

## **Closing the Gap – Refresh or Start Afresh?**

### **Submission to the Closing the Gap Refresh March 2018**

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This submission reflects at least 15 years of research among Aboriginal and Islander communities and the governments and non-government agencies that work with them; over 25 years working in international development to address chronic poverty in some of the most remote and challenging parts of the world, and simultaneous involvement in Aboriginal development in Australia; as well as lived experience of over 20 years within a large Aboriginal family, and voluntary work with Aboriginal people since the early 1980s. It brings insights from all these experiences to bear on the current context of Indigenous Affairs and efforts, particularly over the last 20-25 years, to improve the lives of Indigenous people.<sup>1</sup> I will focus particularly on certain questions in the Discussion paper, notably:

- What is needed to change the relationship between government and community?
- What indicators should governments focus on to best support the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples? Should governments focus on indicators such as prosperity, wellbeing or other areas?
- Should Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture be incorporated in the Closing the Gap framework? How?

### **Introduction**

My argument in brief is that Closing the Gap, rather than being refreshed, should be abandoned. It has failed against most of its own targets; and recent data from the 2016 Census shows poverty increasing in parts of Northern Australia in particular. Government and First People need to start afresh (recognising that all past experience will be inform any new relationship). Business as usual has to change to support Indigenous-led development in a new self-determining framework.

A new approach to policy should be based on a very different relationship between governments and First Peoples than the current one. The Indigenous aspiration for that new relationship was articulated most powerfully in the Uluru Statement from the Heart in 2017. The aspiration articulated there for recognition of Indigenous sovereignty has been, in various forms, the aspiration of First People for as long as I can remember<sup>2</sup>. Whilst other settler colonial states have acknowledged this in their own territories, and entered into treaties with First Nations, Australia seems to want to deny the historical reality. In doing so, we deny people's own family and community experiences of loss and dispossession and their long struggle to reassert some control over their own lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Although I work at CAEPR it does not reflect a "CAEPR position" as there is no such thing. CAEPR respects the academic freedom of its staff. This is my personal view.

<sup>2</sup> See for example, Recognition Rights and Reform A Report to Government on Native Title Social Justice Measures ATSIIC 1995 for a clear statement about the need for such recognition.

My international experience tells me that deep-seated grievances do not go away – they persist and gnaw at the fabric of societies; they need to be addressed. And while achieving self-determination may not automatically lead to huge material improvements overnight, in the longer term, with the right support, it will improve lives. Importantly, the psychological effect is powerful when colonised peoples experience their freedom and can make their own decisions for which they are accountable to their own people.

The Uluru Statement called for a Voice to Parliament, and also called for a Makarrata Commission to oversee agreement-making and truth telling. What people are calling for is the right to be self-determining, to have a major say in decisions that affect them, and to be recognised as First Peoples, not just disadvantaged citizens. Starting from this basis would change the relationship dynamic and transform the outcomes. This is what Indigenous people articulated in 1995, and they still articulate today (see the Principles For Indigenous Social Justice and the Development of Relations Between The Commonwealth Government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples articulated in Recognition, Rights and Reform 1995, in Appendix A).

### **The problem of mainstreaming**

The ‘mainstreaming’ policy adopted in 2000 by the Australian Government and COAG , which underpins Closing the Gap, shifted this country away from what had, from the early 1970s (soon after the Commonwealth government had powers in this area) until the late 1990s, been a gradual development of a self-determination policy agenda, a gradual recognition of rights (e.g. land rights, native title rights), and the development of a contemporary form of regional Indigenous governance through ATSIC across the nation. After around 25 years in which it slowly developed, this policy was deemed by the Australian political elite to have failed, although no-one asked Indigenous people or their representatives if they thought this was the case, how they wanted to see policy, funding and programs improve, or what they needed in addition to some slowly emerging rights to achieve the kind of development that those rights might facilitate. There were reports galore that would have given strong guidance on what Indigenous people thought might improve their circumstances (e.g. The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1991), Recognition, Rights and Reform (1995), and a 2003 Review of ATSIC (Hannaford et al 2003) had they been heeded.

Since 2000 the ‘re-colonisation’ of Indigenous people has proceeded apace, and Indigenous governance, decision-making and expertise has been overridden by ‘mainstream’ processes that involve increasingly controlling tenders and contract arrangements. Indigenous organisations that formed in the 1970s and 1980s (or even later) to reflect self-determination within a framework of limited self-management, if they survived this shift in policy (not all did) , found themselves tied more and more to achieving and reporting on the specific contract objectives of government, often to do with the regulation of individual lives, rather than reflecting the self-determination agenda they started out with; accountable to their communities for meeting particular aspirations. Self-determination remains elusive today. A number of Indigenous people and their organisations are moving towards economic independence, but many are not yet there; and while economic self-determination is extremely valuable, political self-determination remains the inherent right of *all* First Nation peoples. Both are necessary.

Persisting with this type of mainstreaming, and a one-size-fits-all top down strategy is simply not going to work. Mainstream services on the whole do not provide the culturally informed and culturally safe spaces for Indigenous people, so they do not use them. Whilst this situation needs to improve, the fact remains that Indigenous specific services, under Indigenous control, know how to work with their people and therefore more likely to achieve better outcomes than mainstream providers. The Indigenous sector must be valued and strengthened as both a political voice for Aboriginal people at local, regional and national levels and as the best mode of delivering services and programs.

There are two areas that stand out however, for successfully blending mainstreaming with a level of Indigenous autonomy: Health, which works through the Aboriginal community controlled health sector, and until 2014, Environment, which worked very successfully with the Indigenous Protected Areas program and Working on Country program. Both allowed some freedom for Indigenous organisations and people to achieve their outcomes in their own ways. There is a risk that the type of contracting systems described above could jeopardise these successful programs. If mainstreaming persists, ways need to be found that allow for far greater Indigenous autonomy within broad frameworks.

Finally, it is obvious but it needs to be reiterated, that there is a huge difference between the contexts of Western Sydney and the Kimberley or Central Australia, to name just a few locations. First People in each location need to have a major say in what is priority for them and then governments need to work with them to prioritise the steps to fulfil their aspirations. Programs need to be place-based to reflect these vastly different contexts.

### **Resetting relationships and changing processes**

The concept of Closing the Gap, or overcoming Indigenous disadvantage, is about major social change for a settler society and the colonised peoples. It cannot be engineered like a bridge. This requires people and social groups to change their perceptions, change their aspirations, and change their behaviours. Changing people involves working closely with them, and supporting them to change; when people have been marginalised and oppressed, as Indigenous people have been in this country, it requires strengthening their capacities as individuals and their collective capacities through their organisations, to find a form of development that meets their aspirations and enables them to live well in contemporary society.

This task also requires major change in settler society, to acknowledge the trauma and hardship Indigenous people have gone through over many generations, and to be ready to accept new terms for the relationship – terms which no longer oppress, but which accept the history, and make amends through formally establishing new relationships which respect two sovereignties. Other settler countries have done this; Australia alone has not. Political leadership is required.

More important than reformulating precise targets or anything else, is to change the relationship between the Commonwealth (and other jurisdictions) and Indigenous people in Australia. This is because of the calls from Indigenous people referred to above but also because:

- the context is changing at State and Territory levels;

- lessons from earlier experience emphasise the need to change relationships and processes; and
- there is a need to enable Indigenous people to build and rebuild governance systems and processes where these have been dismantled over the last 13 years.

a) **The context is changing at State and Territory levels;**

In August 2017, Aboriginal Affairs New South Wales and the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) at the Australian National University co-hosted an Interstate Forum in Sydney. It brought together government representatives working in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs from seven of Australia's eight jurisdictions<sup>3</sup>, to share good practice and insights on Aboriginal governance, local decision making and formal relationship setting between governments and First Nations people. It reported that:

"Each jurisdiction demonstrated they are progressing new relationships in different ways, however common themes were identified throughout the presentations. These included:

**Leader to leader approach:** Jurisdictions are working towards place based, often regional engagements, with an intention of shifting more decision-making control to First Nations groupings, while developing 'leader to leader' relationships between government and First Nations leaders.

**High-level government leadership:** There is a need for government leadership and commitment, including accountability arrangements which can bring all of government along, and ensure government is able to work differently; capacity has to be built within government to forge new relationships

**Investment of resources:** Jurisdictions indicated a strong need for the investment of additional resources into the development of First Nation bodies that governments are relating to so that they are able to come to the table as equal partners; recognising and building on existing capacity

**Economic development:** Further work is needed to enhance economic development and employment initiatives such as procurement targets to accompany this process, along with cultural heritage, land, language and other significant policy areas that are important to First Nations people." (NSW Government 2017:4)

Treaties and associated policies and processes are now being developed or implemented in three major jurisdictions (South Australia<sup>4</sup>, Victoria and the Northern Territory), while the NSW Opposition and the ACT Government are now also talking about treaties. In NSW the policy of Local Decision Making is moving towards greater place-based decision-making about government services and the Northern Territory is moving in the same direction. In South Australia Aboriginal Regional Authorities are being formed to take greater control of services to Aboriginal people. These shifts signal that a number of jurisdictions have recognised the need to change their approach and are in the process of doing so. The Commonwealth's Empowered Communities may signal some shift at this level, but it affects

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<sup>3</sup> The WA Government was unable to attend.

<sup>4</sup> Although I am unclear any implications of the March 17 change of government in South Australia for their policies.

only eight places across Australia and has yet to demonstrate its potential. Whilst the frameworks in each jurisdiction vary, and not all seem clear or comfortable with the notion of internal treaty-making between two or more polities, they are all interested in at a minimum, devolution of some decision-making to Aboriginal people, and in some cases some transfer of resources or assets.

These place-based agreements and governance arrangements represent an opportunity for the Commonwealth, as well as for Aboriginal people. The Commonwealth needs to factor them into its decision-making about future policy. It would be extremely helpful if the Commonwealth Government could align its approaches to these opportunities for far greater place-based approaches through SA Aboriginal Regional Authorities, NSW Local Decision-Making groups and other local Aboriginal governance arrangements in the remaining jurisdictions. Where these do not exist, it would be extremely valuable to start the slow process of assisting in the rebuilding of some regional Indigenous governance infrastructure through which all jurisdictions could work in future years. This cannot be rushed, but had it been undertaken 25 or even 15 years ago, the nation would now have a whole network of strong regional governance bodies through which governments could work. At some point it has to be done; the sooner the better.

It should also be recognised that native title agreement making is also proceeding across the country, and in doing so it is giving official recognition to groups of Aboriginal peoples, providing them with some resources for development (which vary considerably across the jurisdictions and agreements). These groups represent a whole new layer of Indigenous governance which has to be considered and engaged with as Commonwealth policy moves forward.

#### **b) Lessons from earlier experience demand change**

There is a plethora of reports and evaluations about previous and current policy and programs which all emphasise the importance of governance and participatory approaches. I reviewed a whole range of literature for a report published in 2013 by the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse on Engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People (Hunt 2013: 3) and drew out what we know about what works in government engagement with Indigenous people:

Effective engagement is a sustained process that provides Indigenous people with the opportunity to actively participate in decision making from the earliest stage of defining the problem to be solved. Indigenous participation continues during the development of policies—and the programs and projects designed to implement them—and the evaluation of outcomes. Engagement is undertaken with an understanding of the historical, cultural and social complexity of specific local or regional Indigenous contexts and with a genuine attempt to share power in relationships that foster mutual trust. It requires adequate governance arrangements. It also requires capacity within both the Indigenous community and the governments (and/or others) involved to enable the Indigenous community to negotiate their aspirations and for governments (and/or others) to respond in a flexible and timely way. Engagement is most successful when the parties have agreed clear outcomes they want to achieve, are clear about roles and responsibilities and steps to discharge them, and jointly identify indicators of success and monitoring and evaluation processes that meet their respective needs. Although we don't yet know how effective engagement based on the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples will be, the Declaration presents an

emerging international human rights standard for engagement based on free, prior and informed consent, a concept which is only now being explored in practice.

Subsequent to that research, the 2013 Evaluation report of the 5-year National Partnership Agreement on Remote Services Delivery (NPRSD) (Jan 2009-Dec 2013) reinforced the point that not enough attention was paid in the 29 Remote Service Delivery sites to governance and capacity development.

The NPRSD was intended to contribute to governments improving residents' access to a wider range of better coordinated services, to improve governance and leadership and improve social and economic participation in these communities. An evaluation of the program highlighted that 'tensions in the RSD model between a focus on service planning, coordination and accountability as opposed to partnership and engagement with communities have created challenges during its implementation. .. Government's core focus on the planning and delivery of enhanced services has tended to overshadow systematic attention to community governance & leadership....some stakeholders perceive the NPA RSD as undermining Indigenous aspirations for community-controlled service delivery by favouring expeditious expansion of services over longer-term efforts to develop Indigenous service-delivery capacity.'" (NPARSDE 2013:48-49). The evaluation also argued that government staff did not have the skills for community development approaches to build community capacity. In the end, it made the point that service delivery alone will not overcome Indigenous disadvantage.

Once again, in this program as in many others, the rush to deliver meant that longer term goals of building Indigenous governance and capacity to partner effectively with governments was neglected. This has been happening ever since the shift to mainstreaming from about 2000 onwards. So 15 years has now passed, and opportunities to build significant Indigenous capacity over that period have been lost. This is a result of short term results-based thinking, particularly when the results to be measured do not encompass developing Indigenous governance and leadership capacity. Until the governance capacity to partner with each other strengthens in both governments and Indigenous communities, the results will continue to be below what could be possible. Slow steady development of Indigenous governance is an essential prerequisite to successful Indigenous development. But that also has to be matched with improving governments' capacity to work in a more responsive way with Aboriginal governance arrangements.

A PhD thesis (Walden 2015) about the implementation of the RSD in one location further demonstrated in some detail the challenges for government in supporting genuinely community-driven development. This thesis showed clearly that Commonwealth government systems and processes were unable to respond to positive local initiatives which could have facilitated significant changes in this community, meaning that real opportunities for community-driven change were lost.

This problem is not confined to the Australian Government. The Queensland Productivity Commission's 2017 *Report into service delivery in remote and discrete Aboriginal communities* also found the same:

“In our view, the key to sustained change is to address the underlying incentives inherent in the current system. This means a change to the overall policy and service delivery architecture as follows:

- structural reform to transfer accountability and decision-making closer to where service users are—to regions and communities
- service delivery reform to put communities at the centre of service design
- economic reform to facilitate economic participation and community development.

These elements will need to be underpinned by:

- capability and capacity building within government, service providers and communities to support a new way of doing things
- timely and transparent data collection and reporting to support performance and accountability.” (Queensland Productivity Commission 2017:3).

There is an urgent need for governments to work differently with Indigenous people and their organisations, within a new framework which respects their knowledge, their rights, their priorities, and their ways of approaching their own priorities and aspirations.

### **c) Governance impacts of last 15 years mean there is a need to rebuild**

As most of the above reports make clear, Indigenous governance needs building or rebuilding to enable the genuine exercise of greater self-determination over programs and services, and indeed detailed policies at local and regional levels. Such governance must be perceived as legitimate by those it purports to govern and it must be effective in delivering programs for them. Successful Aboriginal organisations have to meet the requirements of two operating environments – the settler system and those of the Indigenous communities that they serve. These are not separate systems; they are intertwined, but they often place quite different demands on the organisations, making their governance and management far more complex than that of a ‘mainstream’ organisation. However, it is this ability to manage in both worlds that enables these organisations to succeed where mainstream ones struggle or cannot deliver for Aboriginal people.

A further consideration is whether an Indigenous governance body is being expected to simply deliver the non-Indigenous government’s services and programs using that non-Indigenous government’s frameworks and organisational forms, or whether Indigenous governance bodies are genuinely driving and directing the development, and making the decisions about how resources will be utilised and the organisational arrangements which will reflect their ways of working. These are two quite different approaches. Cornell and Kalt emphasise that they have not observed sustained economic development where institutions other than a Native nation take the major decisions about development strategy (Cornell & Kalt 2007). The devolution of power – including decision-making and resource use – is critical to success. But along with that must go the growing capacity to exercise that power effectively, through well-developed institutions, policies, implementation processes, monitoring and evaluation strategies, communication and accountability mechanisms to the constituency.

I hesitate to suggest more change in the governance of Indigenous Affairs, yet it does seem to be essential if Indigenous-driven development is to flourish, and it requires Indigenous people to work out governance arrangements that will help them move in the directions

they want to go as well as devising far more responsive government systems to support them.

### **Focus on wellbeing indicators**

Internationally there has been considerable work on what Indigenous people mean by wellbeing (see for example, Taylor 2008; Maori Statistics Framework (Wereta & Bishop 2006), and there has been a limited amount of work in Australia on what specific groups of Indigenous people mean by wellbeing (see for example Greiner 2005, Yap and Yu 2016). All these studies indicate that the current Closing the Gap Targets fail to capture the aspirations of Indigenous people, in particular in relation to land recovery and the Indigenous estate, language use, recognition of Indigenous governance, ability to practice free prior and informed consent, Indigenous rights in national laws, number of agreements with nation groups etc. (Taylor 2008).

The Australian Bureau of Statistics carried out a major study on Indigenous wellbeing, and identified nine domains that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people saw as important to their wellbeing. These domains are:

1. Culture, heritage and leisure (which includes access to country, language maintenance etc)
2. Family, kinship and community
3. Health (with a broad concept of health evident, including access to family link up services, for example)
4. Education, learning and skills
5. Customary, voluntary and paid work
6. Income and economic resources
7. Housing, infrastructure and services
8. Law and justice
9. Citizenship and governance.

The ABS suggests that,

“Central to the concept of wellbeing is a sense of identity. Identity is defined by the individual’s roles, responsibilities and experiences. Rather than being a component of a specific domain, it is an underlying feature of many of the elements and transactions identified throughout the whole framework.

Similarly, a person’s links to the broader community through their social and formal networks (otherwise known as social capital) will also impact on their wellbeing, and likewise is integral to all domains in the framework.” (ABS 2010)

While this is a settler interpretation of Indigenous concepts it shows their breadth and the centrality of identity.

Work on Aboriginal wellbeing undertaken by the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage found similar domains identified. It used these to develop a tool for participatory assessment of Aboriginal wellbeing and identification of priorities for action. Interestingly,

this tool also used a strengths-based approach, and was reportedly well received by Aboriginal communities in New South Wales that trialled it for that reason<sup>5</sup>.

The domains it identified are:

- Access to country
- Community health and safety
- Cultural identity
- Economic strength and development
- Infrastructure and services
- Leadership, power and influence
- Sense of community

Whilst the 'Leadership, power and influence' domain looks unique to this framework, some aspects of it are found in the ABS 'Citizenship and governance' domain, in relation to community leadership.

These two wellbeing frameworks – one based on national, the other state-wide processes – suggest some important aspects of Aboriginal wellbeing that have until recently or even until now been absent from any Closing the Gap targets. These include most importantly access to country; cultural identity (which is strongly related to country), language, community strength, leadership, law and justice.

Others have worked with smaller groups of Aboriginal people on their concepts of wellbeing. Romy Greiner and colleagues for example, conducted research among Nywaigi traditional owners in north Queensland and found that for the Nywaigi, the domain 'Family and community' is the 'single most important domain of wellbeing, based on the close ties that exist among members of (extended) family' (Greiner et al. 2005: 2). In the diagram below, which illustrates their concept of well-being, the domains with the three thickest lines, indicating that they are the most important (family and community, country & culture, and health), are highly interconnected. Thus while areas such as education and employment covered by the Closing the Gap targets are encompassed in Nywaigi concepts of wellbeing, they are not in fact the most significant domains from their perspectives, although health clearly is. Yet the concept of health is very much tied to access to country and culture and relationships to family and community. In fact, Nywaigi traditional owners **see the key to improved wellbeing as the 'reconnection of Nywaigi people with country and culture'** (Greiner 2005: 3).

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<sup>5</sup> Sadly, at the change of Government in March 2011 this wellbeing framework was abandoned, yet another in a long list of positive initiatives that many people put time and effort into devising, which have fallen victim to the electoral cycle and are no longer accessible.

**Figure: Consolidated model of Nywaigi wellbeing**

Note: the thickness of lines indicates the relative importance/contribution of the domain to wellbeing



This view that country and culture are central to wellbeing is widespread and must be taken seriously. Thus any new framework needs to far better incorporate Aboriginal notions of what is needed to achieve Aboriginal wellbeing. Health, education and employment are there – but they are embedded in other important concepts and priorities. Yap and Yu (Yap & Yu 2016; Yap 2017) also worked with Yawuru on their wellbeing concepts with some similar findings about the importance of country and relationships. They went further than others have and developed some indicators for Yawuru wellbeing which would be worth examining. However, they are Yawuru-specific, and cannot be nationally applied.

Unless the new approach is embedded in Indigenous frameworks and views of wellbeing it will continue to miss the mark. Work could be undertaken to develop some negotiated and high level wellbeing indicators, but ideally indicators would be negotiated at regional and even local levels which would be place-specific.

**Build on strengths and Indigenous values for successful Indigenous Development**

The second key point is that the approach must be strengths-based. Which means it must get away from the concept of “Gaps”. The goal should be broadly related to Indigenous wellbeing and holistic development, with an emphasis on achieving economic development for community wellbeing and it should build on the assets and strengths available in regions. These may include human and institutional strengths, land and culture, available skills and capacities, as well as physical infrastructure and other resources. Greater knowledge in

government of how to work with asset-based community development (Mathie and Cunningham 2002) and the five capitals approach could be valuable (Bebbington 1999, Davies et al 2008).

Some research from overseas suggests that goals must be based in Indigenous values. In New Zealand, two important research projects indicate the importance of Maori values and identity underpinning Maori development. The Maori Development Project and the University of Waikato worked with four iwi (a group of hapu or tribal groups) to explore their aspirations for 'economic, social and cultural development' (Bishop & Taikiwai 2002:31). This research sought to understand how iwi undertook planning for sustainable development. One of its most significant findings was that the first stage of planning within iwi involved 'identifying and understanding Maori values' (Harmsworth et al 2002:45). These were seen to provide the guiding philosophy underpinning the planning, and many values were identified – in fact 19 specific Maori values were commonly identified in iwi plans.

The second research project explored the 'critical success factors for Maori economic development.' (Carter et al 2011:6). This research explored how collectively-owned assets at various levels (whanua, hapu, iwi) could be used in economic development. In the four iwi that participated in this research, the emphasis is on the importance of Maori values, protocols and customs as fundamental underpinnings of their economic development strategies. It is this determination to undertake development whilst maintaining Maori identity and values that is characteristic of Maori economic development according to this research. Another characteristic is the intergenerational focus and the fact that economic development is not seen as an end in itself, but is to contribute to the overall wellbeing of the iwi members, the hapu and whanau, indeed to build the overall 'social capital' of the iwi's Maori constituency. This recognises the importance of concepts of reciprocity, and cultural obligation in Maori relations. A further attribute is the importance of Maori knowledge frameworks and the significance of intergenerational knowledge transmission. This is not to suggest that knowledge and tradition are static, but to draw on experience and fundamental Maori principles to navigate the contemporary world.

This approach to economic development resonates far more with my experience of Australian Indigenous approaches than the concept of "prosperity".<sup>6</sup> It suggests that for Indigenous development to succeed it must be grounded in Indigenous values and frameworks (see also Hunt 2016).

### **Overcoming poverty and achieving wellbeing through empowerment**

While Aboriginal frameworks must shape policies and programs, Indigenous poverty and disadvantage will not be overcome unless Indigenous people have greater power in decision-making at every level. The relationship between disempowerment and chronic poverty is well recognised internationally, with writers such as Mosse (2007), Gaventa (2006), Kabeer (1999) and Cornwall (2002) in particular to the fore. In a major review article of links between culture, marginality and chronic poverty, Mosse emphasises the

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<sup>6</sup> Prosperity as a goal is not a word I have heard in Aboriginal communities – that is not the goal, on the whole; the goal is more usually living adequately, meeting all needs (including the extended family's needs) without stress, and thereby enabling wellbeing. Prosperity suggests financial wealth and affluence as the goal, but for Aboriginal people this is generally not the goal – money is only a means to an end – to improve peoples' lives. It is not an end in itself.

importance of two things: (1) a relational view of poverty, 'which understands persistent poverty as the consequence of historically developed economic and political relations' (Mosse 2007:1), rather than the idea of poverty as marginal to such relations; and (2) 'an approach that rejects methodological individualism and neo-liberal rational choice models, emphasising the importance of social processes and relations of power' (p1). Thus, he argues, poor people are 'adversely incorporated' into social and economic relations, and insufficient attention is given to the multiple dimensions of power, and the ways social processes perpetuate power inequalities and so perpetuate poverty.

For Mosse, the framing of the issue by the wider political system is extremely significant, and 'the politicisation of poverty is necessary for the empowerment of poor people' (p25), including their effective political representation. Their exclusion from such political agenda setting reinforces their poverty. Furthermore, poor peoples' 'culturally patterned behaviour' (p30) can invisibly maintain their situation, which Appadurai suggests limits their 'capacity to aspire' (cited in Mosse, p31). Overall, he concludes that changing the relations that maintain chronic poverty 'requires a *combination* of actions on different fronts, at different scales, and addressing different dimensions of powerlessness and poverty' (p32). For example, ideas about community development and empowerment alone will not be sufficient, but they can be important if combined with other strategies, such as advocacy on broader issues.

Research specifically about empowerment in Indigenous Australia suggests that Aboriginal conceptions of empowerment are very holistic. Work among Aboriginal people in the Kimberley region found that,

'..empowerment is understood as a process of healing that involves coming to terms with the past and present situations, dealing with the pain and redressing the ongoing inequality they and their communities experience. In this conception, healing, empowerment and leadership are seen as all part of one continuum...' (Dudgeon et al 2012:117).

This conception is broad, and emphasises redressing the inequality that has resulted from the history of dispossession, disruption of Indigenous societies, and the loss of governance and leadership which has resulted from this colonising process. Thus for Aboriginal Australians empowerment requires the restoration of leadership and governance where it has been lost or disrupted by the processes of colonisation, addressing the consequences of dispossession of land, and the healing of families and relationships. While each approach to empowerment can be valuable, it is important that approaches to empowerment are considered that enable greater control by Aboriginal people over the information and resources they need to improve their own and their communities' lives, as well as enabling their analysis, and their knowledge-base to inform these approaches. Transformatory change will occur when the structures and discourses of inequality are successfully challenged.

Empowerment also means that Indigenous people must participate in their own development, not have it done to them. This point is relevant to all marginalized people. A study which reviewed 84 participatory research studies of development covering 107 countries over the seven years to 2013 found that across the world:

- Sustainable development processes build local ownership, and bring local assets such as knowledge, culture and networks to the development process.

- Participatory processes need to be built into every stage of the development process: from inception; to design; from implementation to learning, monitoring and evaluation.
- Formal and informal networks are key to survival strategies and to empowerment, and should be prioritised as a focus of development.
- A lack of wellbeing (often characterised by poor mental health, a lack of dignity and no hope), is as important to address as material poverty. Participatory processes that empower people; that challenge stigma, and ensure that development enhances dignity and hope are crucial.(Leavy and Howard 2013:23)

These considerations all seem to be very relevant and important in Indigenous communities. A new policy framework and new relationships must embrace new processes that provide space for Indigenous people to participate fully at every level of decision-making.

### **A process of development**

Overcoming Aboriginal poverty and disadvantage is a process of development. Indigenous ideas about development resonate well with the idea of development as articulated by Indian economist Amartya Sen (Sen 1999), despite his somewhat individualistic view. Sen challenged economic growth as *the goal* of development. Sen's argument was that development represents *the expansion of individual human freedom to live a life that the person has reason to value*. In this view of development, people must be agents in their own development as only they can define their priorities and the choices they wish to make about the kinds of life they wish to lead.

For Sen, there are two key ideas; the first that *improvement in human lives* is the objective of development (in contrast to economic goals); the second, refers to *human agency* to create those improvements through policy and political change, which *requires empowerment*. Thus Sen's approach differs from one that emphasises the *supply* of commodities or services; and it differs from neoliberal economic theory which is underpinned by the notion of 'utility maximisation' – or the ability of a consumer to gain maximum needs satisfaction from a given amount of money or resources. For Sen, the underpinning idea is *the expansion of valued capabilities*. The significance of 'human rights, freedom and agency' is what distinguished Sen's theory from others (Fukuda-Parr 2003:304). And the value placed on the enormous range of possible capabilities is also important and 'can vary with the social context - from one community or country to another, and from one point in time to another' (Fukuda-Parr 2003:305).

The term 'capability' is very important in Sen's work. His theory holds that the social and economic context should enable people to expand their capabilities, by which he means their 'freedom to promote or achieve what they value doing or being' (Deneulin 2009 :31). He argued that *capabilities* reflect a person's *abilities* to achieve particular functionings (or the uses a person makes of the resources at their disposal). Sen has never proposed a list of universally accepted capabilities which might be evaluated, so his approach allows for diversity and difference. For Sen, development must be about the expansion of capabilities necessary for people *to lead a life which they have reason to value*. Most importantly, the focus is on expanding human choices, which are shaped by peoples' values and their rationalities - the worldviews which give meaning to their lives. The values which underpin

our choices are central to Sen's ideas about development. If our cultural context places different values on things we might choose, that is accounted for and embraced by Sen's theory, and the social group concerned would use its own methods to determine what it values. Sen's theory of development suggests that any new policy must provide for Indigenous people's values and world views to shape their own and their communities' choices about the kinds of development they want to improve their lives. This requires their agency and empowerment.

### **What does all this mean?**

*Q. 1. What is needed to change the relationship between government and community?*

- Some agreed principles to underpin how the Commonwealth Government will work with Indigenous people, similar to those proposed in 1995.
- focus on the processes of decision making shifting into Aboriginal hands and these processes being highly participatory
- investment in Indigenous governance building so that strong capacity is at regional and local levels
- government working in a partnership of respect and equality with First People and their organisations
- training for government staff to understand what is needed to facilitate and support Indigenous-driven processes
- change in government's own structures, processes and funding arrangements to enable more responsive government, and working with other jurisdictions to align programs as far as possible.

*Q2. What indicators should governments focus on to best support the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples? Should governments focus on indicators such as prosperity, wellbeing or other areas?*

The framework for indicators most likely to resonate with Indigenous people would be a wellbeing one, and I would expect that to emerge through adequate negotiation with Indigenous people (not just consultation). Economic development will be necessary to achieve wellbeing, but it is likely to be framed towards a wellbeing goal.

Policy making needs to be turned on its head. It needs to start at very local levels, with local organisations, and then coalesce ideas from these levels into some regional priorities agreed by regional Indigenous leaders. From these regional priorities some clear national or major regional themes and goals can emerge. Negotiated indicators can emerge from these goals at each level. Local priorities need to be respected and provision made with flexible funding arrangements to enable people to progress those priorities which lie outside any nationally or regionally common agendas. Thus indicators will vary in different locations, but some overall indicators may be discerned as the goals are aggregated up.

*Q3. Should Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture be incorporated in the Closing the Gap framework? How?*

If the framework is developed from the ground up, by negotiation with Indigenous people, culture will be incorporated through the process itself and the outcomes of that process. It will not be an 'add-on'. People will reflect their own aspirations informed by and embedded in their culture.

### **Final comments**

Policies must be coherent across the whole of government. One part of government cannot be trying to work in genuine partnership *with* First Peoples while another is disciplining Indigenous individuals for failing to behave according to 'mainstream' cultural expectations. This is totally contradictory and unhelpful. A new relationship with government must mean *with the whole of government*. Bringing the entire government onto the same page with the new framework (as well as aligning broadly with all other jurisdictions) will be a major task, but it is critical and will require leadership from Prime Minister and Cabinet.

Resourcing must be adequate to the tasks at hand. In some places the challenges are huge and some Indigenous families and individuals are in tremendous crisis. Services for drug and alcohol rehabilitation, and dealing with violence, trauma and healing are insufficient. Much more investment is needed in Aboriginal community-led services that can work in culturally-informed ways to tackle these tragic issues, as well as to ensure that continuing backlogs in housing<sup>7</sup> and other services are systematically tackled.

There is an urgency to all this as the Indigenous population is very young relative to the rest of the population and it is growing fast. Whilst many Indigenous people are doing well, inequality within the Indigenous population is also increasing (Markham et al 2018). This means that the lives of those missing out are very tough and they are enduring considerable hardship and stress as a result. It is extremely important to address the poverty facing many Indigenous people who are doing less well now, as failure to do so in this generation will see the problems escalate in future, making them even harder to resolve, and causing enormous human distress in the meantime.

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<sup>7</sup> Acknowledging that national partnership agreements on Remote housing since 2009 have improved the situation.

## **APPENDIX A**

### **PRINCIPLES FOR INDIGENOUS SOCIAL JUSTICE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF RELATIONS BETWEEN THE COMMONWEALTH GOVERNMENT AND ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLES**

1. The relationship between the Commonwealth Government and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia is founded in full acceptance and recognition of the fundamental rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to:
  - a. recognition of indigenous peoples as the original owners of this land, and of the particular rights that are associated with that status;
  - b. the enjoyment of, and protection for, the unique, rich and diverse indigenous cultures;
  - c. self-determination to decide within the broad context of Australian society the priorities and the directions of their own lives, and to freely determine their own affairs;
  - d. social justice and full equality of treatment, free from racism; and
  - e. exercise and enjoy the full benefits and protection of international covenants.

*Source: Recognition Rights and Reform: A Report to Government on Native Title Social Justice Measures, ATSIC, 1995.*

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