority to make decisions:

Individual values need to default to the Iama values system and community values. These values need to come through and be passed on through women's and men's groups and the community coming together. They flow from the kinship system.

(iii) **Health**

There were many health issues raised during the healing forum and addressing these issues was seen as challenging. This was due mainly to gaps in service provision. There were lifestyle issues such as poor diets, smoking and alcohol consumption, which led to poor health outcomes, such as diabetes, heart disease and other chronic illnesses. Overcrowded housing and child safety were also raised as issues having negative impacts on peoples' health and wellbeing.

Iama Primary Health Care Centre was described as providing important services. However, visits from a dentist, general practitioner and registered nurse were reported as not being frequent enough to adequately meet peoples' health needs. These service gaps were viewed as significant barriers to improved health outcomes in the short, medium and long term. Mainstream services that have poor knowledge and understanding of local cultural needs and respect for local cultural protocols were also described as harmful to people's health.

(iv) **Social Issues**

The healing forum reported that issues relating to alcohol and other drug use were significant in the community. There was particular concern for young people who were increasingly becoming addicted to alcohol and drugs. The level of alcohol and other drug use was reported as being linked to community and family violence. Participants described families as being socially excluded and isolated and felt that families are no longer strong. The forum reported the need for strong men's and women's groups to be established as the best way for community to help people with their issues and not rely on outside/mainstream services.

Social and emotional wellbeing in the community was reported as poor and issues relating to mental health were highlighted as significant. Participants reported that, in part, the cause of these issues was the loss of traditional roles within the community, due to the processes of colonisation. Urgent restoration of these traditional roles was reported as essential for allowing the community to secure more control over its own affairs, which it currently felt were out of its control:

We don't want to wait for the report. We can do it ... we don't need to wait because we are already empowered and we won't be passive any longer ... we need to take control.

(v) **Service delivery**

Services provided by mainstream organisations into the community were viewed mostly as being disconnected from community and generally not culturally sensitive or appropriate:

There is a clash between cultural protocols and mainstream systems. When a child is naughty there are different ways of dealing with it and our protocols are different to Child Safety systems. Child Safety do not understand our protocols that might include an Uncle smacking a child for discipline. Child Safety view that as abuse but it's a legitimate part of our kinship system.

So disconnected are services from community that participants felt that people – young people in particular – were largely unaware of services that were available to them. It was also suggested that there is a lack of feedback from outside services about their programs and activities and the outcomes they are seeking and achieving:

Services need to stop and prioritise and engage more with us ... they need to participate with us.

Services need to get more connected to community and feedback what they are doing ... we need stronger relationships between communities and services.

The main feedback therefore with regard to services and service delivery is the need for stronger connection and stronger relationships between mainstream agencies and community. This was reinforced by the low representation of services at the Iama Healing Forum and the need for increased commitment to the Iama community from services that are not located on the island:

Choices? There are not many when policy is developed and you just have to toe the line. How do we access that thing called choice?

We cannot blame government anymore. What are we doing about our children? How are we looking after them? What can we do as a person? What can we do as a family? What can we do as a community? It's our framework over theirs, not theirs over ours!

(vi) **Education**

Poor educational outcomes for young people was concerning for community members. Many were particularly concerned about children having to leave the community at Year 7 to continue their education into high school, and the associated loss of cultural ways that results from living and being educated away from Iama.

Participants were particularly concerned about the lack of training opportunities that were available in the community when students return at the end of Year 12 or earlier. A good education alongside strong cultural knowledge and identity was believed to produce better outcomes for young people, as well as more positive transitions into adulthood. This would lead to a reduction in the social and health issues described above:

Children fail because English is a second language to us and them.

Cultural practices are being ignored as the kids are sent away and experience culture shock ... is there not a way our children can do Grade 7 here on the island?

If our children do preschool and primary school here we need to know what we need to teach them. When they go to high school and college in other places we need to know what they need to hold on to.

(vii) **Employment**

Participants were particularly worried about the lack of employment and training opportunities available to people in the community despite the fact that there are jobs in the community they could do. This was attributed to a disconnection between people and opportunities. Participants suggested there was a lack of planning or strategy around employment and stressed the need for a workforce development plan.

(viii) **Fisheries**

The fight for ownership of the region's fisheries and the government's prioritising of commercial operators has caused significant community distress. It was reported as a significant issue relating to cultural rights and sovereignty. The policy response, including quotas and timing, affects the community's way of life. For example, once quotas are reached fisheries are closed and/or timing limits are placed on fishing. This restricts islanders from fishing and impacts directly on cultural practices around special occasions, such as funerals, initiations, unveilings and weddings, when fish are not available.



Healing solutions

The following are the identified strategies, actions and healing solutions to address the issues described above.

(i) *Looking after those who pass*

The community reported that addressing the distress and grief associated with not being able to look after those who have passed would be best addressed by establishing a funeral fund. This would allow financial resources – at the very least – to be available to alleviate the costs associated with transportation. Families could be encouraged to set up their own account and a Will Kit developed to educate community on the need for forward planning.

Families and the community could work together – through a series of community meetings – to establish the fund through a public trust. The possibility of working towards building a community morgue on Iama Island was also raised.

(ii) *Loss of spiritual place and connection*

There were substantial discussions about healing solutions to address the loss of cultural identity, language and spiritual connection to place. The community felt the reinstatement of Elders to their traditional roles would be best to support reconnection to language, culture, community and place. This would further support re-establishing respect from young people towards Elders.

Participants at the healing forum strongly supported the establishment of a 'Council of Elders'. While this would need further consultation and development, some ideas discussed were that the Council of Elders could provide guidance and governance in establishing the funeral fund. Such a council would also guide the solutions addressing youth issues in the community and provide a more formal mechanism for mentoring young people.

Forum participants felt that the Council of Elders would provide cultural leadership and ensure language and culture were maintained and strengthened, since they would be the key consultative body for mainstream stakeholders and services. The community suggested the Council of Elders would restore leadership more broadly within the community and be a source of empowered decision making through the reinstatement of the traditional kinship system.

Reconnection to cultural traditions could also be strengthened by encouraging families to ensure young people participate in cultural programs, in spaces where they can develop and use local language and increase their understanding of kinship structures, traditional ways and their roles as young people.

Most importantly, the community identified the need for the development of an Iama Cultural Protocols Framework.

(iii) *Health*

In addressing the health issues raised during the healing forum there was strong focus on increased service provision and more culturally sensitive service delivery. On a practical level, the community identified the following as having the potential to positively impact health outcomes:

- A general practitioner (GP) be employed full-time on Iama Island and/or a full-time registered nurse (RN). There would need to be some thought given to the accommodation needs but the healing forum was clear that without a permanent GP/RN peoples' health needs could not be met and poor health outcomes would continue
- A Community Health Action Group set up by the community with representation from key stakeholders. The group would promote health awareness and health education, while working to introduce a healthier lifestyles program. This could include health information about products in the store and advocating for a dietician and/or nutritionist to visit Iama Island on a monthly basis
- The Community Health Action Group would work towards bringing back a Torres Strait Model of Care and the training of Torres Strait health workers from within the community. Further, the group could assist services by providing cultural education and awareness training for all staff working on Iama Island
- A series of community workshops in partnership with Queensland Health to educate community in health awareness and how to establish healthier lifestyles

(iv) Social Issues

Improved social and emotional wellbeing in the community was reported as key to addressing the social issues – such as alcohol and drugs, gambling, domestic and family violence – facing the community. Restoration of traditional roles was reported as important for addressing all social issues. This can occur through traditional kinship structures.

The establishment of and support for women's and men's groups was noted as an important element of healing within the community. The women's and men's groups would partner with Queensland Health to ensure programs, services and activities are sensitive to the issues as they exist or emerge. Spaces for men's and women's meetings need to be established. These groups could also provide further support for parents through programs and activities that strengthen parental care for children.

There was some discussion about justice issues. It was suggested that Mura Kosker could facilitate a meeting with stakeholders and community where justice legislation can be explained to families, and the role of the Community Justice Group (CJG) could be better understood and strengthened.

(v) Service delivery

There needs to be greater collaboration between mainstream/government services and the community to ensure greater connection and awareness. Much work needs to be done to ensure 'every community member knows what they need to know' about the range of services available to them.

Services delivered by mainstream/government agencies need to be sensitive to a Torres Strait Model of Care. Agencies need to provide training opportunities for mainstream health workers to increase cultural responsiveness and cultural safety for community clients. Greater understanding of historical and contemporary trauma is required and this should inform all aspects of service delivery.

(vi) Education

Community members were worried by the poor educational outcomes for young people, as it means that employment also becomes challenging.

An after-school program is required to assist families where parents are working and the possibility of establishing a parent tutoring group was also raised.

Indeed, the healing forum identified the need for more family and community engagement in education programs. This included input into curriculum prior to children leaving for Year 7 education. However, increased engagement was required when children return during school holidays (with cultural activities embedded into holiday programs), and at the end of secondary education. That is, more community involvement and engagement is required before children transition into Year 7 and leave the island, as well as when they return back into the community after completing their education. Both require the development of a transition support program. The community noted the need to develop a clear understanding of 'what we need to teach them before they go away' and 'what they need to hold onto while they are away'.

(vii) Employment

As noted, participants identified the lack of employment and training opportunities in the community, while believing that jobs could be made available or developed from within the community.

Participants supported the development of an Iama Workforce Development Plan. Such a plan could include:

- mechanisms for identifying apprenticeship opportunities for boys returning from schooling
- targeted qualifications for machinery and forklift operations
- assurance that the Torres Strait Islander Regional Council (TSIRC) can build local employment provisions in any contracts for work conducted by companies on Torres Strait Islands
- plans for a stronger partnership with My Pathway to ensure exchange of ideas and a vision for training and employment
- a mentoring program for young people to become job-ready and transition into meaningful and long-term employment
- a business start-up and mentoring program to support the establishment of local business enterprises

(viii) *Fisheries*

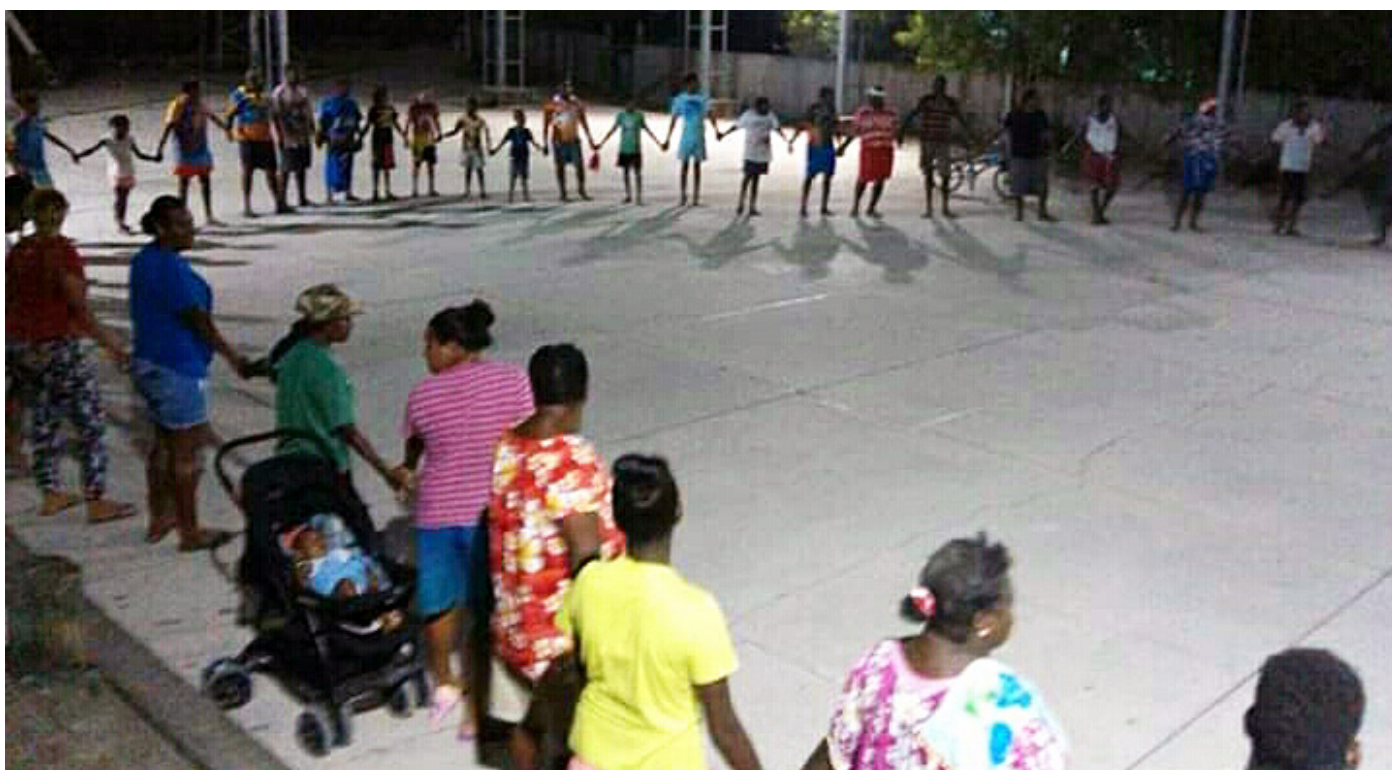
The community reported need for more consultation and dialogue between community and fishing associations. The men's group and Council of Elders (once founded) would lead education and awareness sessions about the rules and regulations around fisheries. The aim is to ensure security of fish and resources for feasts and ceremonies, to enable healing processes to continue in traditional ways.

Note

The healing forum and this report acknowledges the importance of the work Mura Kosker Sorority (MKS) is already doing with regard to a number of these key issues. There is substantial effort being put into men's and women's groups and the development of a cultural framework/protocol.

Further, MKS has begun the process of establishing Community Champions – an outcome of the Torres Strait Domestic Violence Conference. The role of the Community Champions was still being developed at the time of the healing forum but it would be a support role post-incident rather than intervention at the point of incident.

Actions moving forward could inform and be informed by the ongoing work of MKS.



Priority actions

To ensure this report leads to improvements and actions, priority areas for action moving forward were identified at the healing forum. Overall, the community reported that the actions below should form the beginning of a strategy that addresses all the key issues raised in this report. The community noted they would need assistance to develop and implement the strategy.

Priority	Actions	Community Healing Champions	Stakeholders/ partners	Timeline
<i>Caring for those passed</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - establish a funeral fund at the family and/ or community level - hold a community meeting about the issue - scope the feasibility of establishing a morgue on lama Island 	Mr Edward Jack Kepa	TSIRC-Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA)-community	Dec 2019
<i>Loss of spiritual place and connection</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - establish a Council of Elders - develop a mentoring program between Elders and youth - invite young people to attend and develop roles in traditional cultural practices/ceremonies - establish a men's and women's group - develop lama Cultural Protocols Framework 	Mr David Ned David, Mrs Raina Kepa	TSIRC-TSRA-community	Dec 2019
<i>Health</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - write letter advocating for a permanent GP and/or RN on the island - establish a Community Health Action Group that guides community education and awareness of health related issues - advocate for monthly visits by a dietician or nutritionist to the island - build community education and health awareness programs - collaborate more closely with Queensland Health to develop a Torres Strait Model of Care and hold community awareness workshops 	Mr Harold Kepa	Queensland Health, MKS	Dec 2019

Priority	Actions	Community Healing Champions	Stakeholders/ partners	Timeline
<i>Social issues</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - restore traditional roles and kinship structures - support parents through programs and activities that assist with the development of children in their homes - establish and support women's and men's groups that partner with Queensland Health to ensure programs, services and activities are sensitive to the issues as they exist or emerge - establish paces for men's and women's meetings - broker a meeting, between MKS, stakeholders and community, where justice legislation is explained - strengthen understanding of the role of the CJG 	Mr David Ned David	All services, MKS, Queensland Health	Dec 2019
<i>Service delivery</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - increase collaboration between services and community - services to provide training opportunities for mainstream health workers to increase cultural responsiveness and cultural safety - increase understanding of historical and contemporary trauma to inform trauma-informed service delivery - establish regular interagency meetings for two-way sharing of information and feedback about service needs and delivery 	Mr Edward Jack Kepa	Community, all services	Dec 2019
<i>Education</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - establish an after school program to assist those families where parents are working - establish a parent tutoring group - increase family and community engagement in education programs, including input into curriculum prior to children leaving for Year 7 education - design holiday programs that help students reconnect to community and traditional culture during school holidays - create transition support programs for before students leave the island and when they return 	Mrs Raina Kepa	TSIRC, TAGAI, TSRA	Dec 2019

Priority	Actions	Community Healing Champions	Stakeholders/ partners	Timeline
Employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - develop the lama Workforce Development Plan - identify apprenticeship opportunities for boys returning from schooling - TSIRC to include local employment obligations in any contracts for work conducted by companies working on Torres Strait islands - partner with My Pathway to facilitate sharing of ideas and vision for training and employment - build a mentoring program for young people to be job-ready and transition into meaningful and long term employment - develop a business start-up and mentoring program to support the establishment of local business enterprises 	Mr Edward Jack Kepa	Community, all services	Dec 2019
Fisheries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - increase consultations with fishing associations and commercial fisheries - host education and awareness sessions about the rules and regulations around fisheries 	Mr David Ned David	lama Fishery Association, TSRA, AFMA	Dec 2019



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