Urban community enablement beyond service delivery

Purpose

This submission suggests that 'resetting the relationship' requires a resetting of the approach itself, and in doing so, critiques the approach while also making recommendations for alternatives.

Background

I write this submission based on nearly 20 years of research experience collaborating with Aboriginal people, communities and organisations in Australia, mostly in urban New South Wales, and more recently internationally. I am a sociologist and socio-legal scholar, and a Fellow at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research at the Australian National University.

Below I focus on CTG in urban areas and resetting the relationship (Question 1), while giving a brief statement in relation to culture (Question 4).

Recommendations

1. Resetting the relationship requires a change in not only the way Indigenous policy is enacted at the Federal level, but also the way engagement and business (especially contractual relationships) are conducted and entered into with urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, communities and organisations.

2. Urban community enablement (read empowerment) is the way forward for CTG. While this is not a new message, thinking about how this is achieved is. This could be achieved through treaties/agreements/accords focusing on community enablement around community building and development (not simply service delivery or economic development), adopting multifaceted local approaches as stand-alone arenas for policy making (not one-size-fits-all). Solutions based on community needs. This is supported by international research. Urban indigenous service delivery models exist (e.g. federally-driven Canadian Urban Aboriginal Strategy, which commenced in 1997, and, for example, resulted in individual metro strategies like the Vancouver Metro Aboriginal Strategy, which focused on improving the socioeconomic condition of Metro Vancouver's Aboriginal community via partnerships and service delivery). Service delivery models have not been that effective. Policymakers need to move beyond service delivery to local treaties/agreements/accords linked to community enablement, and the transferring of substantial financial resources to communities through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Based Organisations (CBOs). For example, there needs to be a reinvestment in the building of urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social infrastructure (community organisations, facilities, services, and supporting infrastructure) and greater autonomy at the local level. In moving forward, policymakers need to be mindful that agreement-making in Australia does not have a successful history (from native title and Indigenous Land Use Agreements (Howard-Wagner 2010a, 2010b) to Shared Responsibility Agreements (Howard-Wagner 2010c)). So, how this approach is designed matters. Further research is needed. While there can be important distinctions between jurisdictional context and peoples, substantial international scholarship exists in this space; it needs to be gathered for policy to be well informed. Close attention could also be paid to the New South Wales OCHRE Local Decision Making (LDM) model, which is a flexible Accord model – service delivery/community building/economic development – based on local needs.

3. Resetting the relationship also involves addressing injustice, racism and discrimination. Policy reflects viewpoints that suggest Indigenous disadvantage is a social product of contemporary socioeconomic inequality, situating it within a political economy of poverty (Howard-Wagner 2017, Walter 2009, Walter & Sagger 2007). While

policymakers have been concerned with removing the barriers that prevent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from fully participating as Australian citizens in Australian society, the COAG National Indigenous Reform Agreement (Closing the Gap), in its various iterations from 2009 to 2018, is a policy premised on the rights to work, to good health, to a sound education, and to a decent home (Howard-Wagner 2017:8). This approach dissociates Indigenous disadvantage from an understanding of past policies of racial ordering, dispossession and trauma, and contemporary forms of racism (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson 2016:784, Howard-Wagner 2018 forthcoming). Sociologists, like Professor Maggie Walter and myself, argue that Indigenous poverty, or disadvantage as it is referred to in Australia, is also a product of social/racialised relations. Closing the Gap thus requires addressing deeper racialised societal inequalities in Australia. That is, historical and contemporaneous racialised social relations matter around CTG.

4. Resetting the relationship requires that we stop thinking about culture as a stand-alone concept. Culture should inform and be fundamental to and embedded within all dimensions of CTG, including the way that policy is made and how programs and services are developed. What is more, culture is the fundamental ingredient missing from national one-size-fits-all approaches to and the mainstream service delivery organisations involved in CTG, making them simply western, mainstream approaches to CTG and thus often ineffective for this reason. Mainstream one-size-fits-all programs and services are often alienating and disempowering. Mainstream one-size-fits-all approaches sit in stark contrast with locally developed urban CTG programs and services that are underpinned by Aboriginal knowledges, systems, and teachings incorporating, for example, Aboriginal stories and language and forefronting the role of Elders as teachers and healers. Aboriginal knowledges, systems, and practices of culture in CTG programs and services at the local urban level functioned as a positive, active and empowering tool for CTG. (Howard-Wagner 2016)

Background: Gaps, disadvantage, deficits and what the problem is

Indigenous disadvantage is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon and 'wicked problem'. A sociological lens views Indigenous disadvantage as cumulative and intergenerational, and generated and affected by a broad range of historical, social, political and economic factors. The sociological perspective of disadvantage also focuses on the structure and organisation of society and how that relates to both individuals lives and social problems. Disadvantage is considered a societal injustice. This lens also looks at what creates disadvantage in society. A sociological lens also turns its attention to how policy in this area contributes to the problem, creating further injustices and loss of rights. Through this lens the challenges concern how to achieve a balance between the role of social structure, the distribution of resources, and individual agency. It also adopts a learning and development perspective of disadvantage in which the sociological solution is tied to rights and justice, and individual and mutual group decision-making that empowers people in CTG (Sopho & Wicks 2017:245).

This is complemented by the development studies literature, which argues that poverty alleviation is best achieved via civil society participation in local decision-making and community enablement (read empowerment) (Helmsing 2004, Shatkin 2016).

By way of example, my recent research illustrates the disabling effects of social service market enablement on the capacity of Aboriginal CBOs in parts of New South Wales to continue to engage in CTG by adopting local solutions. These local solutions were forefronting Aboriginal culture and ways of doing business. Social service market enablement at both the Federal and State level is an example of what Mitchell Dean describes as governments creating a market where a market did not formerly exist (Dean 2004:161). The intent of State and Federal governments has been to create an effective, efficient and better-quality social service delivery through competitive tendering and results-based management (Howard-Wagner 2016, 2018a, Howlett et al. 2017), as well as new efficiencies through forms of government monitoring and regulation, such as accreditation and governance training (Howard-Wagner 2016). Overall, the

nub of social service market enablement as it relates to models of New Public Management (NPM) is new funding, contractual, accountability, and accreditation mechanisms, and competitive funding arrangements, which form the basis of regulatory system-centred social service delivery reforms (Howard-Wagner 2016:89). Social service market enablement includes one-size-fits-all service delivery and rolling out blanket national programs, which are often highly punitive and/or highly regulative in nature. This concerns too how governments use a 'stick' rather than a 'carrot' in government approaches to CTG. This propensity for the neoliberal 'stick' approach explains why CTG programmes targeting indicators, such as early childhood, education and employment, are highly punitive in nature around say parenting (early childhood), school attendance (education) and workforce participation (employment). This is not only evident the Northern Territory, but in the south-eastern urban areas of Australia. So comparatively, Australia sits on a policy spectrum in terms of the entrenchment of CTG programs and services within the hard-line social service market culture and its approach shows a heavy reliance on particular principles around the way governments do business in this market. This is coupled with a deficit-based mentality around why gaps exist.

A component of my research concerns how the deficit mentality coupled with social service market enablement has affected the capacity of urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander CBOs to engage in the business that they were set-up to do, including in their own way engage in CTG locally (Howard-Wagner 2016, 2017, 2018). My research is premised on the belief that urban Aboriginal CBOs have a distinctive role in society in relation to urban Aboriginal peoples and their rights to self-determination and community development. They have proven essential to advocacy, the maintenance of community development, and the creation of new social infrastructure, with their success resulting in both economic and social outcomes. It is this research that has also found that it is the deficit mentality around organisational capacity, which has led to governments taking a far more top-down programmatic and service delivery approach in Indigenous affairs, which has not only diluted, but actually undermined the capacity of successful long-standing urban Aboriginal CBOs to develop CTG solutions. For example, many successful urban Aboriginal CBOs existed, who in their own way were contributing to CTG. Urban Aboriginal CBOs lost this capacity in the rolling out of one-size-fits-all programs and prescriptive programmatic contractualism in relation to the delivery of CTG programs. In doing so, governments 'threw the baby out with the bath water'.

Little policy consideration has been given to the disabling effect of social service market enablement in terms of the valuable urban Aboriginal-driven community development and social infrastructure that existed and how this previously contributed to CTG, for example. My research shows how CTG approaches in Australia are counterintuitive to what international research demonstrates, which is that CTG-type approaches are far more successful when CBOs are enabled to deliver local solutions for CTG among their people and communities (Howard-Wagner 2018 forthcoming). This was generally the mandate of CBOs when they were set up by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.

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