

## **Refreshing the COAG Targets.**

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The successful development of policy in Indigenous Affairs and its subsequent administration is dependent on the participation of the Indigenous people themselves. At a theoretical level at least, this is not a contested proposition.

While governments have indicated at various times their intentions to secure the participation of Indigenous Australians in the development and implementation of policies and programmes designed to advance their wellbeing, there is little evidence that these statements have been more than rhetorical. Intentions to devolve government decision making to the regional and local levels, so that Indigenous communities and organisations can be included in the decision-making processes have fallen well short of expectations.

Far from devolving decision making to the regional and local levels of government, in practice there continues to be an ever-increasing centralisation of the administration of Indigenous Affairs, seen most particularly at the national level. This in turn has resulted in the further alienation of indigenous Australians from the processes of government and the policies and programmes intended to assist them.

In its report entitled *Introducing Competition and Informed User Choice into Human Services, March 2018*, The Productivity Commission canvasses the delivery of human services to remote Indigenous Communities. The report states:

“Governments will need to adjust their structures and processes and build the capabilities of their staff to implement more localised (including place-based) approaches...

To move beyond rhetoric on community engagement and involvement, governments should shift the balance away from centralised decision making toward greater regional capacity and authority. To do this governments should give local staff more authority over local planning, engagement and service implementation. Government would need to support this transition by

authorising, resourcing and building the capacity and capability of staff working on the ground.” (p292)

In our view, it will be the performance of governments that, in large measure, will determine the success or otherwise of reaching whatever targets are set. As such, we see it as vital that the *governance of governments* is included in the COAG Targets framework and that governments provide far greater transparency and accountability in relation to their own performance.

If governments are to negotiate and form productive partnerships with indigenous communities, they will need to win the respect, confidence and trust of their Indigenous partners by way of being open and accountable for their actions. To enable Indigenous communities to make informed decisions about the more effective investment of funds, they must have greater transparency about government administration costs, spending provided to organisations, and program-level funding at regional and local levels.

Governments will need to make the necessary adjustments to their administrative structures to provide legal, administrative and accountability structures that enables them to locally engage and negotiate with Indigenous communities and Indigenous bodies.

It will be important to set credible markers that will enable the ongoing assessment of progress being made by governments in respect of the measures outlined above.

To this end, we propose the following as a way to monitor the performance of governments in their engagement with Indigenous communities, organisations and other stakeholders. We assert that unless markers of the kind outlined below, or something similar, are incorporated into the COAG target framework and governments move to change the way they do business with Indigenous people, whatever targets are set for the next ten years will be no more successful than the last.

## Proposed COAG Targets

### **Government engagement with Indigenous communities.**

All Governments acknowledge that Indigenous people are essential agents in achieving any of the closing the gap targets. Top down approaches that are conceived centrally and that take little account of local circumstances are a recipe for failure. Direct participation of Indigenous communities, particularly at the regional and local levels, will be essential if targets are to be achieved.

Therefore, all governments will commit to the following priorities that have as their objective enhancing the agency of indigenous peoples and the empowering of Indigenous communities which is essential to improve outcomes:

- **Direct participation of Indigenous Communities.**
  - Increasing the direct participation of Indigenous communities in developing Indigenous policies and the design and delivery of Indigenous programs.
- **Negotiated Partnerships.**
  - Increasing the development of negotiated partnerships between government and Indigenous communities in which the mutual responsibilities and obligations of both parties are clearly identified.
- **Regional and local decision making.**
  - Enhance and facilitate the development of regional and locally place-based decision making on the part of government agencies.
- **Transparency and accountability.**
  - Increasing transparency and accountability of government agencies in terms of government administration costs, spending provided to organisations, and program-level funding at regional and local levels.
- **Continuous evaluation.**
  - Establishment of processes inclusive of Indigenous participation, that provide for continuous evaluation of policies and programmes affecting Indigenous communities. Evaluations will include ongoing examination of the performance of governments in relation to the priorities endorsed by COAG.
- **Data sharing.**

- Enhancement of the collection of, and access by Indigenous communities to, regional and local level data. This will enable government and Indigenous communities to set priorities and to hold government and service providers to account.
- **Government administration.**
  - Development of government structures, administrative and accountability frameworks and capacity (legal, financial and administrative) to support the devolution of decision making within government agencies to the regional and local levels of their administrations in support of the principle of subsidiarity.

**In pursuit of these priorities, governments will take the specific actions set out below and against which government performance will be assessed and reported on within the COAG framework on an annual basis:**

All governments commit to the establishment of appropriate regional and local structures within their agencies which will have the legal, financial and administrative capacity to engage and negotiate regional and place-based agreements directly with Indigenous communities and organisations.

All governments commit to achieving greater regional and local coordination of the delivery of services to Indigenous communities consistent with negotiated agreements between the representatives of indigenous communities and relevant government agencies.

All governments commit to the development of open and more transparent lines of accountability on the part of government and third-party agencies appropriate to the regional and local funding, design and delivery of services to indigenous communities.

All governments commit to engage fully with Indigenous Australians in the processes of developing, designing, collecting and accessing data, with a greater emphasis on the use of regional and local data being made freely available to Indigenous communities.