

Closing the Gap Refresh 2018

NPY EC Submission

Closing the Gap Refresh

In March 2018 a Closing the Gap (CTG) Refresh Overview summarised the process of the CTG refresh to that point in time. It reiterated the commitment made by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) in December 2016 *“to work together and with Indigenous communities to refresh Closing the Gap with renewed emphasis on collaborative effort, evaluation and building on what works in each jurisdiction. In June 2017, COAG further agreed to focus on a strength-based approach that supports Indigenous advancement, working in partnership with Indigenous Australia.”*

<https://closingthegaprefresh.pmc.gov.au/>

A special gathering of prominent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in February 2018 released a statement about the Closing the Gap Refresh. It began:

‘The Special Gathering agreed the next phase of the Closing the Gap agenda must be guided by the principles of empowerment and self-determination as articulated in the 2008 Close the Gap Statement of Intent. (<https://www.humanrights.gov.au/close-gap-Indigenous-health-equality-summit-statement-intent>) We demand from government a community led, strength based strategy that enables us to move beyond surviving to thriving.

The best progress over the last ten years has been in areas where the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community has led the design and implementation of programs from the beginning.

We call on Governments to partner with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to understand how to enact these principles in the implementation of initiatives to improve outcomes.’

Consultations have taken place with almost 30 peak bodies and large ATSI organisations. Public roundtables have been held in 18 major centres throughout Australia, including Alice Springs.

‘Emerging themes and priorities are consistent with those identified by the Special Gathering. The most frequently raised issues are in areas of early childhood, education, community, employment and business. Housing and justice are also often mentioned. Other feedback focused on the importance of local decision making and increased autonomy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations; clear lines of accountability for governments, providers and communities and greater involvement in reporting and monitoring of progress.’

<http://closingthegaprefresh.pmc.gov.au/>



Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (NPY) Empowered Communities

Background

Empowered Communities (EC) is an initiative devised by Indigenous leaders throughout Australia. It seeks to develop a new relationship with Government, based on the ideas and aspirations of local Aboriginal people. Empowered Communities seeks to reform the 'top-down' approach to decision making, by listening to the ideas and worries of Aboriginal people and working with them to develop a more responsive, locally driven service system, that will deliver more positive outcomes for Indigenous Australians.

The goals of Empowered Communities are:

- 1) To close the gap on the social and economic disadvantage of the Indigenous Australians of the Empowered Communities regions.
- 2) To enable the cultural recognition and determination of Indigenous Australians of the Empowered Communities regions so that we can preserve, maintain, renew and adapt our cultural and linguistic heritage and transmit our heritage to future generations.

Empowered Communities leaders across Australia agree that there are 5 priority areas for improving life for Aboriginal people –

- 1) Good education
- 2) Safe communities
- 3) Work or meaningful engagement
- 4) Proper housing
- 5) Care for children, elderly and the disabled

At the heart of these priorities in the NPY region is a central commitment to maintaining culture and strengthening traditional values, through *Tjukurpa* (Law), *Walytja* (Family), *Manta* (Country) and *Wangka Uti* (Language), which are at the heart of people's lives in this region.

We have further refined these 5 national EC priority areas to reflect the specific needs and focus of Anangu and Yarnangu (Anangu) the Aboriginal people of the NPY region, and so the priorities are restated as:

- 1) That children have access to quality education opportunities, and that they are supported to be ready, willing and able to take advantage of those opportunities, and attend school with the active involvement and encouragement of their parents and families
- 2) That communities work urgently and seriously to tackle the problems of domestic, family and community violence and alcohol and drug abuse, and ensure that communities are safe and the rights of all community members are recognised and respected;
- 3) That the safety and welfare of children and the vulnerable, by which we mean people who are frail, aged or disabled, remains of paramount concern and that they are cared for, healthy, supported and safe in their families;
- 4) That all capable adults participate in training, work or meaningful engagement in community and family life;
- 5) That all community members have access to appropriate housing options, and that there is acknowledgement of the mutual responsibility between housing providers and community around availability, choice, maintenance and upkeep of houses

The backbone organisation for Empowered Communities in the NPY region is the EC Secretariat which is currently auspiced by the Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's Council



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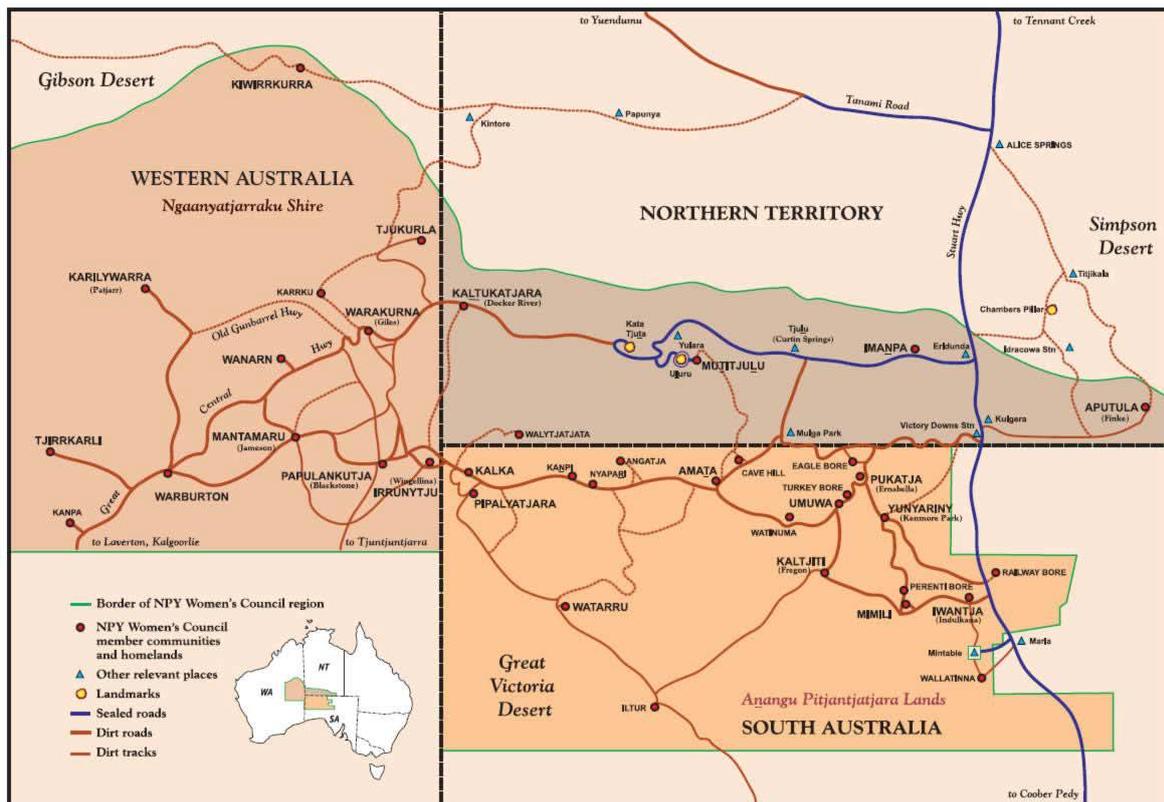
(NPYWC), and the interim Regional Steering Committee is co-chaired by NPYWC and Regional Anangu Services Aboriginal Corporation (RASAC). Other members of the interim Regional Steering Committee include: Western Desert Nganampa Walytja Palyantjaku Tjutaku Aboriginal Corporation (WDNWPT - Purple House), Mai Wiru Regional Stores Council, Ngaanyatjarra Council, Ngaanyatjarra Health Service and Central Lands Council.

“Empowered Communities seeks to create a genuine and balanced partnership between Indigenous organisations, government and corporate Australia, where everybody is working together on a level playing field and towards a shared strategy”

Andrea Mason, CEO, NPY Women’s Council

The NPY region covers 350,000 square kilometres in the cross border region of Central Australia, and is home to 26 remote Aboriginal Communities and homelands (see map below).

Over the past 18 months, the Empowered Communities team has been visiting communities throughout the vast NPY region. We have been listening to people’s concerns and ideas, with the view to developing a shared vision for an Anangu-led Regional Development Agenda for the region.



Parallel to this we are collecting and analysing data about the demographic and social indicators of development, and about the level of investment in programs and initiatives for the region.

Of the total population of 5762 Indigenous people in the region, 63% of the population aged 20-64 years are receiving Centrelink benefits.

We are also aware of a significant proportion of the population who are eligible, and in need of Centrelink benefits, but have not accessed this support due to a range of barriers– some of which are detailed further below. Nonetheless, the majority of the Aboriginal population in the NPY region



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are dependent directly on Centrelink benefits. Stories that illustrate the very significant barriers to social and economic inclusion can be found in the NPY EC submission (No 28) to the recent Senate Finance and Public Affairs Standing Committee's Inquiry into the appropriateness and effectiveness of the objectives, design, implementation and evaluation of the Community Development Program (CDP) available at:

https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Finance_and_Public_Administration/CDP/Submissions

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NPY EC Closing the Gap Observations and Comments

The Public Discussion Paper inviting individuals and organisations to reflect on, and respond to, a range of questions was widely circulated. Some questions were about the specific targets and possible measures. Other questions invited us to suggest strategies for Government to work more effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, businesses and communities and to work more closely together.

The document also summarised the original Close the Gap targets established in 2008 and most of them are clearly not on track.

Both the Special Gathering Statement and Roundtable consultations align with the NPY EC approach and with the priorities that have emerged from our many conversations and consultations throughout the region during the past 18 months.

NPY EC supports taking a strength-based and place-based approach to the Refresh as stated by the Special Gathering participants. In fact, these are both key components of the Empowered Communities initiative. Understanding how policy and operational decisions are made and increasing the local voice in decisions about their communities were raised as priorities at all community gatherings and consultations that we held across the NPY region to develop our EC plans and priorities.

In our assessment **aggregating the data for reporting progress towards CtG targets obfuscates the unique circumstances of remote communities and distorts the reality of the lives of remote residents**, and arguably also diminishes insight into the reality of those living in regional and urban areas.

The NPY EC partners believe that this perspective is well articulated in Jon Altman's recent article in New Matilda which reflects his assessment that Closing the Gap is a failed policy in two ways:

'The first is conceptual or ideological: any notion of elimination of disparity must be based on a logic of sameness. To put it crudely, if Indigenous people are to have the same standard of living as other Australians they will have to live in similar locations, informed by similar norms and values, engage with the mainstream market capitalist economy and society in the same way. This approach resonates with the assimilation policy as defined in 1961....

The second is the fundamental difference in the geographic distribution of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations: while 20% of Indigenous peoples live remotely only 1.5% of the non-Indigenous population do so.

What is more, most of this remote Indigenous population resides in about 1,000 small communities spread across Indigenous-owned lands held under land rights and native title laws. Such titles have largely been legally bequeathed because their owners have demonstrated forms of 'continuity of rights and interests under traditional laws acknowledged and traditional customs observed' and ongoing connection to their ancestral lands.'

Altman goes on to state:



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‘There is no engagement with this reality either in the framing of Indigenous policy or in the Closing the Gap annual reports. And there is no attempt to document the extent of the socioeconomic disparities for remote Indigenous Australia — even though an element of current government policy has distinct Remote Australia Strategies.’

(Altman, J: *How the gap widened and how to ‘refresh’ the policy approach for remote Indigenous Australia*: New Matilda 26.03.2018)

This reflection underpins our assessment that the current framing of the outcomes masks the real lived experiences of many Indigenous people, particularly in remote communities.

Further the position of the NPY EC partnership is that **new approaches to Closing the Gap measures need to incorporate more frequent and more effective community consultation** (ie not just every ten years). The existing EC networks and lessons from EC engagement could be a useful starting point for the CtG model. As outlined in special gathering statement, if the CTG Refresh is to be guided by principles of “empowerment and self-determination”, there is significant value and indeed opportunity to take into account the approaches of EC and existing “new” decision-making entities that have emerged through EC, such as the NPY EC iRSC, and regular Partner Directors meetings, to enhance consultation, engagement and Indigenous-led governance approaches in our region and in the other EC regions.

An internal cultural shift is required from policy makers to truly understand and value the need to ensure enhanced engagement and consultation to support genuine local participation in decision-making and place based approaches -from top down to bottom up.

Improved cross collaboration and information sharing between Government Departments and Agencies is also critical. In our assessment the Government’s own research and public Inquiries provide ample evidence of the need for seismic shift in both focus and targets.

A relevant example for our region is in the area of Language, Literacy and Numeracy (LLN) outcomes:

English as a Foreign Language

Far too many policy makers and practitioners across the board do not recognise that English is not the *Lingua Franca* of most remote communities. This creates a major barrier for, and therefore diminishes the effectiveness of, among others:

- Teachers without ESL qualifications, and often with inadequate cultural awareness or sensitivity, who are routinely posted to remote schools.
- Medical practitioners, Justice personnel and other service providers, who are often unaware of the need for, or unable to access, appropriately qualified and immediately accessible interpreters.

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs recommendations in its report ***Language Learning in Indigenous Communities*** are examples of the information Government already has about the need for change in both targets and program responses to achieve them. The comprehensive report provides a detailed rationale for their recommendations.



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Relevant recommendations include:

Recommendation 1 - Closing the Gap framework

The Committee recommends that the Commonwealth Government include in the Closing the Gap framework acknowledgement of the fundamental role and importance of Indigenous languages in preserving heritage and improving outcomes for Indigenous peoples.

Recommendation 14 – Bilingual education programs

The Committee recommends that the Commonwealth Government work with state and territory governments to provide adequately resourced bilingual school education programs for Indigenous communities from the earliest years of learning, where the child’s first language is an Indigenous language (traditional or contact).

Recommendation 15 – NAPLAN alternative assessment tool

The Committee recommends that the Minister for Education work through the Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood to develop a National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) alternative assessment tool for all students learning English as an Additional Language/Dialect.

Recommendation 18 - Indigenous language teachers - training and career pathways

The Committee recommends that the Minister for Education work through the Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood to develop strategies for training Indigenous language teachers to improve access to qualifications, full accreditation and career pathways as well as providing school support and mentorship where required.

Recommendation 21 - Compulsory EAL/D training for teaching degrees

The Committee recommends the Minister for Education take to the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) a proposal to include a compulsory component of English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) training for all teaching degrees.

https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House_of_Representatives_Committees?url=/atsia/languages2/report.htm

In our assessment the Government’s own report provides unequivocal and compelling insights to demonstrate the important role that Indigenous languages play in communities and that appropriate resourcing can impact greatly on more than specific educational outcomes. We would like to see this perspective and similar relevant evidence based research and recommendations integrated into the CtF framework and process.

The Indigenous “prosperity” framework:

A strengthened regional economy would entail a reframing of the notion of a Prosperity Framework to be more explicit about the importance of social and cultural prosperity, while recognising the overt Government policy initiatives that have exacerbated the financial stresses on residents of remote Australia, particularly Indigenous Australians.

Such stresses include the disparity between CDP and JobActive participation requirements and breaching regimes for Newstart recipients, and decreased Newstart and Family Payments (in real terms) adversely affecting remote residents where the cost of everyday



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goods is already very high. Even in the area of increased Aged Pension benefits, overall fewer aboriginal people enjoy the full potential benefit due to lower life expectancy (compared to non Indigenous Australians).

Work undertaken by a Jawun Secondee, Tammy Scott, sought to help us produce a draft framework for a Community Social and Financial Prosperity Strategy for the NPY Region. The proposed Strategic Framework identified nine core elements (culture, health and wellbeing, education, employment, finance, physical infrastructure, self-governance, safety and sustainability).

In our assessment this reflects the need to acknowledge that frameworks are going to differ between regions, and it is important to ask:

- ❖ What does social and financial prosperity actually mean for Anangu and Yarnangu?
- ❖ What level of social and financial prosperity do Anangu and Yarnangu want in future?
- ❖ What are some of the ways we can start moving towards this?

(See below for an overview of the NPY EC draft framework)

The framework first outlines the core elements of social and financial prosperity, then looks at areas of focus within each of these



Confidential - not for distribution



Inadequate Data

While the Empowered Communities initiative is in its infancy we are making some progress towards such a vision. During our first 18 months of visiting communities multiple times,



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meeting with leaders, attending Community Council meetings, hosting community gatherings and barbecues, conducting information sessions about this 'new way of doing business with government' we have received clear messages about local priorities:

- Education, culture and support for young people,
- Work, meaningful engagement and financial security,
- Anangu led decision making,

along with the other previously mentioned national EC priorities.

We recognise that evidence based policy is critical to make real and meaningful change. However, access to disaggregated data remains a major challenge.

The statistics we were able to obtain bears out the community concerns: around 55% of school aged children are reported as attending school each day (80% or above), only 9% of young NPY Anangu (aged 17-24) are employed, and more than a third of the population are involved in the compulsory CDP initiative.

Unfortunately, more nuanced data is difficult or impossible to obtain. Our attempts to obtain information from government departments at all levels, especially around their program investments in the region, have exposed how little information is gathered and/or shared between departments, let alone across jurisdictions in this tri-state region.

It is therefore difficult to recommend specific measures or targets with such an unclear picture of the current programs and their impacts.

Conclusion

A 'one size fits all' approach that obfuscates the widening gap for remote Indigenous Australians will not enable the responsive policy that is needed to ensure consideration and integration of the unique situation and challenges of Aboriginal people living remotely. It will most certainly not reflect the real experience of remote communities and therefore cannot hope to provide for the necessarily specific strategies and actions required to succeed in improving the lives and opportunities of Anangu and Yarnangu.

Having a clear picture of the circumstances of remote Indigenous Australians and engaging genuinely with people in their communities is critical to inform policy and programs that have the greatest chance for success in areas that are clearly failing our First Nations people in remote Australia.

The NPY EC partnership believe that the way forward is well articulated in the conclusion outlined by Altman in his reflection on the Closing the Gap Refresh:

'(T)here are compelling reasons why the Australian government should be required to meet the needs of remote living Indigenous people as citizens. There are equally urgent social



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justice reasons why as a conquered and subjected people Indigenous people should be afforded special compensatory rights.

A prerequisite for refreshing the policy thinking must be an acknowledgement of the crushing failure of the last decade and the deepened impoverishment in remote Indigenous Australia.

An openness to a range of possible alternate approaches is needed that recognises development as a process that is not only integration into market capitalism that can be totally absent in remote Australia.

A practical and empirically-informed framework is needed based on negotiated principles.

Some that come to my mind to stimulate overdue 'refreshed' debate include: local control; responsive to Indigenous aspirations and circumstances in all their diversity; adherence to international non-discriminatory human rights standards; a consideration of all production possibilities, inclusive of the customary and cognisant of the land titling explosion; new or enhanced existing institutions for empowerment; recognition of the intercultural mix of western and customary norms and values that remote Indigenous people live by; support for cross-cultural forms of hybrid governance arrangements; and creative engagement with global development thinking especially in those settler societies that have managed decolonisation and governance for sustainable development far better than Australia.'