Julie Ballangarry:

This episode was recorded on the lands of the Yuggera and Toorabol people, the Gadigal and the Bidjigal people of the Eora Nation, as well as the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. Giina to F! It!. Giina is from the Gumbaynggirr language. My language. It's a friendly welcome. Hi, I'm Julie Ballangarry. I'm a Gumbaynggirr/Dunghutti woman and a researcher who specialises in Indigenous policy. I'm also a part of the Australian Feminist Foreign Policy Coalition. F! It! is a podcast that brings feminist and First Nations approaches into the foreign policy conversation. We'll be exploring these emerging approaches to foreign policy by drawing on the knowledge and experiences from First Nations people and feminists from within the space. Traditionally, their voices have been excluded from the discussion and decision-making, but we say F! It!, we want to live in a better world, one where we're part of the conversation about re-imaging global systems, one that mutually benefits all.

For this episode, we'll be speaking to two amazing First Nations women, Jenna, a proud Wiradjuri woman, and Alice, a Dharug woman, who are practitioners within the development space. Both women are focused on equitable inclusion and community development for First Nations people in Australia and the broader Indo-Pacific region. Through their roles and lived experiences as First Nations women, they work to amplify First Nations peoples and First Nations women's voices and perspectives to support policies and programs that aid in supporting meaningful and sustainable development across the region. Through an intersectional lens, our yarn with Alice and Jenna looks at how their knowledge as First Nations women, using a First Nations approach to their work, provides a blueprint for how others in the space can start to decolonize processes to create genuine partnerships for true co-design and local solutions through service delivery. Jenna and Alice, thank you for joining me today. Alice, can you tell us about your role?

Alice:

Yeah, sure. So I'm the Indigenous Programs Manager at the Australian Volunteers Program, which is a DFAT-funded program working across 26 different countries. And so, in my role, I've had the opportunity to co-design and then establish Indigenous Pathways, which is a component of the broader program that focuses on expanding and strengthening Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander involvement in international skilled volunteering. So we have a really strong focus on connecting First Nations communities with Indigenous communities internationally to work on projects that are mutually beneficial, where people can exchange knowledge and skills and talk about local solutions to shared challenges.

Julie Ballangarry:

That's awesome. So it's really like First Nations to First Nations approach. How about you Jenna?

Jenna:

So my role is quite similar to Alice's in terms of it being First Nations to First Nations focused. The title of my role is Project Manager for International Development. So I manage small portions of programs under DFATs programming across Asia and the Pacific, but primarily in Papua New Guinea. And through that, we work on the programs to look at how we can embed First Nations perspectives, voices, and peoples into the program to create some more close cultural connection with our neighbors.

Julie Ballangarry:

I guess too, First Nations people are not a homogeneous group and sometimes people can think that, right? So I'm just wondering then when you're working across different First Nations groups, how do you do a First Nations approach with different First Nations peoples?

Alice:

I think for me, it's all about building that relationship first and getting to know people, learning about their culture, about the place and the history of where they are, and then starting from there because everyone's so different. And so, when working with any Indigenous group, you've got to take a unique approach, I guess.

Julie Ballangarry:

Yeah. So it's about creating relationships and taking the time and space that you need. Is that what you're saying, Alice?

Alice:

Yes. Yeah, definitely.

Julie Ballangarry:

How about you Jenna? How do you work with different First Nations groups across the Pacific?

Jenna:

For us, it's quite dependent on the specific project we're working on in most cases. So if we're working with the program, for example, say, in economic development, we'll look for personnel who have that experience there. So there's kind of that portion of it. But then also if we are doing study tours, for example, to a specific place, obviously we'll then engage the traditional owners from that space. So again, very localized depending on what type of work we're doing. Because our work, well, my work is quite varied, so really just making sure we take that, I guess, place-based approach looking at, okay, what is the situation? Who are the people going to be involved and how do we cater what we're doing to those specific group of people?

Julie Ballangarry:

Can you, Jenna, then share with us, how does your identity as a First Nations person influence your approach? Because we've discussed this before where sometimes for non-Indigenous people, they don't understand this. So can you talk about how your identity influences your work?

Jenna:

Yeah, so I feel like I have an inherent want to support people and place in a really authentic way. I think that really ties back to identities as First Nations peoples is really wanting to support people, community, and the environment and everything that surrounds that. So I really think that is what influences my work the most and my understanding and perception of the world. I also think relationships and the way First Nations people build relationships is a really big influencer for me in my work. Through conversations I've had with other development practitioners or government employees in the region, I've heard so many times that quote, they know an Indigenous person who worked in the space and then go on to say how that person has always been applauded for the way they grow their networks and communicate. So I think there's really that inherent understanding of relationships that we have that can really benefit our work.

Julie Ballangarry:

Yeah. So Alice, building on that too, I remember we spoke about how your identity as a First Nation person influences your work. And jumping back on what Jenna said about relationships, and it also stems to how you came into the space because it's not necessarily where you saw yourself. Is that correct?

Alice:

Yeah, definitely. I think relationships are a really big part of it, but I think, I guess my identity influences the way I will see things and want to adapt systems to make them work better for others. I can see the way mainstream systems and processes, why they exist that way, but I can also see many ways in which they're not culturally safe or where they wouldn't work for community. So that's what's always driven me in my work. So I lived in Nepal for a few years and I loved connecting with another culture and learning different ways of working and discovering cultural similarities and difference. And I think my interest in international development started when I was there during the 2015 earthquake and I saw this enormous international humanitarian response, but in many cases it wasn't locally led and there were a lot of really problematic things occurring that could have been avoided if people were actually listening to local communities.

And it just reminded me so much of things at home where non-Indigenous people would come in and try and impose their solutions, but actually end up doing harm. So I guess being in the international context, I could see some of those really interesting connections between communities in Australia and Indigenous communities internationally and in the challenges, the ways we face different challenges, but also the ways that we handle them. And I spent most of my career in Aboriginal community development roles. Started out in a small arts organization in regional New South Wales where I'd work really closely with community to do arts and economic development projects, cultural revival, and that would feed into an annual festival and then kind of moved into operations management at a small bilingual school in a remote community in northeast Arnhem Land.

And it was in that role, I think, that I really focused on adapting systems and working really closely with community to make sure that the education system and the different kind of services that were linked in could work well for community and trying to bridge that gap between mainstream system and Indigenous ways of working and make sure that things could be culturally safe and center our ways of working.

Julie Ballangarry:

Do you have any examples of that, Alice, in the work that you are doing now? How you've replicated that from previous jobs into this role?

Alice:

Yeah. So I've been in my current role for about five years now, and I think my scope when I came in was to redesign existing Indigenous programs and look at ways that we could strengthen what had come before, but really building cultural safety and embed that across the program. So I worked quite hard to build cultural capability across the program and amongst staff and then adapt our systems to make them more flexible or approachable for people. We established an Indigenous advisory panel as well so that there could be support and guidance for volunteers going through the program, but also for staff that might want to seek advice as well. And I think that's made a huge difference. Establishing those foundational elements and embedding them across the program has been really important to the success of Indigenous Pathways.

Julie Ballangarry:

Yeah, that's awesome. Jenna, is your story something similar in the workplace that you work in or were these structures already pre-established, or did you have to come in and kind of scope it out and rebuild what was already there? Reframe it, if you might say.

Jenna:

Yeah. So for my role, I was actually the first project manager working full-time on our international projects. So there was some work done previously that really, I guess, set the path for the work I'm doing now. But really it was, yeah, just scoping it out myself along with other teammates to work out how we're going to go ahead and what it will look like going forward. So through that, we've now recruited another person. So our team is growing, and I think it's a really good example of how having that First Nations leadership when we're working on First Nations programs is really important.

Julie Ballangarry:

It's so important that we're not isolated. We are not the only one. So representation in this space really matters. And I know from the conversations that we've had, none of us necessarily aimed for this space. We kind of ended up in this space. Myself, former teacher. So Alice, there's some synergies there between us. We end up in these spaces because we want a better future. We want a better place and a better world for us to live in. And sometimes the places that we originally found ourselves, whilst we were doing what we could on the ground, there were bigger and better places that we could go, essentially.

And development in the international relations space in a more academic sense is a place where we can make these big impacts, particularly because our region is 70% of where Indigenous people live, which is huge. In terms of then development projects on the ground, I'm really interested to know from Jenna or Alice, if you've worked on any sort of gendered projects where women have been centered in this and Indigenous women because Indigenous women have a different way of seeing the world, and it's different to non-Indigenous feminist women and how they see the world in the development space. I was just wondering if either of you would like to talk about that.

Alice:

Yeah, one of the recent projects I was working on was the Indigenous conservation knowledge exchange. We delivered that in partnership with WWF Solomon Islands. And that saw for First Nations women from across Australia travel to Solomon Islands in the Western Province for three weeks to connect with a few different communities and spend time with Solomon Islander women working in conservation to exchange skills and knowledge. And while we were there, there was a focus definitely on exchanging knowledge in regards to technical environmental conservation work. But it was also really important that they were advocating for the role of women in conservation and talking about the importance of that because they're such a crucial part of community. And I think often women in conservation are overlooked and not formally recognized because it's a very male-dominated industry. So they were looking at ways in which they could come together to share knowledge about the kind of structural challenges that they're facing. And it was also providing a platform for women in conservation to highlight their strengths.

Julie Ballangarry:

Yeah. I think that's really important because when we think about feminist approach, sometimes we forget about First Nations women and the importance and the knowledge that they hold. And so, while we're talking about a specific program, I think it can go across the spectrum. It can go across all developmental spaces where women and First Nations women, particularly because First Nations women are the most marginalized in communities, their voices are heard, and it may not exactly look like the agenda set out by the mainstream. Do you guys agree with that?

Alice:

Yeah, absolutely. And I think there's connections between feminist and First Nation approaches as well, because there's, I guess, this overlap in the shared experience when it comes to being in spaces that have been traditionally dominated by others and having to fight to make change and seek a more equal distribution of power. So yeah, I see a lot of similarities there. And it's also about having to prove your worth as well.

Julie Ballangarry:

Yeah. And I think even just looking at you two, you are amazing, the importance of investing in First Nations women in this space. And I think that you bring a lot of wealth and knowledge to the space, and I think that you're doing amazing jobs, and what you do in those communities is helping to amplify those First Nations women's voices.

Alice:

Oh, thanks Julie.

Julie Ballangarry:

You're welcome. So thinking about projects that you've worked on in the last few years or so, can I ask, how do you sort of move to the implementation stage of this? I might start with Alice first.

Alice:

So for me, it all really starts with building relationships and building trust. And so, looking at who's going to be involved in the program, reaching out, and at the very starting point, getting to know everyone who's involved, hearing about why they'd like to be involved, what they'd like to see, their ideas, and kind of, I guess, co-designing, co-designing is really critical.

Julie Ballangarry:

I think sometimes too, the word co-design can be taken way out of context, right? Co-design is a real buzzword. So what co-design is on the ground looks different to necessarily what different people may prescribe, different bodies may prescribe as co-design.

Alice:

Yeah. And for me, co-design is you might go into something with an idea, but then it's genuinely listening to the other people that you're going to be working with and being completely prepared to change the direction of your project or the scope so that it fits and is mutually beneficial and that everybody's really comfortable with it. So yeah, building those relationships and the trust at the start is really critical to the success of the project. And then I think getting to know each other's context. So if it's First Nations people from Australia connecting with mob in the Pacific, it's getting to know each other's cultures, our context, the history behind things, our ways of working, and sharing that so that we've got a common base to work together from.

Julie Ballangarry:

I think you said something really important there, and that's mutual benefit. And too often the development space wants to impose something on a peoples rather than it being mutually benefit. So we give aid to make ourselves look better or feel better about ourselves as a nation rather than actually it being of benefit to the people on the ground. So the work that you guys are doing is reversing that in a sense, and actually decolonising these spaces for mutual benefit because that's when we see outcomes. Jenna, do you have anything that you would like to add in terms of implementing how you implement different programs?

Jenna:

So what you just mentioned about mutual benefit, I think that is something really, really important that we consider when we are developing proposals for new projects or developing project plans, we're always looking at whatever the piece of work we're working on, who will that benefit and who will be involved. Naturally through my work, a lot of the time it is First Nations people, so really making sure that there is benefit, whether that be through co-design, as we mentioned. So making sure that all parties are involved in the design of the process, but also looking at economic benefit as well. And I think that's something that in my role we've really looked at. So recently we co-hosted a study talk, a delegation from Timor-Leste to the Northern Territory. And through that we made sure that they were all cultural considerations were included, including welcome to countries and whatnot, but also looking at how we can include Indigenous businesses into the program as well.

So looking at Indigenous catering businesses, looking at local tours, and whatnot. And I think that's something really important in this space because often when we are thinking about First Nations engagement, people automatically assume, yeah, I'm going to get a First Nations person to go overseas and work on this program. But that isn't always feasible given the small number of First Nations people working in this space. So I think we really need to start thinking more broadly around what type of engagement and participation can we have. And that can look anything from like a First Nations person working overseas right through to engaging with Indigenous suppliers for a variety of work.

So I think there is spectrum, a very, very large spectrum, I'd say, in terms of the work that we can do in this space. But it's really just making sure that this is known and getting out there so people can start thinking about, hey, I could actually do this in my program too. I can engage with First Nations people, but also understanding that there is a need for that cultural safety and security and making sure that everything is culturally safe, because I think that is definitely a limitation possibly in terms of engaging First Nations people and not having that cultural safety.

Julie Ballangarry:

And I think too, you speak to another really important issue, which is that it can't be tokenistic. It must be genuine.

Jenna:

Yes.

Julie Ballangarry:

We all know this from our own experiences as well. Yeah. So Jenna, you touch on a really important topic there around, I guess, no tokenism, because it's so easy for people to fall into the trap of just getting someone to welcome someone and think, oh, we've done a First Nations approach. It's so much more than that. And both of you have really dug through that in this yarn talking about what it looks like to have genuine participation, genuine consultation, genuine co-design, dare I say, to make those local services to the people that need it most be beneficial for them. It's not just a one-way partnership. It is definitely a two-way partnership.

Alice:

Yeah, absolutely. First Nations foreign policy has been really highlighted lately, and there's a lot of interest in it. And I think people might be looking for a bit of a step-by-step guide on how to do it, but it can't necessarily be step-by-step because every community is different, and there's incredible diversity amongst First Nations peoples. Within Australia, we're not all the same, nor in the Pacific or any other Indigenous communities around the world. So I think for people when they're looking at ways of working and engaging with First Nations peoples, having some maybe core principles to focus on is really important. But then making adaptions to suit the context and the culture of the communities. So learning what's appropriate, what's not, what are the protocols, what's the history? And then, I guess, focusing on strength-based approaches, ensuring all the engagement is really meaningful, being flexible and open to change, and prioritizing cultural safety.

Julie Ballangarry:

Excellent. Yeah, I think that's spot on. Thanks, Alice. I want to know, what do you really want to tell non-Indigenous people and allies that are working in this space that are wanting to embed First Nations approaches into their work? And Alice, you just briefly mentioned those. Jenna, do you have anything that you would like to share about what we can share with our non-Indigenous allies?

Jenna:

Of course. I think in terms of engaging with our non-Indigenous allies in this space, there is a lot of interest from across the sector to engage. But as Alice touched on previously, there isn't much guidance out there on how to actually do it. My understanding is that a lot of people are expecting that the First Nations foreign policy will have all the answers. I think it will have some answers, but I don't think it's going to have all of the answers in terms of practical implementation. So in saying that, I think this podcast is a perfect opportunity for those allies to listen to First Nations people who are working in this space and are doing the work. And of course, there's, I'm sure, many, many other opportunities out there to engage with First Nations people and look at how you can embed First Nations perspectives in programming.

We previously touched on tokenism, and I think that's something that's really, really important and something that I don't want to see. You often see that a lot of First Nations people, not just in the international development space, get pushed into roles that are focused on First Nations communities, whatever else. But I think there is so many First Nations people out there who have skills, knowledge, and experience that can be shared in so many other areas outside of the Indigenous space. So I think really making sure that tokenism doesn't come through. If you've got a First Nations person working for your organization or whatever, really making sure that they have the flexibility to be engaged either way. I think that's really important.

Julie Ballangarry:

I agree. I think that sometimes the ghettoization that we get as being First Nations people isn't beneficial because First Nations approach is for everybody. We have knowledge that we can share. It's just like a women's issue isn't just a women's issue, it's everybody's business. And it's the same with First Nations. To wrap up our conversation, which I've really enjoyed this yarn, our podcast is focused on exploring emerging approaches to foreign policy that is really about reimagining and remaking global systems to create a more mutually beneficial society. What's one takeaway for our audience about First Nations and feminist foreign policy that you want to share?

Alice:

I think a First Nations foreign policy has a potential to be a transformative force in accelerating development by embedding cultural values at a policy level and fostering meaningful relationships. And it's by addressing power imbalances and valuing different ways of working that we can empower communities to amplify voices and create avenues for respectful dialogue. So I think I'd say to people most importantly is consider power. Think about who holds it and why they hold it, and do they hold it because they're the right person to hold it, or does someone just hold power because they've inherited through a system that was kind of built for them, that favours them, for people to think about ways in which they can step back and give up some of their power so that somebody else has the chance to step forward and have a voice is really important. And I think that's what will really help drive change to make systems more equitable and strengthen and enrich our development work.

Julie Ballangarry:

Alice, that's such a strong message to end it on. Thank you so much. What's one takeaway for our audience about First Nations and feminist foreign policy you want to share, Jenna?

Jenna:

Listening to First Nations voices. I think that is the most important thing anybody in this space can do. First Nations and voices of women, I think. Particularly in the development sector, traditionally there has been a majority of certain demographics, and we can definitely see that changing as time goes on. So I think really listening to both the younger generation, but also First Nations peoples and women in terms of what that could look like in the future. The First Nations foreign policy is exciting, from my perspective, but I think there's still a long road ahead. So in the meantime, while we're waiting for this policy to be released, I think just continuing to listen and learn, that's the most important thing for me.

Julie Ballangarry:

I think so too. Thank you both so much for your time today. This has been so amazing to listen to, and you're both so inspiring and you're going to do so much in this field, and I really urge the listeners to find out more, look into these wonderful women and what they do. But yeah, thank you both so much for your time today. It has been an absolute pleasure to yarn with you both.

Alice:

Thanks, Julie. It's been really lovely to be a part of it with you and Jenna.

Jenna:

Thanks, Julie. Thanks for having us.

Julie Ballangarry:

Well, that's all for today. Thank you so much to Alice and Jenna for joining me. Until next time, yaarri yarraang. In case you were wondering, yaarri yarraang is from my language, the Gumbaynggirr language. It means goodbye, but it also means this way or in this direction, or it can mean a change of state. Yaarri can also mean a change of any kind, for instance, a change in place, direction, state, time, or subject. I think that these two little words hold so much meaning and they're perfect for this podcast, which is all about changing the direction or state of foreign policy. So again, yaarri yarraang. This podcast was executively produced and edited by Paria Tahazadeh and co-produced by myself, Julie Ballangarry, Alice Ridge, Carla Kweifio-Okai, and Annelise Lecordièr.