

CLOSING THE GAP – A WILCANNIA PERSPECTIVE ON EMPLOYMENT TARGETS

The Australian Human Rights Commissions 2017 Close the Gap – Progress and Priorities Report stated that the recent report of the National Audit Office on Closing the Gap showed “across nearly every government funded program, initiative or portfolio responsibility we see the continuation of imposed, unengaged and often rushed service delivery.”

The result of imposed and unengaged service delivery can be seen in remote or isolated communities such as Wilcannia where the target of halving the gap in employment outcomes between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians within a decade (by 2018) does not include strategies to increase the number of jobs available in the community. The ABS figures from the 2016 census show that out of a population of 406 people aged between 19 and 65, there were 27 unemployed people in Wilcannia, 203 people in full time or part time employment and 11 “away from work” when the census data was collected. This leaves 165 not accounted for and as the number of Community Development Program participants ranges between 135 to 145 it is assumed that this is where they are placed - neither employed or unemployed.

The CDP as it is currently structured does not meet the needs of an isolated community with very limited employment opportunities. The focus is on individuals rather than overall economic disadvantage. Participants are locked into working for the dole in whatever system is currently operating – Work for the Dole becomes the only work choice. There is little incentive for participants to undertake training for non-existent jobs and funds cannot be accumulated locally to set up small businesses. Only a program which supports the development of small sustainable locally owned and operated businesses would help develop the community economy and provide valued employment. Such a program would need to be shaped at a local level and provided with the appropriate support and resources until it is self-sufficient. The Indigenous Entrepreneurs Fund should be the vehicle for such a program but the two programs are not supporting each other at the local level. A great deal of effort is put into ensuring that CDP participants are fulfilling their obligations but there is no effort put into implementing a program that should be helping to close the gap between work for the dole as a way of life and economic development for an economically disadvantaged community.

Any organization involved in the first round of IAS funding will know the outcome of “imposed, unengaged and rushed service delivery.” An initiative which was supposed to move funding from large NGOs to Aboriginal organisations was spectacularly unsuccessful because it was rushed and badly designed. NGOs were still funded but many community based organisations missed out. The smaller organisations did not have the resources necessary to complete an application which even professional submission writers acknowledged was a “dogs Breakfast”. The Wilcannia Local Aboriginal Land Council applied unsuccessfully for funding for a project which it believed would begin to address a number of the Closing the Gap targets. The program was to provide training in a variety of repair and maintenance skills by repairing houses on Aboriginal owned properties and then set up a small business which would provide R & M for all housing in Wilcannia. All up there was employment for twenty people in a much

needed, viable, locally owned and run enterprise. In addition it is recognized that housing improvements are a contributing factor to improved health and educational outcomes.

A current agreement between Murdi Paaki Regional Enterprise Corporation (MPREC) and the Wilcannia Local Aboriginal Land Council (WLALC) could provide the starting point for an alternative approach to self-sufficiency. The agreement in place permits MPREC to use a WLALC owned property as the base for a number of participant activities. The property is a commercially zoned block of an acre with a large shed and a caretaker's cottage. MPREC pays no rent but has spent a considerable amount of money on infrastructure upgrades. Activities based at the yard include a small olive grove, citrus trees, furniture making and a yard maintenance crew. A Certificate II in Civil Construction was recently run at the property.

Funding the Land Council to work with the job service provider to develop building repairs and maintenance business, a small olive oil production business and a yard maintenance business are all possibilities if money made from these enterprises could be reinvested in a community fund. Participants could earn additional income, necessary equipment would be supplied and infrastructure developed from this fund. Eventually these would become independent entities providing employment and genuine economic development.

Communities like Wilcannia can see ways to integrate a variety of strategies designed to meet the Closing the Gap targets. All it takes is the willingness to support local initiatives not continue to impose programs based on preconceived ideas of effective solutions.