



## **YAWOORROONG MIRIUWUNG GAJERRONG YIRRGEB NOONG DAWANG ABORIGINAL CORPORATION**

### **1. Do you have any general comments?**

The Close the Gap framework, while ambitious in nature, has never been streamlined in implementation and as such has not been successful in bridging the gap in Indigenous disadvantage since its inception. Constant changes in government, policy and initiatives have left Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders further behind their non-Indigenous counterparts than ever before<sup>1</sup>.

MG Corporation as the native title holder for the Miriung and Gajerrong people in the East Kimberley are dismayed at the efforts of the Closing the Gap framework and policies, and believe that they have not been effective in improving the life outcomes of MG people.

For the past ten years since its inception the Close the Gap framework has been haphazardly implemented by successive governments. Therefore strong progress towards tackling these all-encompassing issues of disadvantage have not been addressed in a robust and necessary way. In order to have long term effects and really tackle the issues facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples the framework needs to be community led, culturally relevant and administered in a continuous way.

The underlying principles of the Close the Gap framework are fundamentally good being the sustained and long term improvement to overall health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. However, policy makers should focus on tackling the enablers of these issues, those entrenched issues of disadvantage that are the causes of these problems, not just focusing on the symptoms themselves.

### **2. What does Closing the Gap mean to you?**

Closing the Gap means investing in our nation's first people, in working towards MG Corporations shared vision of achieving a healthy, wealthy and culturally strong community for the traditional owners of the East Kimberley.

Closing the Gap means ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are not left behind their non-Indigenous counterparts.

Closing the Gap means that the Australian government is committed to overcoming the factors that have led to the current crisis that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are facing in terms of health outcomes and life expectancy.

To truly Close the Gap, means to have no disparity in this country between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, to ensure that at all people grow in culture and tradition as appropriate to them, their families and communities no matter what that might be.

### **3. How can governments, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and businesses work more effectively together?**

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Human Rights Coalition 'Closing the Gap: 10 year Review' states that the gap has widened due to 'accelerating non-Indigenous population gains in these areas' see p. 3

- **What is needed to change the relationship between government and community?**
- **To help close the gap, what is needed to support Indigenous community leadership and decision-making?**

In order to effectively Close the Gap in Indigenous health and life outcomes and tackle the entrenched issues leading to disadvantage, initiatives need to be Indigenous lead and grounded in community leadership and governance. We believe there needs to be an end to the top-down government approach that has plagued Indigenous policy for years, including the inaction of the Close the Gap framework.

At the community level this will mean a strong focus on community governance and community controlled responsibility of outcomes. It will mean a strong focus on building capacity in local communities at the organisational level to be able to deliver meaningful programs and strong outcomes.

As the Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull mentioned while addressing parliament in regards to the Close the Gap refresh, working alongside and not dictating to Indigenous peoples is crucial best practice to address these issues<sup>2</sup>. More needs to be done to overcome the governmental red tape in order to increase the capability of Aboriginal Corporations to run effective programs. There needs to be a greater focus on Aboriginal led decision-making and leadership in programs as well as a shift in funding to Aboriginal Corporations.

MG Corporation and our brother and sister corporations in the East Kimberley possess the knowledge, cultural and community governance to be able to empower local people and address these issues. We are in need of an agenda that is focused on meaningful, prolonged change and based in culture and community.

**4. 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?**
- **What do you think are the most important issues for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, families and communities? Why?**

Governments should focus on community consultation and allowing the community themselves their focus areas and personal indicators for their people. Every region, area, community and language group is different and as such an effective policy also needs to be adaptable to this changing landscape.

In this year's Prime Ministers address of the Close the Gap progress it was noted that consultation and implementation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders has been essential in the work already started by the Close the Gap initiative<sup>3</sup>. It is now time for government to consult with those on the ground in each remote, regional and urban part of Australia to discuss what is important to their mob, and how things should change in order to create culturally relevant and sustainable change.

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<sup>2</sup> See *ABC News Online*, 'PM says Closing the Gap results are 'promising', but Indigenous communities should be worked 'with, not to' accessed via <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-02-12/prime-minister-delivers-10th-closing-the-gap-report/9422172>

<sup>3</sup> Prime Minister's address of Closing the Gap initiative accessed via <https://closingthegap.pmc.gov.au/working-together>

## **Most important issues:**

For MG Corporation the most important issues can be summarised by the 5 social norms:

- Look after kids
- Kids go to school
- Be good tenants
- Don't commit crimes
- Work or learn

The most important thing for MG people is having a strong family, strong connection to country and strong culture. If policy is based on these three ideals, then the outcomes will follow.

In order to achieve these outcomes, it means the Close the Gap initiative will have to focus policy in a meaningful way to enable traditional owners to live on community and be connected to land and culture. It means the Australian government needing to invest in grass roots initiatives, understanding the necessity for Aboriginal people to live on community and being a mechanism for this to happen.

Aboriginal people do not ask for much, just the chance to live in their way in their traditional lands. This is an important factor in overcoming Indigenous disadvantage. The Close the Gap initiative should involve recognising this in a formal way and subsequently invest in appropriate programs to ensure a focus on community led values and cultural appropriateness.

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

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture is one of the oldest surviving cultures in the world today, and any policy that is focused on building capacity in that culture must first respect it. The Close the Gap framework must have allowances for cultural recognition and any attempt at a framework that does not incorporate the rich cultural heritage of Aboriginal people will be yet another futile top down approach.

Community consultation and co-design is a good place to start in terms of incorporating culture into the refreshed strategy. Targets and indicators should be culturally significant, and linked to outcomes that promote and improve cultural competency such as improving community life as well as living and working on country. In order for such a framework to succeed it needs to be embedded in all government policy initiatives, which means a focus on constitutional recognition needs to also be addressed.

### **6. What do you think are the key targets or commitments that should be measured in a refreshed Closing the Gap agenda?**

- **What resources, including data or information, are needed to help communities and develop and drive local action?**

The idea of Closing the Gap in Indigenous disadvantage needs to be changed from the ground up, starting with the language used around describing this policy initiative. The stigma that is attributed with words such as vulnerable and disadvantaged is damaging to those that it is trying to describe. A shift in focus away from vulnerability and social disadvantage to capability and capacity would be a strong start to building an empowered Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

A refreshed Close the Gap policy should be focused on improving health outcomes and tackling the root causes of issues and not the effects that the issues cause. By way of example, a strong focus on pre-conception health and education to tackle the issues of Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) and curb this trend. There is a multitude of evidence that FASD is prevalent in a disproportionate amount of Indigenous children, and the effects of this syndrome are far reaching including lower life expectancies, higher amounts of police and judicial interactions and poor educational outcomes. A focused approach on the pre-conception and early year's intervention could have a strong effect on this all-encompassing issue. It is not unrealistic to imagine that a mother who receives necessary prenatal education and support, who then gives birth to a healthy baby who receives early year's education will curb the rates of police interactions, increase educational outcomes, decrease rates of family violence and curb the rate of unemployment. The refreshed Close the Gap strategy needs to drill down to the root causes of widespread issues.

Key targets need to be all encompassing and nothing less than pure equality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. To be satisfied with anything less than equality in terms of life spans and health outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples is disrespectful to one of the oldest surviving cultures. As previously mentioned the targets should also be culturally and community relevant.

To help communities and organisations such as MG Corporation to develop and drive local action transparent and robust information should be made readily available. Issues such as FASD mentioned above are hard to quantify in remote communities such as Kununurra due to the complex system that accompanies a FASD diagnosis. These types of barriers need to be addressed to empower local Aboriginal Corporations and communities to address problems and be leaders in these areas.

In conclusion, the refreshed Close the Gap framework needs to change to reflect current day realisations and cultural competencies in order to truly tackle Indigenous disadvantage. The proposed gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people will possibly never close as non-Indigenous outcomes improve at a higher rate. However, a refreshed Close the Gap agenda that is rooted in cultural awareness and tackles the root causes of health issues will never close as non-indigenous outcomes improve