

Submission to the Closing the Gap Refresh

A joint initiative of the Council of Australian Governments



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About ACOSS

The [Australian Council of Social Service \(ACOSS\)](#) is a national voice in support of people affected by poverty, disadvantage and inequality and the peak body for the community services and civil society sector. Our vision is for a fair, inclusive and sustainable Australia where all individuals and communities have the opportunities and resources they need to participate fully in social and economic life.

ACOSS acknowledges the contribution of state and territory Councils of Social Service to this submission, in particular the Northern Territory, South Australian and Western Australian Councils of Social Service.

Priorities for the Closing the Gap Refresh

We welcome COAG's commitment to work together, in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, to refresh the Closing the Gap agenda. The agenda should include revised and additional targets, supported by an adequately resourced intergovernmental strategy to achieve them.

1. Genuine community control by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is vital

The continued reliance on top-down approaches ensures key socio-economic indicators remain sorely unchanged for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia. Governments must look to local, community driven solutions if they are serious about improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people need to be at the centre of decision-making processes from the beginning of the policy process, and should have control to the greatest extent possible.

Providing support and investment in communities, responding to community-identified needs, is critical to improving quality of life and wellbeing. ACOSS strongly supports the [2016 'Redfern Statement'](#) and urges governments to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander national organisations and leadership to develop policy and budget measures across key areas in the Redfern Statement including engagement, health, justice, violence prevention, disability, children and families. It is essential to support meaningful dialogue and transformative action by Australian parliaments on the priorities identified by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak bodies.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups should be in control of resources and decision-making affecting their communities. It is concerning that funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs is increasingly flowing to mainstream service providers and non-Indigenous organisations, rather than building the capacity of local community organisations. The refreshed strategy should include a commitment to ensure funding policies support local

community capacity and leadership. ACOSS refers the Inquiry to the [Partnership Principles for NGOs working with Aboriginal organisations and communities in the Northern Territory](#) endorsed by National Congress of Australia's First People, ACOSS, Aboriginal Peak Organisations NT, NTCOSS and a wide range of non-government organisations.

The Principles commit non-Aboriginal organisations to:

1. Consider their own capacity to deliver effective and sustainable outcomes.
2. Recognise existing capacity and strengths of Aboriginal NGOs and identify how they can contribute to further developing this capacity.
3. Research existing options for Aboriginal service delivery and community development projects before applying for contracts or considering projects.
4. Seek partnerships with Aboriginal organisations, and not directly compete with them.
5. Develop partnerships guided by the priorities of the Aboriginal NGO and based on building and strengthening Aboriginal organisational capacity and control.
6. Recognise, support and promote existing Aboriginal organisations development practices, including those that are implicit and undocumented.
7. Work together with Aboriginal people to create strong and viable Aboriginal organisations.
8. Ensure Aboriginal control, not just consultation.
9. Develop a clear exit strategy to hand over service delivery or development role to local Aboriginal organisations. This should be included and resourced in government contracts.
10. Ensure robust evaluation and accountability in partnership with Aboriginal organisations and communities.
11. Work with Aboriginal organisations to develop cultural competency and appropriate development practices.

ACOSS urges government funding bodies to support the tenor of these Principles. Governments should develop procurement processes that ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations are preferred. Where funding is to non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander controlled organisations, principles consistent with the Partnership Principles should be put in place.

The 2014 Senate Review of the Indigenous Advancement Strategy was highly critical of its design, policy direction, implementation and processes, and found that the open tender process favoured large non-Indigenous organisations. New Indigenous Procurement Policy Principles refer to 'Local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Owned **or** Controlled', which opens opportunities for non-Indigenous organisations to tender for Indigenous-specific funding. There is a need for government procurement processes to be consistent, clearly defined and based upon the needs of community stakeholders. We support the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress recommendation that COAG adopt a policy that recognises Aboriginal-controlled organisations as preferred providers, in the allocation of all Closing the Gap-related funding.

ACOSS also supports the ['Uluru Statement from the Heart'](#) and rejects the government's refusal to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in their united plea to have a voice to parliament. The ongoing refusal of this parliament and others before this to

engage with a consultative group on issues that affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across this country is blocking effective dialogue with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. We refer the Inquiry to the Uluru Statement webpage at www.acoss.org.au/supportfirstnations, which carries the support of over 8,500 signatories.

2. Develop additional targets

In addition to revising, renewing and resetting existing targets as appropriate, we also urge COAG to adopt targets to:

- Reduce income poverty;
- Reduce homelessness, overcrowding and housing stress;
- Reduce Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander imprisonment and violence against Aboriginal people;
- Increase digital inclusion, with development of a digital inclusion index as part of the Closing the Gap framework;^[1] and
- Eliminate the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Out of Home Care and address the gap in access to early childhood supports that keep children safe at home.

Culture and retention of language plays a major role in promoting the resilience of ATSI families and communities. There is a direct correlation between culture and better health outcomes, school retention rates and educational attainment, improved sense of identity and attachment to place. This should be included in the Framework, and this should be guided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups.

2.1 Reduce income poverty

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience poverty at much higher rates than the rest of the community. Reducing poverty should be a lead Closing the Gap target as part of an economic wellbeing agenda. This will require additional investment in social security payments (including Newstart and other allowances) as well as funding for the ABS to monitor income trends in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households.

2.2 Reduce homelessness, overcrowding and housing stress

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience homelessness, overcrowding and rental stress at high rates. Housing outcomes are closely linked to health, education and employment outcomes. Improving access to affordable and culturally appropriate housing should be a high COAG priority, including a new 10 year remote housing agreement and designated Aboriginal housing funding within the new National Affordable Housing and Homelessness Agreement.

^[1] This draws on the communique from the Broadband for the Bush forum, available at: <http://broadbandforthebush.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Broadband-For-The-Bush-Communique-2017.pdf>.

2.3 Reduce Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander imprisonment and violence against Aboriginal people

While there continues to be a high proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people caught in the criminal justice system, it is not possible to meet targets on health, education and employment. Imprisonment and involvement with the criminal justice system has a direct impact upon individual and community disadvantage. We therefore support Change the Record's [Blueprint for Change](#), which calls for justice targets to promote community safety and reduce the rates at which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people come into contact with the criminal justice system. In particular:

- Close the gap in the rates of imprisonment between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous people by 2040.
- Cut the disproportionate rates of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to at least close the gap by 2040, with priority strategies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children.

These targets should be accompanied by a National Agreement which includes a reporting mechanism, as well as measurable sub-targets and a commitment to halve the gap in the above overarching goals by no later than 2030.

2.4 Increase digital inclusion, with development of a digital inclusion index as part of the Closing the Gap framework^[2]

The 2016 census revealed a 10% digital access gap between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous households (with 24% of households with Indigenous people not accessing internet at home, vs 14% of all households). While this was a slight improvement from the 2011 figures, with 1 in 4 Indigenous households not accessing the internet at home there is a long way to go.

2.5 Eliminate the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Out of Home Care and address the gap in access to early childhood supports that keep children safe at home.

COAG and Closing the Gap need to acknowledge the ongoing impact of intergenerational trauma. This impact needs to be addressed in order for any targets to be met.

As identified by the national Family Matters coalition, CTG needs to include targets to eliminate the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Out of Home Care and address the gap in access to early childhood supports that keep children safe at home. Targets must be underpinned by a strategy that addresses the underlying causes of child protection intervention – including family violence, intergenerational trauma, alcohol and other drugs, mental ill health and disability issues. The 2017 Report on Government Services statistics show that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kids aged 0 – 5 are less than half as likely to access an early childhood education and care services, meaning they are in many cases already behind by the time they reach their pre-school year.

According to SNAICC, Closing the Gap has failed to capture the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children removed by child protection authorities – a key

^[2] This draws on the communique from the Broadband for the Bush forum, available at: <http://broadbandforthebush.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Broadband-For-The-Bush-Communique-2017.pdf>.

driver of poor lifelong outcomes for children. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are 10.1 times more likely to be living in Out of Home Care than non-Indigenous children, with 10,000 more children living in Out of Home Care today than since the CTG Strategy was introduced.

We support SNAICC's call to include additional targets to eliminate over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Out of Home Care by 2040, and sub-targets that address the underlying causes of child protection intervention. We also support [SNAICC's call](#) to 'foster our children's wellbeing and development by strengthening the current target on education to eliminate the under-representation of 0 – 5 year old children in early childhood education and care services by 2040'.

3. Reinvest in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs and services

The 2014-15 Federal Budget reduced funding to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs by \$500 million. These cuts eroded the capacity of community organisations around the country and have not been reinstated despite repeated calls to do so and poor performance in achieving the Closing the Gap targets.

There is a need for greater consistency between Closing the Gap policy rhetoric and policy implementation. The abolition of the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) program, the introduction of the NT Emergency Response, the shortfall in remote Indigenous Housing funding, and Indigenous Advancement Strategy funding have not been in line with aspirations to increase school attendance rates, employment rates, improved health outcomes.

In addition to the above proposals initiatives, ACOSS outlined a number of Federal policy priorities in our [recent submission](#) to the Federal Budget process which we believe are essential to efforts to close the gap, as follows:

- Provide core funding for the institutional capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation in policy making and national decision-making.
- Restore community service funding levels, including under the Indigenous Advancement Strategy in order to fund recommendations arising from a comprehensive and transparent mapping of service needs in 2018.
- Develop a new national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander housing strategy with supplementary funds earmarked in the new national agreement to support culturally appropriate housing, including growth of the Indigenous Community Housing Sector as an alternative to mainstream providers.
- Develop a new Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander remote funding agreement with costs shared equally between the Commonwealth and State and Territory governments to meet the construction supply shortfall (5500 new dwellings) and the necessary refurbishments and property and tenancy management costs, through a 10 year commitment.
- Replace the Community Development Program with a new employment services scheme for people in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities along the lines of the Remote Development and Employment Scheme proposed by APO NT, ensuring the new scheme maintains entitlements to social security payments and

does not impose more stringent activity requirements than those applying to unemployed people generally.

- Improve access to early childhood education and care for families on low incomes by redirecting savings from tightening of income test and caps for higher income households and establishing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community based program within the new Child Care Safety Net, which provides children with 22.5 hours and enables the provision of playgroups, mobile services and outside school hours care in regional and remote communities.
- From 1 July 2018, abolish compulsory income management and the cashless welfare card trials in all states and territories, putting in place both transition arrangements for individuals and communities wishing to retain voluntary income management and cashless card schemes; and opt-in schemes which have been co-designed with communities and to include supports and services as elected by communities, which could include drug and alcohol services, financial counselling, mental health and social support services.
- Introduce a subsidy for the transport of fresh food to remote areas using revenue from a new tax on sweetened drinks.