



## ICV response to the Closing the Gap Discussion Paper

Indigenous Community Volunteers (ICV) is a non-profit community development organisation. We are an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation working with our people to improve quality of life, equity and inclusion, health and wellbeing, and economic participation, to support self-determination.

ICV has close to two decades of experience working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in remote, regional and urban settings. In the past four years we have undertaken a monitoring, evaluation and learning review with a focus on developing strength-based indicators determined by communities themselves.

Designing and achieving the Closing the Gap outcomes must adapt a 'way of doing' that empowers communities and gives agency to the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership and to 'buy in' to creating the required change.

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

- 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?

### **The benefit to governments of adapting a co-design model, or strengthening the self-determination elements of the strategies in place would increase the productivity of communities:**

*"Self-determination, Community Governance and Cultural Continuity*

*The effective functioning of communities plays a critical role in supporting the economic and social wellbeing of families and children. Good community leadership and governance is well recognised as a primary driver of human development in Aboriginal communities. Failures in community governance, on the other hand, have been associated with catastrophic social dysfunction such as endemic alcohol misuse and family violence. The maintenance of Aboriginal self-determination consistent with traditional cultural practices and values is another important driver of social functioning and human development, as evident in a number of studies of Indigenous communities in the USA and Canada.*

*For example, a study of variations in youth suicidal behaviour among First Nations communities across British Columbia's communities demonstrated that suicidal behaviour was dramatically lower in communities which had taken active steps to ensure good community governance structures, as well as preserve and rehabilitate their own cultures, languages and traditional practices.*

*One of the key findings from this research is the importance of fostering a secure sense of personal and cultural identity as a necessary protective factor against the threat of self-harm. This highlights the important role that maintaining cultural beliefs and traditional practices can play in assisting people to have a sense of personal continuity and cultural*



*identity and enhanced sense of wellbeing. In this section we have discussed some of the factors that are a source of potential strength and resilience for Aboriginal people. “<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>*Extract from the paper: **Social determinants of social and emotional wellbeing -Chapter 6.** by Stephen R. Zubrick, Carrington CJ Shepherd, Pat Dudgeon, Graham Gee, Yin Paradies, Clair Scrine and Roz Walker.)*

This view is consistent with the guiding principles of ICV.

We know that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been excluded from participating in many aspects of Australian life for too long.

Australia’s history is littered with examples of Indigenous programs that are top down and welfare-focused, in which end users are passive recipients of aid. Nothing much changes for the better and people are no less dependent.

ICV does things differently by giving people control of development decisions and by respecting local knowledge and input. We aim to help create a better and brighter future for Indigenous Australians so they may fully participate in, and benefit from, the advantages enjoyed by all Australians.

ICV believes that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people hold the keys to solving their own challenges. We provide the opportunity and support they need to make it happen.

- **Community ownership:** ICV works with Indigenous communities that request our help to raise their health, wellbeing and self-sufficiency. Our role is to support communities in their own initiatives, with skills and resources not usually available.
- **Long-term sustainability:** Many challenges communities face are complex, transgenerational and take time to address. ICV makes long-term commitments when partnering with communities, which may involve developing multiple projects over many years. Each activity is designed to ensure it meets the long-term, overarching objectives of the community.
- **Relationship driven:** ICV helps connect and strengthen relationships and local resources. These relationships can be between community members, government, businesses and non-government organisations. Our Community Development Officers and volunteers work in the field to build meaningful and respectful relationships with communities.
- **Asset-based development:** ICV takes an ‘asset’ rather than a ‘deficit’ approach to development. We work with communities to help recognise and develop their existing skills, resources and knowledge.
- **Reconciliation in action:** ICV connects Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, providing a platform to share cultural knowledge and skills. Our community development activities promote two-way understanding and respect. Reconciliation is at the heart of all of ICV’s work.

### **How could the Closing the Gap targets better measure what is working and what is not?**

- What has worked well under Closing the Gap?
- What has not worked well?

There are many Indigenous cultures in Australia, with over 250 language groups, made up of people from a rich diversity of tribal groups and a variety of cultural beliefs and traditions.

One of the critical mistakes of the Federal government in the original *Closing the Gap* program was the lack of capacity to assess programmatic success for the different cultural groups, due to the rigid and inflexible parameters of funding agreements, and the assumption that ‘place based’ delivery



does not require a specific understanding of the individual communities to whom services are provided.

Even today, the government seeks to implement ‘models’ or a ‘one size fits all’ approach to the delivery of services across communities. The measures implemented in the refresh should account for both the diversity of the Aboriginal nations around the continent, and the starkly different needs of these communities, urban, regional and rural.

Previous iterations of Government funding have sought to ‘simplify’ the distribution of Government funding by implementing a framework which lacked the flexibility to diversify the delivery methodology and subsequent outcomes and measures, ensuring that the success of ‘place based’ program delivery was limited to the regions for which the initial program was delivered (with limited exception).

Noting the importance of ensuring self-determination and community governance, and to ensure the success of future funded programs, governments should consider measurements that:

- a) are linked to overall community success,
- b) are inclusive of the social determinants,
- c) foster community engagement and participation,
- d) are relationship driven, and
- e) focus on ‘asset based’ community development.

#### **Flexibility in the funding agreement – transition funding to support community growth**

In cases where communities lack the skills and/ or knowledge to undertake a project at its inception, consideration should be given to a ‘transitional funding model’ that will ensure agency is placed in community hands as a part of the initial project scope.

A greater investment in ensuring communities are better able to measure and report on their successes, and flexibility to adjust or alter an agreement if the measures show ‘a different success’ to that which was first identified, will allow communities to operate projects with an ‘action learning framework’ in place, ensuring that the innovation and learnings can be taken into account.

#### **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?

The complexity of the individual communities must be considered independently. Understanding that the views and perspectives one community represents does not/cannot represent the views of all is critical to the success of any engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and/ or individuals.

Any service delivery should be relationship based, and analyse the needs of each community separately.



Social and emotional wellbeing, and the inclusion of land and culture is widely considered to be a critical component in sustainable health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, who consider health to be holistic.

The belief that physical health is affected by the social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of both individuals and the broader community must be taken into account when delivering all services, and communities should be encouraged to present 'holistic' longer term strategies to address the 'disadvantage'. i.e.: if a person is mentally strong, they are more likely to address physical ailments, or actively participate in the workforce.

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

Culture is central to the success of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, culture should be incorporated into any project delivered in response to the Closing the Gap outcomes:

As previously stated - the importance of ensuring self-determination and community governance, and safeguarding the success of future funded programs governments should consider measurements that:

- a) are linked to overall community success,
- b) are inclusive of the social determinants,
- c) foster community engagement and participation,
- d) are relationship driven, and
- e) focus on 'asset based' community development.

### **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?

This year we formalised our approach to emphasising the voice of communities in the way we capture our data. We have now developed a monitoring and database system that:

- Allows communities to choose their own indicators of success which monitor short-term outcomes and their long-term dream.
- Generates a community's own program logic that describes the successful outcome/s they desire, the strengths and assets they have to work with and the planned solution.
- Captures an aggregate picture of the impact trends in ICV's community development activities across all regions using quantitative data. This is based on a collation of indicators chosen by communities.

When communities are able to input on the policy and programs implemented on their behalf the outcomes have a higher rate of success.



If the Federal Government wishes to impact on the Closing the Gap outcomes, it must adapt a 'way of doing' that empowers communities and gives agency to the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership to guide the projects, and allows the community as a whole to 'buy in' to creating the required change.

In February 2016, the Close the Gap Campaign (the Campaign) welcomed the Prime Minister's words at his first Closing the Gap report to Parliament where he said '***we have to stay the course on key policy priorities***' and that it is time for governments to '***do things with Aboriginal people, not do things to***' Aboriginal people. In his speech, the Prime Minister said:

"I will honour that commitment not by delivering to Indigenous Australians, but by working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and their communities across Australia..."

As stated in the *Close the Gap report 2017*:

*Culture and wellbeing is central to the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. As Professor Ngiare Brown suggests:*

*We represent the oldest continuous culture in the world, we are also diverse and have managed to persevere despite the odds because of our adaptability, our survival skills and because we represent an evolving cultural spectrum inclusive of traditional and contemporary practices. At our best, we bring our traditional principles and practices – respect, generosity, collective benefit, and collective ownership – to our daily expression of our identity and culture in a contemporary context. When we are empowered to do this, and where systems facilitate this reclamation, protection and promotion, we are healthy, well and successful and our communities thrive.<sup>2</sup>*

<sup>2</sup> As quoted in the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2013* Brown, N 2012, *Pacific Caucus Intervention to the 12th Session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues*, New York, 20-31 May 2012.