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CLOSING THE GAP REFRESH:  
PAPERING OVER THE GAPS OR  
STRUCTURAL REFORM?

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Aboriginal Economic  
Policy Research  
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**Arts & Social  
Sciences**

CAEPR TOPICAL ISSUE NO. 2/2018

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April 2018



# Closing the Gap Refresh: papering over the gaps or structural reform?

Compiled by F Markham, K Jordan and  
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Topical Issue No. 2/2018

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## Acronyms

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ATSIC	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission
CBO	Community Based Organisations
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
CTG	Closing the Gap
LDM	Local Decision Making
NPM	New Public Management
OID	Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage
PM&C	Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
SCRGSP	Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision

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## Introduction

Francis Markham, Kirrily Jordan and  
Deirdre Howard-Wagner  
CAEPR ANU

Ten years on from the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) committing to the National Indigenous Reform Agreement – Closing the Gap (CTG), the Federal Government has announced the CTG Refresh. In November 2008, governments committed to seven CTG targets. Five of the original seven targets are not on track.

Five academics and visitors at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research made submissions as part of the CTG Refresh ‘Have Your Say’ process, all critically engaging with the CTG Refresh from specialist disciplinary perspectives and grounded expertise. The views expressed are those of the individuals, as is clearly evident in the diversity of perspectives presented in this Topical Issue. These views have been consolidated in this one document to ensure their longer-term availability as a resource for policymakers, researchers and the interested public.

The title of this Topical Issue paper is ‘Papering over the gaps or structural reform?’ In using the phrasal verb ‘to paper over’, we are talking about the potential for the CTG Refresh to gloss over, explain away, or simply patch up the faults with the CTG policy. It suggests the presence of a risk that policy faults are concealed or hidden. This Topical Issue provides an overview of a range of issues, shortcomings and challenges identified by individual scholars as requiring urgent attention in specific areas.

Mike Dillon discusses the risk that the media spectacle of a ‘refreshed’ CTG may lead to a complacency effect, whereby the annual address and reporting lead the public to believe that everything that can be done, is being done. Dr Kirrily Jordan points to the need for structural reform to the current policy approach, and warns that changing the policy language to be more ‘strengths based’ and focus on ‘prosperity’ does not constitute sufficient structural reform. Associate Professor Janet Hunt argues that gaps will not close without Indigenous people having greater power in decision-making processes, and without a new relationship between government and First Peoples based on Indigenous self-determination. Dr Deirdre Howard-Wagner suggests that promising avenues for change in urban areas lie in urban community building and development; treaties, agreements and accords; and adopting multifaceted local approaches as stand-alone arenas for policy

making rather than one-size-fits-all national approaches. Dr Julie Lahn argues that Indigenous public servants are a valuable but underutilised resource for improving relationships between government and First Peoples, and calls for an expanded role for Indigenous public servants and regional offices in the future of CTG.

Together, the submissions in this CAEPR Topical Issue paper argue that it is the policy-making process itself which has failed and discuss how it could be done differently. All five papers indicate the need for substantial change and structural reform, and express concern at the risk that the current ‘refresh’ will simply ‘paper over the gaps’. They identify a need for governments to do policy differently. Taken collectively, we identify three key areas that need to be addressed.

First, these submissions make the case that CTG will not occur without structural reforms. While the ‘Closing the Gap: The next phase’ Public Discussion Paper speaks to a need to adopt a ‘strengths-based approach’, there is a risk that this can come to mean glossing over problems or papering over gaps rather than redistributing decision-making power and resources to First Peoples. Several of the submissions make reference to the Uluru Statement from the Heart, which called for the establishment of a First Nations Voice, enshrined in the Constitution, as well as support for treaty-making processes and a truth and reconciliation commission.

There are distinct risks if the refresh fails to enshrine structural reform. First, business as usual will continue to lead to poor outcomes. Without structural reform, a repeat of the CTG process is likely to lead to a repeat of the outcomes seen over the first decade of the policy. Second, there is a real risk that a refresh of the CTG strategy, by providing an impression of government activity, will encourage the public to assume that the state has done all that it can, and that First Peoples are therefore to blame for the failure of gaps to close.

The second key area needing to be addressed is the relationship between government and First Peoples. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have the right to be self-determining, to control decisions that affect them, and to be recognised as First Peoples, not just disadvantaged citizens. This will involve an unwinding of the ‘mainstreaming’ policy adopted since the early 2000s and a reinvestment in social infrastructure including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations. Indigenous affairs policy-making has to be driven from the ground up and recognise regional differences. While several resources such as the skills, knowledge and relationships of Indigenous staff in the regional network

of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C) can assist with this, more formal structures that incorporate local strengths and aspirations need to be established. Agreement making with self-determining First Nations bodies may provide one avenue through which Indigenous people can lead the policy-making process in Indigenous affairs.

The third area raised by these submissions is the issue of measurement. Several of the authors note the importance of indicators for accountability, and raise the need for new indicators, such as those related to racism, the functioning of the justice system and progress towards self-determination. However, a number of the submissions also identify that the approach to designing indicators, measuring outcomes, and interpreting their meaning needs reform. This might include the development of 'culture-smart' indicators in a process that is genuinely Indigenous-led (rather than reliant on a limited model of 'consultation'), and measurement that incorporates a mixed-methods approach to contextualise statistics with local Indigenous knowledge.



## The risks of a ‘complacency effect’; a submission to the Closing the Gap Refresh process

Michael Dillon

Visiting Fellow, CAEPR ANU

### Key points

- The CTG process has advantages, but also potential disadvantages.
- A major risk is that it engenders a ‘complacency effect’ which undermines the impetus for substantive policy reform.
- Consequently, it is important that the CTG process be based on a substantive policy framework rather than randomly selected targets.

### Summary

This extract from a submission to the CTG Refresh process argues for a more radical and substantive focus on underlying policy rather than the maintenance of a flawed structure whereby the targets are not clearly funded or resourced. The absence of such an underlying policy structure has the potential to reinforce generalised complacency in the wider community about the nation’s efforts, and thus increase the risk that Indigenous interests will be blamed for the ongoing lack of success in CTG.

The CTG targets and the associated annual process of reporting to the Parliament at the beginning of the Parliamentary year have considerable advantages both to the nation as a whole and particularly for Indigenous peoples. In particular, CTG provides a highly symbolic opportunity to take stock of the nation’s efforts to meet its social, economic and cultural obligations to its Indigenous citizens. It also provides a high level, but shallow, form of transparency and accountability primarily related to the efforts of government at all levels in addressing the challenges of Indigenous disadvantage.

Notwithstanding the advantages, the CTG process is problematic on a number of levels.

There is a widely shared critique of the CTG process that argues that it reinforces a focus on ‘deficits’ and under-emphasises Indigenous strengths. There is a conceptually separate critique (Altman 2018) which argues that the CTG focus on gaps incorporates an assumption that Indigenous people should not be different or do not have a right to choose to be different, and implicitly pushes policy towards assimilationist

objectives. While I consider that policymakers need to be cognisant and actively address both critiques in both target and policy design, I don’t see them as constituting a persuasive argument for dismembering the CTG process.

A further and more salient issue in my view is that at the level of public opinion, the CTG process operates to engender a view in the community that our elected governments and the nation as a whole are seeking to ‘do the right thing’ by Indigenous citizens, even if the targets are not being met in full. In other words, the CTG process operates in my view to engender a ‘complacency effect’ which counterproductively operates to undermine the political impetus to substantively address Indigenous policy concerns. The result will be that key institutions and sectors of Australian life will continue to adopt or reflect policies of exclusion rather than inclusion with respect to Indigenous interests.

Given that the CTG process involves both potential risks and opportunities, any process of policy adjustment (or ‘refresh’) should involve a rigorous policy design process. To date, we have seen extensive consultation, but it is clear from the ‘Closing the Gap: The next phase’ Public Discussion Paper (PM&C 2017) that it has been focused around a preconceived intention by government to shift towards a ‘strength based’ policy framework focused on ‘prosperity’.

The ‘Closing the Gap: The next phase’ Public Discussion Paper, in outlining the rationale for refreshing the CTG targets, shifts seamlessly from asserting that ‘Improving the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is a key priority for our nation’ to noting that ‘as we approach the tenth anniversary of Closing the Gap only one of the seven national targets is on track and four will expire in 2018’. This progresses to statements acknowledging the need for governments to work differently with Indigenous Australians, and to work in ‘genuine partnership’ to ‘identify the priorities that will inform [not ‘determine’] how governments can better design and deliver programs and services, to close the gap’. This then leads to the conclusion that governments want to hear from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people ‘to inform a new way forward’.

We might translate this into plain English as follows: the targets are not being met, but instead of making the funding and policy changes necessary to meet them, we will talk to Indigenous people and then change the targets presumably either with targets that can be met or which

are not rigorously measurable and thus cannot be shown not to have been met.

A better and logically coherent policy design process would look rather different. It would begin by asking the fundamental and basic question: What are the structural underpinnings of Indigenous disadvantage? The answers, which need to be culturally, demographically and socially nuanced, would determine the high level targets which are chosen. A series of long term policy frameworks would then be devised, ideally in consultation with Indigenous interests, directed to addressing the structural impediments to removing Indigenous disadvantage. The chosen targets, their associated policy frameworks, and the funded programs linked to each policy framework would be monitored annually and evaluated independently every 5–10 years.

The absence of such a policy development process, and the associated lack of any public and bipartisan commitment to address the funding and policy shortfalls in evidence today makes the current refresh exercise a second best process. Just because the government consults Indigenous interests, or manages to design technically robust targets, the overarching long term outcome may nevertheless be sub-optimal.

### *Conclusion*

The refresh of the CTG process ought to primarily focus on improving the linkages and the funding available for the underlying policy frameworks which impact Indigenous disadvantage. The primary focus ought not to be on the targets themselves but on improving policy design and funding allocations, particularly at a structural level. A focus solely on targets would be an exercise in shifting the goal posts and giving the appearance of new action but won't actually change conditions on the ground for the better in Indigenous Australia. Such an exercise runs the risk of raising Indigenous (and non-Indigenous) expectations in unsustainable and ultimately counterproductive ways. Finally, whichever adjustments are made to the CTG model, there is a need to re-establish a robust, independent and transparent monitoring and assessment process. The absence of such an independent oversight body in any revised framework will clearly signal a lack of real commitment to addressing the very real and tangible consequences of deep disadvantage for the majority of Indigenous Australians.

## The need for structural reform to the current policy approach

Dr Kurrily Jordan

Research Fellow, CAEPR ANU

### Key points

- What is needed is structural reform to the policy-making process rather than a 'refresh' of the same approach.
- Changing the language to be more 'strengths based' and focus on 'prosperity' is not sufficient and must be accompanied by that structural reform.
- The required reform would involve moving towards a policy model that genuinely facilitates 'development' in a way that is determined and controlled by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and represents the diversity of Indigenous aspirations.

This submission addresses the first set of questions raised in 'Closing the Gap: the next phase' Public Discussion Paper (2017:3):

How can governments, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, and businesses work more effectively together? What is needed to change the relationship between government and community?

### *The need for structural reform rather than a 'refresh' of the same approach*

There is a widespread view that the way in which the CTG framework has been operationalised has tended to cause harm in at least three ways:

- It has tended to be assimilationist – that is, legitimising policy interventions in the name of statistical equality that erase or ignore the diverse aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (see e.g. Altman 2009, Altman & Fogarty 2010, Yap & Yu 2016a).
- It has tended to focus on deficits and reinforced perceptions that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are 'the problem' (see e.g. Pholi et al. 2009, Walter & Andersen 2013).
- It has contributed to a sense that improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is a technical issue, rather than being political and structural (Altman 2009), and so marginalises crucial issues like self-determination (Pholi et al. 2009).

Metrics in themselves are necessary and valuable, and there is likely to be merit in measuring progress against

new indicators (e.g. those relating to the functioning of the justice system and progress towards self-determination). However, metrics are never neutral and always require careful interpretive work in their construction and use, including contextualisation with qualitative knowledge. Without this, they can 'distort the complexity of social phenomena' (Merry 2016:1) and legitimise policy interventions that are counterproductive. For example, the target of halving the gap in employment, divorced from broader evidence including of peoples' lived experience and aspirations, has contributed to policy decisions that have in fact widened the employment gap (see e.g. Jordan 2016, Markham & Biddle 2017).

Having indicators is not the problem, it is the way in which they are constructed and used. For this reason, simply coming up with new indicators is not a solution. What is needed is fundamental structural change in the way government relates to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, which puts self-determination at the forefront.

### *Changing the language to be more 'strengths based' and focus on 'prosperity' is not sufficient*

Some of the language in the 'Closing the Gap: The next phase' Public Discussion Paper is encouraging. It notes the need to recognise the strengths and diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples being the 'decision-makers over issues that impact their lives' (p.4). The 'refresh' process also includes an opportunity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to comment on the discussion paper and attend a number of consultation sessions.

However, these features are not sufficient to create the required structural change in the relationship between government and community. Some insight can be gleaned from efforts over the last five years to adapt the Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage (OID) framework to a 'more strength-based approach' that incorporates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander conceptions of wellbeing. Despite this attempt, the enduring impression in the framework is one of an Indigenous 'problem' (Jordan forthcoming). At issue here is that efforts to reframe the OID are seeking to retrofit a strengths-based approach that is informed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives onto a framework designed to measure disadvantage and statistical gaps.

Rather than trying to make a deficit-based approach more 'culturally appropriate,' a more promising way forward would be to redesign the approach from the

ground up (see e.g. Brough et al. 2004). The OID reports themselves recognise that the common success factors in 'things that work' to improve outcomes all reflect this bottom up, self-determined approach (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (SCRGSP) 2016:5.37).

### *What is required for structural reform?*

The required reform would involve moving towards a policy model that genuinely facilitates 'development' in a way that is determined and controlled by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and represents the diversity of Indigenous aspirations

Fundamentally, indicator frameworks like CTG have embedded within them an ideology of what makes a 'good society' (see Morphy 2016). It should be noted that New Zealand turned away from its 1999 Closing the Gaps strategy because of its focus on deficits, towards a more successful approach that has sought to move beyond 'Western models of wellbeing' (Kukutai & Taylor 2016:13) and recognised 'that Māori must be able to succeed as Māori' (Comer 2008).

In practice, this has meant: a policy-led approach to understanding and progressing Māori aspirations; improving the relationship between Māori and government; and 'explicit recognition of Māori as capable and aspirational (rather than underperforming)' (Comer 2008). A number of projects have used these principles to articulate self-defined aspirational frameworks for Māori development, working from the ground up through Māori forums and assemblies to identify priorities from an iwi (kinship group or tribe) perspective (see e.g. Hingangaroa Smith et al. 2015:32). This growing body of research has identified that Māori often see economic development as a means to achieving the realisation of 'culturally strong' and self-determining populations, rather than an end in itself (Carter et al. 2011:18).

Applying this approach in Australia would require moving towards a policy model that facilitates 'development' in a way that is determined and controlled by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It would mean creating the institutional change required to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination. In this context, the proposal for a First Nations voice to parliament is significant, as are moves towards treaties in several states and the various models for accords and agreement-making. Davis's concern that rejecting a First Nations voice to parliament has already foreclosed the most important contribution to a CTG 'refresh' the government could have made should be taken seriously

(in Davidson 2018). A new approach would also mean a reorientation to developing what Smith (2016:129) calls 'culture-smart' data: that is, based on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' aspirations from the ground up, 'produced locally,' capturing 'local social units, conditions, priorities and concerns,' and 'culturally informed and meaningful' (see Yap & Yu 2016b, 2016c for an Australian example).

## Closing the Gap – Refresh or start afresh?

Dr Janet Hunt

Associate Professor, CAEPR ANU

### Key points

- A new approach to policy must embrace a new basis for the relationship between government and First Peoples, one based on the right to self-determination.
- The framework should be a wellbeing one, which reflects Indigenous aspirations beyond the current CTG targets, and it must be strengths-based.
- The agency and empowerment of First Peoples is essential – Indigenous people need to have greater power in decision making.

A new approach to policy should be based on a very different relationship between governments and First Peoples than the current one. The Indigenous aspiration for that new relationship was articulated most powerfully in the Uluru Statement from the Heart in 2017. The aspiration articulated there for recognition of Indigenous sovereignty has been, in various forms, the aspiration of First People for as long as I can remember.<sup>1</sup> What people are calling for is the right to be self-determining, to have a major say in decisions that affect them, and to be recognised as First Peoples, not just disadvantaged citizens. Starting from this basis would change the relationship dynamic and transform the outcomes. This is what Indigenous people articulated in 1995 (ATSIC 1995), and they still articulate today.

The ‘mainstreaming’ policy adopted in 2000 heralded a ‘re-colonisation’ of Indigenous people. Indigenous governance, decision making and expertise has been overridden by ‘mainstream’ processes that involve increasingly controlling tenders and contract arrangements that no longer reflect the self-determination agenda.

More important than reformulating precise targets or anything else, is to change the relationship between the Commonwealth (and other jurisdictions) and Indigenous people in Australia. This is because of the calls from Indigenous people referred to above but also because:

- the context is changing at State and Territory levels
- lessons from earlier experience emphasise the need to change relationships and processes, and

1. See e.g. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC 1995) for a clear statement about the need for such recognition.

- there is a need to enable Indigenous people to build and rebuild governance systems and processes where these have been dismantled over the last 13 years.

Treaties and/or local decision-making, policies and processes are now being developed or implemented in several major jurisdictions (e.g. Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia, Northern Territory) signalling that a number of jurisdictions have recognised the need to change their approach and are in the process of doing so (New South Wales Government 2017).

There is a plethora of reports and evaluations about previous and current policy and programs which all emphasise the importance of governance and participatory approaches. There is an urgent need for governments to work differently with Indigenous people and their organisations, within a new framework which respects their knowledge, their rights, their priorities, and their ways of approaching their own priorities and aspirations (Hunt 2013).

Any new framework needs to far better incorporate Aboriginal notions of what is needed to achieve Aboriginal wellbeing. Internationally there has been considerable work on what Indigenous people mean by wellbeing (Taylor 2008, Wereta & Bishop 2006), and a limited amount of work in Australia on what specific groups of Indigenous people mean by wellbeing (e.g. Greiner et al. 2005, Yap & Yu 2016a, 2016b, 2016c) as well as two larger studies (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2010, NSW Office of Environment and Heritage n.d.). All these studies indicate that the current CTG targets fail to capture the aspirations of Indigenous people, in particular in relation to land recovery and the Indigenous estate, language use, recognition of Indigenous governance, ability to practice free prior and informed consent, Indigenous rights in national laws, number of agreements with nation groups etc. (Taylor 2008).

### *Build on strengths and Indigenous values for successful Indigenous Development*

The approach must be strengths-based. Which means it must get away from the concept of ‘Gaps’. The goal should be broadly related to Indigenous wellbeing and holistic development, with an emphasis on achieving economic development for community wellbeing and it should build on the assets and strengths available in regions. (Mathie & Cunningham 2002, Bebbington 1999, Davies et al. 2008).

Research from overseas suggests that goals must be based in Indigenous values (Bishop & Taikiwai

2002; Harmsworth et al. 2002, Carter et al. 2011). A determination to undertake development whilst maintaining Māori identity and values is characteristic of Māori economic development according to this research. This approach to economic development resonates far more with my experience of Australian Indigenous approaches than the concept of 'prosperity'.<sup>2</sup> It suggests that for Indigenous development to succeed it must be grounded in Indigenous values and frameworks (see also Hunt 2016).

### *Overcoming poverty and achieving wellbeing through empowerment*

While Aboriginal frameworks must shape policies and programs, Indigenous poverty and disadvantage will not be overcome unless Indigenous people have greater power in decision-making at every level. The relationship between disempowerment and chronic poverty is well recognised internationally (Mosse 2007). Indigenous empowerment requires the restoration of leadership and governance where it has been lost or disrupted, and must enable greater control by Aboriginal people over the information and resources they need to improve their own and their communities' lives, as well as enabling their analysis, and their knowledge-base to inform these approaches. Transformatory change will occur when the structures and discourses of inequality are successfully challenged. A lack of wellbeing (often characterised by poor mental health, a lack of dignity and no hope), is as important to address as material poverty. Participatory processes that empower people, that challenge stigma, and ensure that development enhances dignity and hope are crucial (Leavy & Howard 2013).

Overcoming Aboriginal poverty and disadvantage is a process of development. Indigenous ideas about development resonate well with the idea of development as articulated by Indian economist Amartya Sen (1999), despite his somewhat individualistic view. Sen challenged economic growth as the goal of development. Sen's argument was that development represents the expansion of individual human freedom to live a life that the person has reason to value. In this view of development, people must be agents in their own development as only they can define their priorities and

the choices they wish to make about the kinds of life they wish to lead. Sen's theory of development suggests that any new policy must provide for Indigenous people's values and worldviews to shape their own and their community's choices about the kinds of development they want to improve their lives. This requires their agency and empowerment.

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2. Prosperity as a goal is not a word I have heard in Aboriginal communities – that is not the goal, on the whole; the goal is more usually living adequately, meeting all needs (including the extended family's needs) without stress, and thereby enabling wellbeing. Prosperity suggests financial wealth and affluence as the goal, but for Aboriginal people this is generally not the goal – money is only a means to an end – to improve people's lives. It is not an end in itself.

## Urban community enablement beyond service delivery

Dr Deirdre Howard-Wagner

Fellow, CAEPR ANU

### *Purpose*

This submission suggests that ‘resetting the relationship’ requires a resetting of the approach itself, and in doing so, critiques the approach while also making recommendations for alternatives.

### *Background*

I write this submission based on nearly 20 years of research experience collaborating with Aboriginal people, communities and organisations in Australia, mostly in urban New South Wales, and more recently internationally. I am a sociologist and socio-legal scholar, and a Fellow at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research at the Australian National University.

Below I focus on CTG in urban areas and resetting the relationship (Question 1), while giving a brief statement in relation to culture (Question 4).

### *Recommendations*

1. Resetting the relationship requires a change in not only the way Indigenous policy is enacted at the Federal level, but also the way engagement and business (especially contractual relationships) are conducted and entered into with urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, communities and organisations.
2. Urban community enablement (read empowerment) is the way forward for CTG. While this is not a new message, thinking about how this is achieved is. This could be achieved through treaties/agreements/accords focusing on community enablement around community building and development (not simply service delivery or economic development), adopting multifaceted local approaches as stand-alone arenas for policy making (not one-size-fits-all). Solutions must be based on community needs. This is supported by international research. Urban indigenous service delivery models exist (e.g. federally-driven Canadian Urban Aboriginal Strategy, which commenced in 1997, and, for example, resulted in individual metro strategies like the Vancouver Metro Aboriginal Strategy, which focused on improving the socioeconomic condition of Metro Vancouver’s Aboriginal community via partnerships and service delivery). Service delivery models have not been that effective. Policymakers need to move beyond service delivery to local treaties/agreements/accords linked to community enablement, and the transferring of substantial financial resources to communities through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Based Organisations (CBOs). For example, there needs to be a reinvestment in the building of urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social infrastructure (community organisations, facilities, services, and supporting infrastructure) and greater autonomy at the local level. In moving forward, policymakers need to be mindful that agreement-making in Australia does not have a successful history (from native title and Indigenous Land Use Agreements (Howard-Wagner 2010a, Howard-Wagner & Maguire 2010) to Shared Responsibility Agreements (Howard-Wagner 2010b)). So, how this approach is designed matters. Further research is needed. While there can be important distinctions between jurisdictional context and peoples, substantial international scholarship exists in this space; it needs to be gathered for policy to be well informed. Close attention could also be paid to the New South Wales OCHRE Local Decision Making (LDM) model, which is a flexible Accord model – service delivery/ community building/economic development – based on local needs.
3. Resetting the relationship also involves addressing injustice, racism and discrimination. Policy reflects viewpoints that suggest Indigenous disadvantage is a social product of contemporary socioeconomic inequality, situating it within a political economy of poverty (Howard-Wagner 2017, Walter 2009, Walter & Sagger 2007). While policymakers have been concerned with removing the barriers that prevent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from fully participating as Australian citizens in Australian society, the COAG National Indigenous Reform Agreement (Closing the Gap), in its various iterations from 2009 to 2018, is a policy premised on the rights to work, to good health, to a sound education, and to a decent home (Howard-Wagner 2017:8). This approach dissociates Indigenous disadvantage from an understanding of past policies of racial ordering, dispossession and trauma, and contemporary forms of racism (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson 2016:784, Howard-Wagner 2018 forthcoming). Sociologists, like Professor Maggie Walter and myself, argue that Indigenous poverty, or disadvantage as it is referred to in Australia, is also a product of social/racialised relations. Closing the Gap thus requires addressing

deeper racialised societal inequalities in Australia. That is, historical and contemporaneous racialised social relations matter around CTG.

4. Resetting the relationship requires that we stop thinking about culture as a stand-alone concept. Culture should inform and be fundamental to and embedded within all dimensions of CTG, including the way that policy is made and how programs and services are developed. What is more, culture is the fundamental ingredient missing from national one-size-fits-all approaches to and the mainstream service delivery organisations involved in CTG, making them simply western, mainstream approaches to CTG and thus often ineffective for this reason. Mainstream one-size-fits-all programs and services are often alienating and disempowering. Mainstream one-size-fits-all approaches sit in stark contrast with locally developed urban CTG programs and services that are underpinned by Aboriginal knowledges, systems, and teachings incorporating, for example, Aboriginal stories and language and forefronting the role of Elders as teachers and healers. Aboriginal knowledges, systems, and practices of culture in CTG programs and services at the local urban level functioned as a positive, active and empowering tool for CTG.

***Background: gaps, disadvantage, deficits and what the problem is***

Indigenous disadvantage is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon and ‘wicked problem’. Through a sociological lens, Indigenous disadvantage is viewed as cumulative and intergenerational, and generated and affected by a broad range of historical, social, political and economic factors. The sociological perspective of disadvantage also focuses on the structure and organisation of society and how that relates to both individual lives and social problems. Disadvantage is considered a societal injustice. This lens also looks at what creates disadvantage in society. A sociological lens also turns its attention to how policy in this area contributes to the problem, creating further injustices and loss of rights. Through this lens the challenges concern how to achieve a balance between the role of social structure, the distribution of resources, and individual agency. It also adopts a learning and development perspective of disadvantage in which the sociological solution is tied to rights and justice, and individual and mutual group decision-making that empowers people in CTG (Sopho & Wicks 2017:245).

This is complemented by the development studies literature, which argues that poverty alleviation is best achieved via civil society participation in local decision-making and community enablement (read empowerment) (Helmsing 2004, Shatkin 2016).

By way of example, my recent research illustrates the disabling effects of social service market enablement on the capacity of Aboriginal CBOs in parts of New South Wales to continue to engage in CTG by adopting local solutions. These local solutions were forefronting Aboriginal culture and ways of doing business. Social service market enablement at both the Federal and State level is an example of what Mitchell Dean describes as governments creating a market where a market did not formerly exist (Dean 2004:161). The intent of State and Federal governments has been to create an effective, efficient and better-quality social service delivery through competitive tendering and results-based management (Howard-Wagner 2016, 2018a, Howlett et al. 2017), as well as new efficiencies through forms of government monitoring and regulation, such as accreditation and governance training (Howard-Wagner 2016). Overall, the nub of social service market enablement as it relates to models of New Public Management (NPM) is new funding, contractual, accountability, and accreditation mechanisms, and competitive funding arrangements, which form the basis of regulatory system-centred social service delivery reforms (Howard-Wagner 2016:89). Social service market enablement includes one-size-fits-all service delivery and rolling out blanket national programs, which are often highly punitive and/or highly regulative in nature. This concerns too how governments use a ‘stick’ rather than a ‘carrot’ in government approaches to CTG. This propensity for the neoliberal ‘stick’ approach explains why CTG programmes targeting indicators, such as early childhood, education and employment, are highly punitive in nature around say parenting (early childhood), school attendance (education) and workforce participation (employment). This is not only evident in the Northern Territory, but in the south-eastern urban areas of Australia. So comparatively, Australia sits on a policy spectrum in terms of the entrenchment of CTG programs and services within the hard-line social service market culture and its approach shows a heavy reliance on particular principles around the way governments do business in this market. This is coupled with a deficit-based mentality around why gaps exist.

A component of my research concerns how the deficit mentality coupled with social service market enablement has affected the capacity of urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander CBOs to engage in the business that they were set-up to do, including in their own ways of



engaging in CTG locally (Howard-Wagner 2016, 2017, 2018). My research is premised on the belief that urban Aboriginal community-based organisations have a distinctive role in society in relation to urban Aboriginal peoples and their rights to self-determination and community development. They have proven essential to advocacy, the maintenance of community development, and the creation of new social infrastructure, with their success resulting in both economic and social outcomes. It is this research that has also found that it is the deficit mentality around organisational capacity, which has led to governments taking a far more top-down programmatic and service delivery approach in Indigenous affairs, which has not only diluted, but actually undermined the capacity of successful long-standing urban Aboriginal CBOs to develop CTG solutions. For example, many successful urban Aboriginal CBOs existed, who in their own way were contributing to CTG. Urban Aboriginal CBOs lost this capacity in the rolling out of one-size-fits-all programs and prescriptive programmatic contractualism in relation to the delivery of CTG programs. In doing so, governments 'threw the baby out with the bath water'.

Little policy consideration has been given to the disabling effect of social service market enablement in terms of the valuable urban Aboriginal-driven community development and social infrastructure that existed and how this previously contributed to CTG, for example. It shows how CTG approaches in Australia are counterintuitive to what international research demonstrates, which is that CTG-type approaches are far more successful when CBOs are enabled to deliver local solutions for CTG among their people and communities. This was generally the mandate of CBOs when they were set up by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.

## Good policy needs good relationships: an expanded role for Indigenous public servants and regional offices in the future of Closing the Gap

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### Key points

- Indigenous public servants are a valuable but underutilised resource in improving relationships with community; government needs to better employ their capability to contribute and lead in this effort.
- Regional offices can play a key role in relationship-building and developing regionally identified priorities among Australia's diverse Indigenous communities; focus needs to be given to strengthening their existing capacities and in providing their staff with greater opportunities to input into the design and implementation of policy.
- Multi-method approaches to data, evidence and indicators are required (i.e. qualitative as well as quantitative) if Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural priorities and values are to be embedded in strength-based and community-led approaches to CTG.

This submission addresses a central question raised in 'Closing the Gap: The next phase' Public Discussion Paper (2017:3): What is needed to change the relationship between government and community?

### Submission

The 2018 Special Gathering of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians established clear requirements for the continuation of a CTG framework:

*We demand from government a community led, strength based strategy [...] 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 (Special Gathering Statement 2018:2, my emphasis. See also Redfern Statement; Uluru Statement).*

The 'refresh' offers an important opportunity to move towards realising these requirements, which would also restore a critical element of the original vision for CTG, one that held enormous promise for government–community relationships but was largely lost in implementation: 'sufficient flexibility *not to insist*

*on a one-size-fits-all approach'* across hundreds of diverse remote and regional Indigenous communities, by creating '*flexible, tailored, local approaches* to achieve commonly-agreed national objectives' (Rudd 2008:170, my emphasis).

This submission offers three recommendations to assist in addressing the aspirations of the Special Gathering and contribute to improving relationships between government and Indigenous communities through supporting greater responsiveness and flexibility of approach.

### *Better utilisation of the skills and capabilities of Indigenous public servants*

This submission endorses the comments of PM&C Deputy-Secretary Professor Ian Anderson in arguing that development of good policy requires 'high quality' relationships between stakeholders and bureaucrats built on a 'sense of trust and mutual respect' (2017:406). He notes that increasing the number of Indigenous public servants along with their participation and leadership in policy development is vital in achieving this goal.

Research suggests a high level of motivation among Indigenous public servants to assist in improving policy (see Lahn 2018, Lahn & Ganter n.d.). However, a range of difficulties and hindrances currently operate to limit their ability to effect constructive change or raise significant insights, including largely occupying lower levels in non-leadership roles (Lahn 2018). Greater support aimed at advancing Indigenous employees and supporting the efforts of the Indigenous senior executive to maintain and build their numbers should be a major focus going forward as a direct means to incorporate relevant 'relationship capacities' into the operations of CTG.

### *Build on the capability and capacity of the PM&C Regional Network*

My research with Indigenous public servants (see Lahn 2018) suggests those working at regional offices who have established positive relationships with Indigenous communities and organisations frequently feel their local knowledge and experience is underutilised by central offices. On rare occasions where advice is sought it is perceived as largely disregarded.

At the same time, policy directions emanating from the centre can be poorly communicated, undermining local relationships that may have been built carefully over considerable time. As one regionally-based Indigenous public servant described, a lack of information 'coming

down the line' made her office look 'cagey...like we're being misleading...And that's with relationships we've had for 10, 15 years, that you've built up with organisations' (quoted in Lahn 2018:6).

Attention needs to be given to recognising existing capabilities in regional offices and to strengthening their capacity as a means to support locally specific approaches, consultation and relationship-building. This would include measures to reshape the CTG reporting framework in a manner which places new emphasis on regional differences and diversity of priorities among Australia's numerous and distinctive Indigenous communities.

### *Qualitative findings and community insights, not just numbers*

Established scholarly critiques of CTG have for some time pointed to its inflated emphasis on generalised statistical remedialism (represented by numerical targets and indicators). These can overshadow Indigenous priorities and fail to give due regard to cultural difference, especially in relation to the range of goals and terms of advancement held by Australia's diverse Indigenous peoples.

If CTG is to adequately address Indigenous calls to incorporate a new focus on strengths and culture, there is a pressing need to move beyond wholly quantitative and statistical forms of data to multi-methods approaches that generate and incorporate qualitative, culturally relevant information and interpretation.

A new stress on community-based multi-methods research would create genuine opportunities for regional offices to build and deepen relationships with Indigenous organisations and communities as well as providing a vehicle for sharing and developing valuable social research skills with Indigenous peoples which reflect their aspirations for community-led knowledge creation, leadership and self-determination.

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