

Submission to the Closing the Gap Refresh: The need for structural reform to the current policy approach

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Key points:

- What is needed is structural reform to the policy making process rather than a 'refresh' of the same approach.
- Changing the language to be more 'strengths based' and focus on 'prosperity' is not sufficient and must be accompanied by that structural reform.
- The required reform would involve moving towards a policy model that genuinely facilitates 'development' in a way that is determined and controlled by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and represents the diversity of Indigenous aspirations.

This submission addresses the first set of questions raised in 'Closing the Gap: The Next Phase Public Discussion Paper' (2018:3):

1. How can governments, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, and businesses work more effectively together? What is needed to change the relationship between government and community?

The need for structural reform rather than a 'refresh' of the same approach

There is a widespread view that the way in which the Closing the Gap framework has been operationalised has tended to cause harm in at least three ways:

- It has tended to be assimilationist, ie. legitimising policy interventions in the name of statistical equality that erase or ignore the diverse aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (see e.g. Altman 2009, Altman & Fogarty 2010, Yap & Yu 2016a).
- It has tended to focus on deficits and reinforced perceptions that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are 'the problem' (see e.g. Pholi et al. 2009; Walter & Andersen 2013).
- It has contributed to a sense that improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is a technical issue, rather than being political and structural (Altman 2009), and so marginalises crucial issues like self-determination (Pholi et al. 2009).

Metrics in themselves are necessary and valuable, and there is likely to be merit in measuring progress against new indicators (eg. those relating to the functioning of the justice system and progress towards self-determination). However, metrics are never neutral and always require careful interpretive work in their construction and use, including contextualisation with qualitative knowledge. Without this, they can

'distort the complexity of social phenomena' (Merry 2016: 1) and legitimise policy interventions that are counterproductive. For example, the target of halving the gap in employment, divorced from broader evidence including of peoples' lived experience and aspirations, has contributed to policy decisions that have in fact widened the employment gap (see e.g. Jordan 2016, Markham & Biddle 2017).

Having indicators is not the problem, it is the way in which they are constructed and used. For this reason, simply coming up with new indicators is not a solution. What is needed is fundamental structural change in the way government relates to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, which puts self-determination at the forefront.

Changing the language to be more 'strengths based' and focus on 'prosperity' is not sufficient

Some of the language in the Closing the Gap: The Next Phase Public Discussion Paper is encouraging. It notes the need to recognise the strengths and diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples being the 'decision-makers over issues that impact their lives' (p.4). The 'refresh' process also includes an opportunity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to comment on the discussion paper and attend a number of consultation sessions.

However, these features are not sufficient to create the required structural change in the relationship between government and community. Some insight can be gleaned from efforts over the last five years to adapt the Overcoming Indigenous Advantage framework to a 'more strength-based approach' that incorporates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander conceptions of wellbeing. Despite this attempt, the enduring impression in the framework is one of an Indigenous 'problem' (Jordan forthcoming). At issue here is that efforts to reframe the OID are seeking to retrofit a strengths-based approach that is informed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives onto a framework designed to measure disadvantage and statistical gaps.

Rather than trying to make a deficit-based approach more 'culturally appropriate,' a more promising way forward would be to redesign the approach from the ground up (see e.g. Brough et al. 2004). The OID reports themselves recognise that the common success factors in 'things that work' to improve outcomes all reflect this bottom up, self-determined approach (SCRGSP 2016: 5.37).

What is required for structural reform?

The required reform would involve moving towards a policy model that genuinely facilitates 'development' in a way that is determined and controlled by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and represents the diversity of Indigenous aspirations

Fundamentally, indicator frameworks like Closing the Gap have embedded within them an ideology of what makes a 'good society' (see Morphy 2016). It should be noted that New Zealand turned away from its 1999 Closing the Gaps strategy because of its focus on deficits, towards a more successful approach that has sought

to move beyond 'Western models of wellbeing' (Kukutai & Taylor 2016: 13) and recognised 'that Māori must be able to succeed as Māori' (Comer 2008).

In practice, this has meant: a policy-led approach to understanding and progressing Māori aspirations; improving the relationship between Māori and government; and 'explicit recognition of Māori as capable and aspirational (rather than underperforming)' (Comer 2008). A number of projects have used these principles to articulate self-defined aspirational frameworks for Māori development, working from the ground up through Māori forums and assemblies to identify priorities from an iwi (kinship group or tribe) perspective (see for example Hingangaroa Smith et al. 2015: 32). This growing body of research has identified that Māori often see economic development as a means to achieving the realisation of 'culturally strong' and self-determining populations, rather than an end in itself (Carter et al. 2011: 18).

Applying this approach in Australia would require moving towards a policy model that facilitates 'development' in a way that is determined and controlled by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It would mean creating the institutional change required to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination. In this context, the proposal for a First Nations voice to parliament is significant, as are moves towards treaties in several states and the various models for accords and agreement-making. Davis's concern that rejecting a First Nations voice to parliament has already foreclosed the most important contribution to a Closing the Gap 'refresh' the government could have made should be taken seriously (in Davidson 2018). A new approach would also mean a reorientation to developing what Smith (2016: 129) calls 'culture-smart' data: that is, based on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' aspirations from the ground up, 'produced locally,' capturing 'local social units, conditions, priorities and concerns,' and 'culturally informed and meaningful' (see Yap & Yu 2016b for an Australian example).

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