

**SUBMISSION IN RESPONSE TO THE QUEENSLAND PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION DRAFT REPORT:
Service delivery in remote and discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities**

Dear Commissioner Fredericks

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the draft report on *Service delivery in remote and discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities*, and for the opportunity to meet the QPC staff earlier in the year and provide verbal input to the inquiry.

Community-driven development

I commend the Commission for identifying in its draft report what I believe to be the key issue in the delivery of services to remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities – that the way that services for remote communities are designed and delivered has become too removed from the recipients of those services and has fundamentally disempowered Indigenous community residents by denying their sense of agency in the key decisions that affect them. My reading of the draft report is that it is calling for a more community-driven and demand-responsive approach to service delivery, whereby Indigenous communities are meaningfully involved in co-designing the services and programs designed to improve their lives and address the urgent areas of disadvantage that is so well documented in these locations.

The Commission has also correctly identified the absolute importance of economic opportunities for the future prosperity and wellbeing of remote Indigenous communities, recognising that there can be no ‘government service-led recovery’ in Indigenous communities.

Community planning and community-driven development

The report correctly identifies the need for structural and service-delivery reform that prioritises more devolved, community-driven, co-designed service delivery, complemented by economic development. But what is the mechanism for this to occur? I agree that community planning leading to place-based agreements need to be a key part of the way forward. However, I would urge the Commission to consider carefully where previous attempts to proceed on this basis in remote Indigenous communities have failed, and to make sure that we have learned from these efforts and instead pursue planning that is genuinely participatory and community-led. My recollection of previous efforts at community planning and place-based negotiated agreements are as follows:

- ATSIIC required regions to undertake Regional Plans and Community Plans in the 1990s to guide community development and funding investments by ATSIIC. There was a strong focus on community-based planning methodologies, and a guide to Community-Based Planning was developed. My understanding is that a lot of community planning occurred but the process was curtailed by the lack of planning capability in communities, and ATSIIC was of course, cut back and then abolished by the Howard Government from 1997.
- The Queensland Department of Housing assisted several remote Indigenous communities to prepare community plans in the late 1990s. These plans were based on community surveys but resulted in little more than wishlists about what facilities communities wanted Government to provide for them. Sport and recreational facilities topped the lists.
- The response to the 2001 Cape York Justice Study report (Meeting Challenges, Making Choices) was for Negotiation Tables involving government and community leaders in each community to formulate Community Action Plans to pursue shared priorities in a coordinated way. This approach had some success in some locations, especially where

motivated Government Champions led the process (for example, Jim Varghese in Lockhart River). The resulting plans were still hamstrung by siloed government service and program structures and the inability to leverage pooled funding to pursue the plans' priorities. The program evolved into the Partnerships Queensland model, but never managed to bring about the whole of government coordination of response hoped for. A key missing ingredient was the lack of support for building community governance capacity for community to take the leadership (Denise Hagan's work in Lockhart River in the mid-2000s was a notable exception).

- In the mid-2000s the Federal Government implemented Shared Responsibility Agreements and Regional Partnership Agreements as a form of place based community planning. It also launched the COAG Trials for coordinated place-based service delivery. Muurdi Paaki was one of the successful initiatives under the COAG trials, because it had strong community leadership. The evaluation of the COAG Trials by Morgan Disney and Associates contains some valuable lessons for future policy, which have not been heeded.
- In 2008, the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Service Delivery identified 29 Indigenous communities for intensive place-based planning and coordination of service delivery by both State and Commonwealth. Baseline mapping of data about service gaps (compared to mainstream comparator communities) was to lead to negotiation with the community of Local Implementation Plans to collectively address the gaps. The whole exercise collapsed under the weight of bureaucratic process and did not sufficiently invest in Indigenous community governance capacity to give any real agency to Indigenous people. See the evaluation report on the NPARSD.
- The Local Government Act previously included a requirement for all local governments to do community plans, but this was removed in the late 2000s.

I believe important lessons from these previous experiences are that:

- Supporting the development of Indigenous community governance capacity is a critical prerequisite to community planning that is truly participatory and provides a genuine opportunity for communities to co-design solutions to their challenges
- Planning must not end up as simply stocktakes of what government is already doing, but focus on what needs to change and how things need to be done differently
- Strong, skilled independent facilitation of participatory planning processes is required
- Shared responsibility for design and delivery of planning is crucial so that plans do not end up as community wishlists premised on a 'government as provider / community as recipient' mentality
- For planning processes to have real transformative ability, there first needs to be structural reform to ensure planning can bridge silos between agencies and levels of government, decision-makers in planning processes/negotiation tables have genuinely devolved authority to make decisions, and funding is pooled and untied to ensure planning outcomes/negotiated agreements can actually be implemented. Otherwise, we will see the same issues as the Queensland Government's negotiation tables of the mid-2000s, where agreed directions could not be implemented because government participants in negotiation tables did not have authority to make decisions and new initiatives were impossible within the confines of the 'straitjacket' of government departmental and program structures.
- Indigenous people will not engage in another round of planning unless they have some assurance that this time it will be different – that government genuinely wants to partner,

that government will share the required data with community, that community will have genuine authority in the planning process, that real changes will flow from the plans, and that community will have an opportunity to be part of the implementation (e.g. the design and delivery of specific programs and services)

To support its call for more community-driven approaches, the Commission may want to cite some of the recently emerging evidence about the improved outcomes in indigenous communities where there is genuine self-determination afforded to these communities by national and provincial governments. For example:

- Evidence of lower suicide levels in self-determining Indigenous communities in British Columbia – see MICHAEL J. CHANDLER AND CHRISTOPHER E. LALONDE, 2008, ‘Cultural Continuity as a Moderator of Suicide Risk among Canada’s First Nations’
- Improved health outcomes from community control in Manitoba – see Lavoie et al, 2010 ‘Have investments in on-reserve health services and initiatives promoting community control improved First Nations’ health in Manitoba?’
- Better socioeconomic outcomes for Indian Reservations in the US that chose self-government over control by the Bureau of Indian Affairs – see Frye and Parker 2007, ‘Paternalism versus Sovereignty: The Long Run Economic Effects of the Indian Reorganization Act’

In terms of models of place-based planning, the Commission may wish to consider the Collective Impact model, and particularly its focus on the need for an independent ‘backbone organisation’ to coordinate place-based activity and manage the monitoring/data collection aspects. See Kania and Kramer, 2011, ‘Collective Impact’, *Stanford Social Innovation Review*.

In reinforcing the need for Aboriginal community control and empowerment in service delivery, the Commission may wish to refer to the Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory’s ‘Partnership Principles for Organisations working with Aboriginal organisations and communities in the NT’.

Indigenous governance

As mentioned, assistance to build strong Indigenous governance capacity at the community level is crucial to success of the Commission’s proposed direction of reform. Unfortunately, community governance capacity has been systematically undermined over the past two decades as the locus of decision-making has progressively become more removed from the community level and community-controlled organisations have been shut out of tendering processes for program and service delivery. A targeted government effort to support local governance capacity is required – the Government may wish to look at the NSW Government’s Ochre strategy and its focus on Local Decision-Making: <http://www.aboriginalaffairs.nsw.gov.au/local-decision-making>

I note that the report also indicates regional bodies could have a role in this process. I would urge some caution in how this is promoted as a solution, because there is considerable scepticism about regional Indigenous bodies amongst many remote Indigenous communities. In Cape York in particular, there is damaging counter-productive politics around the role of regional Indigenous organisations. This phenomenon is also prominent in other areas, such as in the suspicion that local groups hold towards Native Title Representative Bodies and Service Providers. It is a strong feature of Aboriginal political orientation that people favour ‘localism’ and individual and group autonomy – refer to the work of anthropologists such as David Martin, Tim Rowse and Fred Myers.

This is not to dismiss the real practical advantages of regional approaches, which have been successfully invoked by Indigenous communities in some locations, such as the Murdi Paaki region. However, be aware that a reform model that places too much prominence on regional bodies is likely to be greeted with significant scepticism in remote Indigenous communities. There needs to be considerable emphasis on how local communities may *choose* to organise themselves regionally to support place-based planning and development. But the power must still be seen to reside locally.

Finally, the importance of Indigenous governance at the State level should not be ignored in these reforms. In the late 1990s and early 2000s a range of Indigenous representative structures were abolished, including ATSIC, the Aboriginal Coordinating Council (peak body for Aboriginal Councils), the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Board, the Indigenous Advisory Council (formerly chaired by Neville Bonner, then Bob Anderson), the Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committee, the Deaths in Custody Overview Committee, the Joint Ministerial Advisory Council on Housing and Infrastructure. All of these bodies had strong Indigenous representation from across the State and played a very important role in advocating to government about Indigenous needs and providing input into the design and delivery of programs to Indigenous communities. Their existence reflected the overriding importance placed by governments on the principle of self-determination in the 1990s.

The abolition of these structures has left a vacuum in Indigenous leadership at the State level and has left agencies developing legislation, policies and strategies with nowhere to go to seek Indigenous input. I believe this has contributed to the increasing disconnect between government policy and strategy development and the needs and aspirations of Indigenous communities. The frustration and exclusion from the policy process felt by Indigenous Australians was given expression in the recent Uluru ‘Statement from the Heart’, which urged that Indigenous people be given a ‘Voice’ in the constitution. I would urge the Commission to advocate for the need for some form of voice to be institutionalised in the Queensland Government to ensure proper input and co-design of legislation, policy and program reforms that affect Indigenous peoples. It would need to be properly resourced with a secretariat capacity, and might also have a role in the evaluation of programs in Indigenous communities (facilitating more Indigenous input in these evaluations – see below). I believe the investment would be more than re-paid in the improvements in the government’s policy-making and program design processes and the improved outcomes of government initiatives. It would also be important recognition of the need for Indigenous Queenslanders to have a genuine ‘voice’ in the things that government does that affect their communities.

Capability building for government

The report rightly recognises that there is a critical need for government to improve its own capability to work in different ways in Indigenous communities – partnering rather than dictating, facilitating and enabling community-driven approaches. This has remained a significant skill gap for government staff and has been a recurring theme in evaluations of why government initiatives for place-based and community-driven development have not succeeded in the past. For example, see the Morgan Disney evaluation of the COAG Trials, the evaluation of the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Service Delivery, or the regular reports on the NPARSD by the Coordinator-General on Remote Indigenous Services.

The 2004 House of Representatives Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs report, 'Many Ways Forward'. Investigated capacity-building and service delivery in remote Indigenous communities. Ironically, a key finding was that the capacity-building gap was as much on the government side as in Indigenous communities. This situation remains the same to this day.

The University of Queensland has sought to address this gap through the development of the Advanced Indigenous Development Programming short course, which has been run twice in the past two years for government staff and NGOs working in Indigenous communities. The course is run by Prof Mark Moran and I have been a facilitator of some modules for the course on Indigenous governance, evaluation methods and place-based coordination. The Queensland Government should consider courses such as these as part of a program to build the capacity of staff to work in new and more enabling ways in Indigenous communities. The Commission's suggested reforms will not succeed without this element.

Monitoring and evaluation

I also commend the Commission for its emphasis on the need for better monitoring and evaluation of outcomes in delivery of programs and services. I would urge the Commission, however, not to advocate for a narrowly conceived approach to monitoring and evaluation that focuses only on service outputs and value for money measures. Rather, government's formulation of what are the "funded outputs" for services and programs in Indigenous communities needs to recognise that community capacity-building and community governance are significant outputs of government investment in themselves. Hence, there may be greater net benefit from funding an Indigenous community organisation to deliver a service in a way that invests a significant portion of the available funding in internal capacity building of the organisation (e.g. training of staff, developing the board, developing governance policies and procedures), even at the sacrifice of a slightly lesser level of direct service outputs than might be achieved from an existing large non-government organisation that has the capability to apply *all* the funding to service outputs. Government funding models need to recognise and place a value on the capacity-building outputs, as it is this capacity that has the potential to create long-term positive change in Indigenous communities.

There is also a greater need for Indigenous communities and organisations to be involved in the evaluation of programs and services in remote communities. The Commission should consider the recently released DPMC evaluation framework for the Indigenous Advancement Strategy, which emphasises Indigenous involvement in evaluation.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input to this inquiry. I wish the Commission all the best in finalising the report and I am hopeful this might be a turning point in addressing the challenges of service delivery in discrete and remote Indigenous communities.

Kind regards



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