

**The Indigenous Community  
Co-ordination Pilot Trial:  
The Leadership Challenge for Governments in supporting Indigenous  
Governance.**

**Building Effective Governance Conference Jabiru 5-7 November 2003**

**Neil Westbury  
Executive Director  
Office of Indigenous Policy  
Department of Chief Minister**

**Background**

Firstly I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners, the Mirrar people, and thank Yvonne and Joseph for their welcome.

As Stephen just explained the ICCP's were established as part of the COAG Reconciliation Framework to trial a more coordinated approach to service delivery to Indigenous communities and to engender a sense of shared responsibility (government and community) for improved outcomes.

Through the partnership agreement being pursued under this project at Wadeye, the local Indigenous leadership insisted that the issue of governance took centre stage from the outset and it has remained there ever since. The papers already delivered to the conference by Tobias, Matthias, Aloysius, Theodora and Catherine have all borne testimony to that reality.

Whilst the approaches being trialed under the ICCP are clearly good ones there are however a number of underlying structural issues that need to be addressed if governments and communities are to secure tangible benefits from the ICCP process and support sustainable effective Indigenous governance.

These questions include:

- Given the ICCP's are pilot projects, how can the current and future lessons be systematically identified? How will the practical lessons be applied elsewhere?
- There is clear evidence that communities are demanding access to normal services. Existing Indigenous specific programs are simply unable to meet current, let alone future needs. Are these specific programs merely helping perpetuate a system that results in Indigenous peoples continuing to be denied services available to the other 98% of the Australian population?

- How do we create the practical/structural mechanisms to embed that co-ordination beyond the life of meetings and the comings and goings of individual bureaucrats?
- What do the pilots tell us about the failure to tackle the underlying structural issues that constitute the real barriers to Indigenous economic and social development?
- And what if communities want to evaluate the effectiveness of governments in the pilot?
- How also do governments turn the mirror onto them and evaluate the effectiveness of cross-governmental performance.

I will return to these questions at the end of my address, but let's turn first to some of the lessons learned so far.

### **Lessons learned so far**

So what are the positive lessons from the ICCP at Wadeye? What seems to be working?

Firstly, drive and leadership from the Indigenous partner is an essential prerequisite for any success. In the case of Wadeye the community demanded up front respect for their culture, acceptance of cultural difference, the traditional governance system referred to as Thamarrurr, and recognition of traditional land ownership. These principles are contained up front in all the agreements reached between the partners.

The ICCP represents a response to what Wadeye had been actively seeking for a number of years. Whilst all the three partners have defined responsibilities under the partnership agreement the community has insisted that it wants government to 'take responsibility for its responsibilities'. Community leaders tell us that governments often arbitrarily shove problems off onto to community people to solve. They have made it clear they want government field staff to offer options that involve practical solutions not just more problems.

The ICCP also coincided with the culmination of six years work by the 20 clan groups across the region in developing their unique governance arrangements. Governance is the critical starting point.

Australia is replete with examples of temporary success, usually driven by individuals that were doomed to failure because sustainable governance structures were not developed.

As this conference has demonstrated the major challenge facing Indigenous communities in North Australia is how culturally based systems of authority and decision making fit with contemporary governance arrangements. Previous policies have resulted in largely imposed localised structures that have been designed for 'governing for dependence'.

Without effective governing institutions, leaders who have cultural legitimacy and the ability for Indigenous institutions to exercise real decision making powers, the aims of ICCP will simply not be sustainable or of any long term social or economic benefit.

A strong leadership role is not just necessary at the community level it is also required from the other partners.

We have found that Central agency carriage at the Territory level has been essential in clearing blockages and keeping issues on track.

Similarly the strong leadership shown by the Department of Family and Community Services in Darwin as the lead agency for the Commonwealth has been essential.

It is also critical for government staff to understand the historical and cross-cultural context in which they are operating. Experienced and culturally informed field staff who are listened to by their agencies (i.e. have a mandate to act) and who have credibility with the community, have been the backbone of both government's efforts.

The partners recognised up front the pressures to spread effort too thinly. The decision to focus on a common community chosen theme "Give every kid a chance", tackle issues in biteable chunks and avoid trying to fix everything has proven the correct strategy.

It is also well understood by all that a long-term commitment and preparedness to make the hard yards are required from all the partners.

Finally, we have recognised the need to avoid bureaucratic process wherever possible. People are seeking practical solutions, not just more process. Complex and convoluted committee and reporting structures weigh and wear down participants.

What doesn't work?

What are the lessons about what doesn't work?

The attitude that 'We know what's best for you' is doomed to failure. Succumbing to the constant temptation to 'just get in there and do it yourself', will also produce the same result.

Answers in accountability don't lie in burdening government agencies and Indigenous communities alike with endless and sometimes mindless performance indicators that bear little relationship to measuring real improved outcomes on the ground.

Lack of Government staff continuity and knowledge is a real negative, particularly when people move on and take their undocumented knowledge

with them. The development of relationships of trust and understanding with the key players in the community is an investment that can be lost when staff move on.

We must avoid the bureaucratic comfort zone of increased coordination. Outcomes shouldn't be measured in terms of the number of meetings. We need mechanisms established that result in meaningful cross government and community-based collaboration.

When there is a lack of concurrent commitment and shared responsibility for outcomes either between the partners or within each partner's constituency, tension and frustration is bound to arise.

We have seen first hand the difficulties faced by staff when they find that after years of working within narrow program or project parameters, literally overnight they are being expected to think outside their project and program silos. Invariably this occurs in a vacuum because their own agencies have limited or no experience in grappling with the same issue.

And finally, all too frequently officers are literally sent out to communities with limited or no training. Capacity development is just as much an issue within government agencies as it is within communities.

### **Some underlying structural issues**

The fundamental challenge is whether we are prepared to systematically and objectively openly debate and address the underlying structural issues and agree to the necessary changes that will support Indigenous peoples efforts to improve their well being.

So what are some of the underlying structural issues that impact on governance being thrown up as a result of our ICCP experience so far? What should the Australian and Northern Territory Governments be working on together that tackles these structural issues in a more comprehensive manner?

The issues already identified by Stephen Cornell earlier in this conference about what role governments should play both in supporting and sustaining effective Indigenous governance are very relevant here.

It is already clear that the level of resources that has had to be applied by all the partners to one community means that a replication of the approach being adopted via the current pilot is simply not sustainable.

The real barriers to improved outcomes are more fundamental than lack of coordination. We need to consider wholesale reforms of the way in which services and programs are currently delivered. This includes providing communities with the necessary institutions and capacity to govern themselves.

The experience gained so far brings into even sharper focus the following factors that add up to an impending crisis:

- As John Taylor pointed out yesterday at Wadeye alone the current population will double in a 20 years resulting in a town the current size of Nhulunbuy- this reflects Indigenous population growth Territory wide.
- There is at present a wholesale disengagement from the mainstream economy. In the Territory, Indigenous people account for 25% of all adults, but the Indigenous share of total income from employment (excluding CDEP) is only 4%.
- The current unmet housing needs of Wadeye and Maningrida alone are equivalent to the number of houses destroyed in the Canberra bushfires- this level of need reflects a microcosm of a national emergency that is not attracting the level of attention required.
- This lack reflects wider community disenchantment and disengagement with Aboriginal Affairs. It will require national and bi-partisan leadership to bring these issues squarely back onto the agenda.
- The continuing prohibitive costs of administration versus actual delivery via a plethora of discrete programs within and between Government portfolios can only be addressed concurrently by the Commonwealth and the States/Territories acting in concert with broad Indigenous support.
- There remains a clear lack of priority or understanding of the importance of governance in the Indigenous context and its critical relationship to enabling economic development.
- The lack of engagement between the banking and financial services sector and Indigenous people represents fundamental barrier to reducing welfare dependence. How can we even talk about Indigenous economic development when most people in Aboriginal remote communities cannot even access a normal bank account?

These issues amount to a serious note of caution regarding the limited outcomes that can be expected under ICCP if it is not matched by a serious attempt by governments to address the underlying issues that are compounding the parlous circumstances of many communities.

### **Future Directions**

In returning to the questions I posed at the beginning of my paper - There are some positive short and longer-term initiatives we should be jointly examining. Shorter-term evaluation should assist in amplifying and exchanging lessons learnt whilst longer-term collaborative work is required that goes to the heart of some of the underlying structural issues identified.

## Short Term

- What works and what don't? It would be instructive to independently compile an ongoing list of learning's from the perspective of all the partners that could be made available on the ICCP web site.
- Evaluation of cross government performance. It could be a constructive exercise to identify both the existing and potential barriers and how in practical terms people (particularly on the ground) view cross government co-ordination and attempt to overcome the difficulties that arise.
- For its part the NTG has already recognised that we need to dedicate full specific staff resources to the project who will be drawn from a number of agencies but be jointly located to act as a one stop shop for Thamarurr. This group will also be charged with developing options for the lessons to be applied more broadly, especially in relation to pooled funding.

## Longer Term

- **Pooled Funding** – In the USA there has been recognition that for co-ordination to be effective it requires statutory backing and government pooled funding to communities. Regulation 477 provides a statutory basis for pooling program funds for identified areas of service delivery that allows programs to be collapsed into single line items on the basis that Native American Tribal Governments submit an agreed Plan with agreed program indicators and identified outcomes over a set period.
- It would appear to be timely to seriously examine options for this type of approach to be made available here, possibly by building on experience already gained in the health area.
- **Planning For the Future**– Probably the most fundamental lesson is that governments and communities need to start looking and planning for the future rather than remain focussed on the current or past events. The startling projections developed by Taylor in respect to Wadeye represent a mere microcosm of what applies across many Indigenous communities in the NT and other parts of Northern Australia.
- The foregone opportunity costs and impacts on social cohesion will be enormous if Governments and the wider Australian community are not convinced that urgent action is required. Those costs need to be assessed and analysed by independent and credible experts.
- **Indigenous Specific versus Normal Services**- Is it time too seriously examine the proposition that Indigenous specific programs have largely failed their original goal of supplementing and attracting mainstream programs and by themselves are now inadvertently resulting in the marginalisation of Indigenous Australians. The example of IHANT versus NT Housing Commission waiting lists is instructive here.
- **Access to Financial Services and Private Capital** – Creative and collaborative approaches need to be advanced for leasing of inalienable lands, (David Ross's visionary paper yesterday highlighted this issue) raising of private capital (backed initially by government guarantees) and access to banking and financial services more generally. Robert Lee's comment yesterday about raising loan funds directly from the banks is particularly relevant. Simplistic notions that unlocking inalienable title is an

essential requirement for raising finance will only retard progress in this arena. We should look to how the Americans and Canadians have responded to similar issues with creative solutions that have created real competition for the Indigenous dollar.

- **Governance** – requires a policy focus that is informed by international and Australian experiences- there is much to be learned from the authoritative long-term research of the Harvard project. Reconciliation Australia, the ANU and the NT and WA have agreed to collaborate in undertaking similar applied research which is designed to support and directly inform both Indigenous communities and government policy making.
- **Recognition and incentives for Regional Economies**– Remote regions need to be viewed as regional economies in their own right and provided with incentives (including taxation) to develop and levy charges to raise revenue. Housing needs to be viewed as an asset rather than entitlement. Government departments who deliver services on site to communities should pay rent as they do in any other towns.
- Indigenous communities need to develop their own business rules as guides for external investors and the private sector.
- **Philanthropic and Private Sector partnerships**- Robert Lee pointed to the critical need to engage with the private sector and secure support that will never be forthcoming from the public sector. Jawoyn's engagement with Woolworths and Fred Hollows bears testament to that.

## Conclusion

I have attempted to cover a lot of ground here. However I believe we are moving into a period of opportunity where the architecture of Indigenous policy could be reshaped to take on board the lessons of not just ICCP but the last 30 years.

We need to explore constructive and practical options that will assist our political leaders and support Indigenous communities and their leadership in facing the daunting challenges and choices that will inevitably confront them.