



Aboriginal people 'talking back' to policy in rural Australia

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Abstract

How does a geographically remote Australian Aboriginal community ensure that culturally and locally important priorities are recognised in policy? This paper discusses a case study of Indigenous community engagement in policy making, revealing some of the challenges community leaders face and the strategies they implement in their struggle for a strong say and hand in designing appropriate policy responses to local problems.

The case study community is Walgett, a remote New South Wales community with a large Aboriginal population, distinguished in history for its part in the 1965 Freedom Ride which highlighted racial segregation and discrimination across outback Australia. Today Walgett ranks as one of Australia's most disadvantaged communities (Vinson, 2007), and hence was chosen as one of 29 priority remote Aboriginal communities to be the focus of the Australian Government's Remote Service Delivery commitment, part of the Closing the Gap agenda.

INTRODUCTION

Since 2008, Australia's Closing the Gap agenda has taken a comparative population-level approach, aiming to reduce gaps in life outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations within set timeframes. Six high-level targets identified by policymakers aim to halve or close gaps in life expectancy and infant mortality, early childhood, education, training and employment outcomes within timeframes ranging from 5 or 10 years to a generation.



Meanwhile many Aboriginal people are expressing a strong view that policies designed to improve socio-economic outcomes should not only, or mainly, focus on gaps and deficiencies, but also build on community strengths which promote identity, including knowledge of culture and attachment to country. This critique matches objections raised by other commentators (J. Altman, 2009; Pholi, Black, & Richards, 2009), who see Closing the Gap as a narrow statistical policy focussed on deficiencies, that risks defining Indigenous peoples as under-achieving and their cultures as mismatched to modern times. New Zealand's Maori people rejected a 'closing gaps' approach more than a decade ago for this very reason.

In Australia, Aboriginal community members often prioritise maintenance of cultural identity and connection to country as strong imperatives for well-being, whilst also looking for ways to overcome crippling disadvantages that affect their lives. Aboriginal communities may be willing to work collaboratively with governments and others to seek innovative ways to both strengthen culture and improve livelihoods (Jon Altman & Kerins, 2012; Yotti' Kingsley, Townsend, Phillips, & Aldous, 2009).

This paper investigates how a geographically remote Aboriginal community in rural Australia has been navigating a complex policy environment to work with governments toward improvements in service delivery. It highlights how the community's leaders have tried to ensure that culturally and locally important priorities are recognised and included in policy and planning, and that local knowledge is respected and acknowledged. It traces the processes and frustrations that challenge the community and strategies they use to fight for a strong say and hand in both defining policy problems and designing culturally and locally appropriate policy responses to local problems.

REMOTE COMMUNITY CASE STUDY

A primary aim of the case study has been to observe the processes the people in the New South Wales Gamilaraay town of Walgett have gone through in their efforts to ensure that culturally and locally important priorities are recognised in the implementation of policies that impact their community. The research has been designed and carried out in collaboration with the Aboriginal community, whose governance body the Walgett Gamilaraay Aboriginal Community Working Party (WGACWP) felt it would be beneficial to have independent observation and analysis of the community's engagement with government over the implementation of the place-based policy initiative Remote Service Delivery.

Walgett is one of 29 remote Indigenous communities chosen for priority attention as part of Remote Service Delivery (RSD), a whole-of-government commitment by Australian federal and state governments to invest \$291.2 million over a six year period to try to improve services in particular localities.

RSD is part of the nation's Closing the Gap policy agenda¹. Each of the RSD priority communities is affected by a range of socio-economic disadvantages and social problems, and is significantly under-served relative to need. Therefore the identified aim of RSD was to 'progressively deliver to these communities the facilities and services enjoyed in other Australian towns of comparable size, location and need' (Australian Government, 2009b).

The policy is based on a recognition of significant disadvantage of Aboriginal people living in remote communities today, who are under-served relative to the broader population, and in recognition of a history of chronic under-investment by Australian governments in both infrastructure and provision of service delivery to Indigenous communities (Australian Government, 2009a, p. 4; Dillon & Westbury, 2007). This lack of adequate investment, compounded by poorly coordinated cross-jurisdictional government effort and accountability in relation to Indigenous people, has resulted in what is acknowledged today as 'acute and visible need' (Australian Government, 2009a, p. 4). The deficit is particularly clear when remote infrastructure and services are compared against those provided to non-Indigenous Australians living in urban and regional areas, however it is also evident when compared against services provided to non-Indigenous citizens living in rural and remote areas (Senate Estimates, 2009).

SERVICING REMOTE AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITIES

Australia is a vast continent with a highly urbanized population. As long ago as federation (1901), the country's population distribution was well established, with a majority of people living in coastal cities of the south-east and south-west. Equal provision of services to farming regions was once considered a legitimate subsidy by government to support agricultural producers making a vital economic contribution (Brett, 2011). State and federal governments were monopoly providers of many basic services so they were able to cross-subsidize service provision relatively easily. Equal access to communication technologies, for example, was considered a citizenship right that could conquer distance for people living in remote and scattered communities (Brett, 2011, p. 23). Costs of unique outback services like the school of the air and Royal Flying Doctor service were also cross-subsidized by governments, becoming iconic outback institutions to support citizens living remotely (Dillon & Westbury, 2007, p. 26).

It is important to note however, that no corresponding long-standing investment was made by governments to provide services to remote-living Indigenous communities. In fact, Australia's Indigenous people, colonized since 1788, were not granted citizenship until 1967, so it was not until that time that federal governments took any interest in the lives of Aboriginal peoples living across the nation's various state and territories. Colonisation had a brutal impact on the lives and livelihoods of Australia's first peoples with many communities decimated by disease or violence,

1 In 2008, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed to six ambitious targets for closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in terms of life expectancy, health, education and employment. Remote Service Delivery is one of a number of National Partnership Agreements related to Closing the Gap (COAG, 2008).

and progressively dispossessed from traditional country (Elder, 1999). Across the continent, including in NSW, many Aboriginal people found themselves forced onto managed reserves, with appallingly substandard facilities and restricted freedom, as white settlers encroached and took over land for farming and grazing.

Meanwhile, governments' continued subsidized support of non-Indigenous settlers in rural and remote Australia was to drop off by the 1980s as the nation's 'city-country compact' dissolved under the influence of neo-liberalism (Brett, 2011). As large state-owned enterprises were privatized or corporatized in the 1980s and 1990s, government agencies and private businesses increasingly based decisions on user-pays market principles that removed the notion of service equity for rural citizens. Country towns now experienced declining levels of service in areas like hospital facilities and communications, bank branches closed, and rail and air services were cut back or discontinued, causing a domino effect that impacted viability of local businesses, and left many townships struggling to survive.

At the same time, a strong new trend emerged, as non-Indigenous people started to move away from rural and remote Australia, migrating to better serviced regional or urban centers; so that Aboriginal communities, with a naturally higher rate of population growth and less propensity to move away from traditional country, made up an increasing proportion of the population in rural and remote Australia². The indigenization of many country towns has been a notable effect (Dillon & Westbury, 2007, pp. 20-22; Taylor, 2006). Demographer John Taylor stresses an urgent need for proactive policy planning to take account of this change, rather than just continuing to play historical catch-up, as trends predict that younger Indigenous populations will have escalating needs in the areas of education, jobs and housing for new families (Taylor, 2006).

Remoteness is undoubtedly a factor that affects the cost-effectiveness and capacity of governments to provide services (Dillon & Westbury, 2007, p. 63). Increasingly there are arguments that Indigenous people ought to be coerced or encouraged to move away from traditional country to regional and urban centers to access jobs and services. However there is little evidence that those that do migrate away from homelands to larger towns or urban centers are able to improve their social standing or job prospects by so doing (Dillon & Westbury, 2007, pp. 20,27), and policies that encourage out-migration may simply shift problems of under-servicing and infrastructure shortfalls from remote to regional locations.

There is also emerging evidence that Australia will need to continue to support people residing in remote regions, beyond those involved in mining and resource extraction, in order to have people on the ground to monitor and care for country.

2 While the majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people today live in urban and regional parts of Australia, there are still 120,000 people, around 20% of the total population, residing in remote or very remote locations; there are approximately 1200 remote and very remote Indigenous communities (Dillon & Westbury, 2007, pp. 62-63; Taylor, 2006, p. 5). While non-Indigenous population growth has been negative, Indigenous populations of remote areas have grown by 23% since 1981. (Dillon & Westbury, 2007, p. 24)

As climate change and other forces pose myriad threats to land and seascapes of the nation, there is increasing recognition of a role for traditional custodians to 'conserve and rehabilitate the outstanding natural and cultural resource values of their ancestral lands' (Jon Altman & Kerins, 2012, p. 1). The importance of sustaining remote Indigenous communities as natural and cultural resource managers over vast remote estates is something Australia is perhaps only nascently coming to acknowledge.

CASE STUDY COMMUNITY PROFILE: WALGETT

Walgett is a remote town in the far north west of the state of NSW. Located at the junction of two rivers, the Barwon and the Namoi, Walgett's name comes from a word that means the place where two rivers meet. Aboriginal people living in Walgett today are mostly of the Gamilaraay, Yuwaaliyaay and Ngayimbaa nations.

Around 1800 people reside in Walgett and two nearby Aboriginal villages, according to the 2011 census, with a little over half the population identifying as Indigenous (ABS, 2011). Situated 10 hours drive north west of Sydney, Walgett is three and a half hours from the nearest regional population and service centre Dubbo, population 41,000. Walgett is classified as a remote community, and the cessation of commercial air services in 2008 has exacerbated both its remoteness and service delivery challenges.

Walgett was once a thriving commercial hub for surrounding agricultural properties, a time when the majority of town residents were non-Indigenous. While local Aboriginal people were employed as farm and domestic laborers, the Aboriginal community was marginalized, physically segregated and largely excluded from enjoying the wealth and amenities of the town. Today both the population make-up Walgett and its economic prospects have changed dramatically.

As Taylor has clearly shown, significant shifts in the demographics of this community over time are typical of many rural towns, with the Aboriginal proportion of the population growing, and increasingly young, compared with the non-Indigenous population, which is aging and dwindling due to out-migration and lower birth rates (Ross & Taylor, 2000; Taylor, 2000, 2006). These demographic trends highlight that there are particular challenges and needs to be met in the locality, both due to existing disadvantage and service delivery gaps, but also because of predicted increases in demand for housing, education, training and jobs for younger Indigenous residents into the future.

Being flood-prone, Walgett's township is surrounded by a 9 km levee bank. There are two Aboriginal villages some distance from town, called Gingie and Namoi, where authorities once sought to force Aboriginal families to live on segregated reserves isolated from the rest of the community. Today the villages are on land managed by the local Aboriginal land council, a fact which has unfortunately allowed the Shire Council to avoid responsibility for providing certain basic services to the level they are provided to the town, such as well-maintained roads, rubbish collection, water and sewerage provision. A number of families and older residents continue to reside in the two villages, but the largest proportion of Indigenous residents now live in the town proper.

Walgett Shire includes large agricultural properties engaged in sheep, wool, cattle, grain and cotton production; however changes to agricultural practices and the rural economy have reduced opportunities for Indigenous employment in farming over past decades. It is big sky country, with sweeping plains above and a vast artesian bore steaming below. The surrounding areas feature black opal fields, a significant wetland reserve and numerous sites sacred to Aboriginal people.

It's chilling to think that some of the most bloody and notorious massacres of Aboriginal people took place here in the north west plains in the 1830s, as white settlers attempted to take over land to graze livestock. Violence had virtually been sanctioned by the colonial government when squatters were advised to take 'vigorous measures' for their own defence against 'the natives'. When Aboriginal people resisted with a type of guerrilla warfare, there were casualties on both sides (Elder, 1999).

From the 1880s onward, a confusion of local and state policies saw officials act to try to remove, contain, assimilate or disperse Aboriginal people in the region, via policies we now recognise as racist, misguided, culturally and individually damaging. Then, in 1965 Walgett became a key site of the civil rights protests staged by Charles Perkins' Freedom Riders from the University of Sydney. Inspired by the American civil rights movement, the Freedom Riders travelled around the state by bus, conducting public protests and transgressing colour bars in country towns, to bring about non-violent confrontations. They picketed segregated swimming pools, hotels and clubs, theatres and dress shops, raising the ire of locals in many places and drew national and international media attention (Curthoys, 2002). Strong local leadership would continue the struggle for Aboriginal rights in Walgett long after the bus had left town. But for many years afterwards the towns of Walgett and Moree became the Australian 'media's measuring stick to gauge the level of racism in rural NSW'. (Peters-Little 2000, p. 8).

Despite the many hardships they have lived through, Aboriginal people of NSW's north west have survived on country, retaining their Aboriginality and their own concepts of social and geographical boundaries. Today, the population of Aboriginal people living in the region is believed to be higher than it was prior to colonisation. There is a proud history of political activism and resilience on the part of Aboriginal people in the Walgett community, reflected in a number of Aboriginal community-run organisations established here since the 1970s: the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs, Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service, Walgett Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, Walgett Local Aboriginal Land Council and the Dharriwaa Elders Group to name a few.

POLICY CONTEXT OF CASE STUDY: CLOSING THE GAP FRAMEWORK

Whilst many Indigenous individuals, families and communities are thriving, at population level there remain shocking disparities in a range of life outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians which are difficult to fathom given Australia's wealth as a nation. One example is the existence of a 16 to 17 year gap in life-expectancy between Indigenous Australians and the general

population, reflecting vast disparities in levels of chronic diseases, mental illness and hospitalization³. In a range of other areas too, Indigenous people's outcomes are identified as measurably disparate from those of other Australians.

FIGURE 1: CLOSING THE GAP BUILDING BLOCKS



Source: Walgett Remote Service Delivery Local Implementation Plan, 2010

In 2008, Australian governments introduced a new policy based around targets to close statistical gaps in life outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous population groups. Six high level targets for Indigenous policy were identified as part of Closing the Gap:

- To close life expectancy gap within a generation;
- To halve the gap in infant mortality rates;
- To ensure that all 4 year olds in remote communities get preschool education, within 5 years;
- To halve the gap in literacy and numeracy;
- To halve the gap for indigenous students reaching year 12 or equivalent
- To halve the gap in employment outcomes within a decade (COAG, 2008)

³ Indigenous Australians born in the period 1996-2001 are estimated to have a life expectancy at birth of 59.4 years for males, and 64.8 years for females. This is approximately 16-17 years less than the overall Australian population born over the same period (ABS 2007 cat. no. 3302.0). Australia compares poorly against other countries: Canada estimates a Indigenous/non-Indigenous life-expectancy differential of 6-8 years, while New Zealand estimates an 8-9 year difference. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare: <http://www.aihw.gov.au/indigenous-life-expectancy/>

To further the Closing the Gap agenda, Remote Service Delivery (RSD) is one of a number of cross-jurisdictional commitments by federal and state governments to work to improve the delivery of services in 29 priority communities, including Walgett and one other in NSW.

To achieve the high level targets of Closing the Gap, Government has defined a framework of 'building block' areas for activity (see figure 1). As RSD has been rolled out, each priority community has been tasked to work with staff from government coordination offices to draft a Local Implementation Plan (LIP) matched against the seven building block areas. Heads of particular government agencies would then be designated as Senior Responsible Owners to coordinate cross-agency cooperation to achieve activities listed under various Building Blocks.

COMMUNITY CRITIQUE OF CLOSING THE GAP

In its engagement with RSD since 2009, Walgett's Aboriginal community has shown considerable initiative in critiquing or 'talking back' to Closing the Gap policy. Initially the WGACWP informed government of its intention to amend and improve the federal policy framework of building blocks, by developing an 8th building block called Land and Culture (see figure 2). This additional building block, they argued, would better capture the community's core values and priorities, making the policy a better fit with local values and aspirations.

FIGURE 2: CLOSING THE GAP BUILDING BLOCKS WITH PROPOSED ADDITION OF 'LAND & CULTURE'



Proposing to reframe national government policy was a powerful and ambitious move on the part of this community, and the research has revealed that though the land and culture building block was not ultimately incorporated into the community's LIP, this ground-up initiative was discussed at some very high level government meetings. Importantly, other RSD communities identified similar problems with the CTG framework, and one community did add an additional 'land, culture and language' building block to its LIP (Beagle Bay LIP, 2010).

The community's critique and efforts to 'talk back to' policy, reflect what many critics have said about CTG, that with its strong focus on statistical gaps and deficiencies – the strategy seems unable to value or appreciate the strengths of culture – because what is unique or special to Aboriginal communities is irrelevant to measurement towards closing gaps (J. Altman, 2009; Jon Altman, 2012; Pholi, et al., 2009). In fact the only factors relevant to be measured are those that can be compared against measurable outcomes for non-Aboriginal people.

The WGACWP hoped to develop and insert land and culture-based programs into the LIP for funding and support as part of RSD, because it believed the empowering and well-being aspects of land and culture to Indigenous communities may actually be prerequisites for closing gaps in health, education and other areas. Walgett's Community Working Party argued that land and culture programs should be funded under Closing the Gap, because they would bring empowerment and increased well-being for Aboriginal people, and because they would help to close gaps in other areas the government was already focussing on, such as health and education.

CASE STUDY GOVERNANCE ENVIRONMENT

Dillon and Westbury identify as problematic the complex architecture of government in Indigenous affairs, given the 'reality of political competition and conflict between the states and territories on one hand and the federal government on the other', as providing 'enormous scope for miscommunication, misunderstanding, misdirection of effort and at times mischief in the implementation of politics and programs by governments' (Dillon & Westbury, 2007, p. 63).

In the case study locality, three tiers of Australian government intersect: the federal government sets national Indigenous policy, while state governments are in charge of major services like education, policing and health. The Local Shire Council is an additional third layer that arguably has the most direct impact on day to day lives, responsible for municipal services, yet has an uneasy relationship with Closing the Gap, because it is not actually a signatory to the local plan.

Many services in Walgett are also provided by non-government organisations, or by Aboriginal organisations like the Aboriginal Medical Service, Dharriwaa Elders Group, and the Local Land Council.

Walgett's Gamilaraay Aboriginal Community Working Party (WGACWP) is the representative governance body for the Indigenous community. It is an unincorporated body, whose members are unpaid and frequently time-poor, as they hold numerous other roles and responsibilities. Sitting on the WGACWP are representatives of local Aboriginal organisations involved in health and education, the Elders organisation, and Local Land Council, as well as members representing the interests of youth, women and men.

Individual WGACWP members involved in the research spoke of the frustrations of their role, feeling caught between the limitations of their decision-making power in relation to government and the need to be accountable to the broader community for progress in addressing social problems.

PARTICIPATION IN POLICYMAKING

While Closing the Gap has signalled a renewal of energy and commitment from federal and state governments toward tackling shameful levels of Indigenous disadvantage in Australia, Aboriginal leaders have expressed concern about the rapid development of new policy reforms, shaped and implemented by governments without what Tom Calma describes as 'significant engagement and participation by Indigenous peoples' (Calma, 2008).

Addressing the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in Geneva, Australia's Social Justice Commissioner Mick Gooda identified a pressing need for Australian governments to 'ensure the intrinsic right to full participation of Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders in policymaking processes' (Gooda, 2010; UN General Assembly, 2007). He argued that to achieve a significant improvement in the lives of Indigenous peoples governments must 'recognise, endorse and treat Indigenous people as substantive players and major stakeholders in the development, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of all policy and legislation that impacts on their health and wellbeing' (Gooda, 2010).

Gooda described that governments, particularly in Australia, typically 'interpret their obligation to consult with Indigenous people as a duty to 'tell us what has been developed on our behalf, and what eventually will be imposed on us' (Gooda, 2010). He pointed out that the capacity of communities to engage in consultative processes is often hindered by inadequate resources to effectively participate in decision making as equals; and unreasonably short timeframes provided.

TENSIONS IN WALGETT'S RSD ENGAGEMENT WITH GOVERNMENT

In negotiating RSD, there have been tensions between government and the community, stemming at least in part from differences in focus and desired outcomes. If governments were targeting deficits, aiming to ramp up services and achieve visible results toward closing gaps within the five year policy cycle, the WGACWP wanted to ensure service improvements would be sustainable and strengthen existing local Indigenous organisations; the WGACWP wanted to apply broader notions of Indigenous wellbeing, and focus on longer term community aspirations and goals.

Tension also arose over the Community Working Party's role in decision making. If government identified it needed to consult the community at particular stages of implementing RSD, Working Party members considered themselves leaders, advocates and local experts, who ought to be involved and influential in every stage of decision-making processes. Some Working Party members expressed a view that government seemed to treat them as a 'tick a box' consultation body to allow pre-determined agendas to be carried out.

In the past Indigenous community members have identified a feeling of being under 'remote control', with decisions that affect Indigenous lives made by agency heads far away in Sydney or Canberra, more than 650km away (Drewery, 2009). Under RSD this may have been exacerbated, with processes that saw very high level government decision makers meet bimonthly without (initially) any provision for local Indigenous representation or involvement. This was particularly problematic for community representatives, who saw themselves as experts in their own lives and communities, yet felt they were rarely recognised as rightful local decision makers.

Other identified engagement problems included high staff turnover in government roles, difficult relationships evident between governments at different levels who were supposed to be working together on RSD, poor avenues for information sharing between government and the community, and a lack of direct communication between the WGACWP and senior responsible government decision-makers based in Canberra or Sydney.

WHAT DID COMMUNITY LEADERS DO IN THE FACE OF SUCH CHALLENGES?

A range of strategies and processes were used to fight for a stronger voice and involvement. The WGACWP:

- continuously lobbied for more information and for more opportunities to engage and have a say in decision-making
- pushed for a paid administration position to support members' work
- developed a communications strategy
- decided to collaborate with the current research project as an independent observation of the community's engagement with government

In addition, the WGACWP also carried out its own policy work:

- identifying the LIP as too complex and more reflective of governments' agenda than the community's plan, the WGACWP took a pragmatic approach, developing 12 Community Priorities to simplify and focus long term goals
- members encouraged government to see the benefit of community planning
- implemented action research processes to develop their goals

SUCCESSSES OF THE APPROACH, DESPITE SOME TENSIONS AND SETBACKS ALONG THE WAY

Despite community representatives' frustrations about inadequate levels of involvement government's processes allowed them, some successes of the WGACWP's approach included that: the WGACWP was described as good at holding government to account over RSD commitments; the Chair of the WGACWP was eventually invited to attend state Senior Management Committee meetings; and more flexible and enabling processes did develop towards the end of the policy cycle, as a result of the WGACWP's continued feedback and lobbying. Administrative and some facilitation support were eventually provided to the WGACWP, enabling it to research and develop community priorities with potential to extend beyond the life of RSD. Meanwhile separate planning processes run by the WGACWP may promise a longer-term legacy for the community.

CONCLUSION

Despite their frustrations and disappointment about inadequate engagement over RSD implementation, the WGACWP were able to salvage some sense of hope for locally-driven, longer-term goals beyond this policy cycle. As one member put it: 'Governments come and they go, ministers come and they go, the community will always be here.' This makes it vital for communities to be able to envision their own future beyond political or policy cycles.

Ultimately the case-study highlighted that engagement processes were far from satisfactory for Walgett's Aboriginal community. Nevertheless, community representatives were pro-active and vocal in fighting for a say and a seat at government's senior decision-making table, spending considerable effort and energy battling for improved processes.

The case study does however also highlight the importance of Aboriginal communities being supported, via skilled, independent facilitation, to carry out their own cycles of participatory policy work, to strengthen local governance and allow communities the time, space and support they need to strategise, develop, research and plan for long-term goals and aspirations. If governments need to engage better with communities to tackle Indigenous disadvantage, there must be more investment in resourcing and supporting the capacity of communities to develop and carry out necessary processes, in their own way, to their own satisfaction.

Indigenous community engagement is consistently emphasised by Aboriginal leaders, and in government policy documents, as key to the design and implementation of policies. However there appears to be little evidence that this is being carried out to the satisfaction of either governments or Indigenous people. Where governments and other agencies engage in purely instrumental consultation with Aboriginal communities, toward achieving predetermined agendas, Indigenous people are likely to feel disillusioned and disempowered by processes that tantalisingly promise participation and shared decision-making, yet ultimately don't deliver anything of the kind.

In resources developed to support Indigenous engagement toward Closing the Gap, the Federal Government has endorsed a 'spectrum of Indigenous engagement' processes that can be implemented depending on circumstances: from low-end engagement like informing people about what government is doing, through to higher-

end engagement that involves collaborating and empowering Indigenous people in decision making (FaHCSIA, 2011). Disappointingly this higher end of engagement is rarely attempted nor achieved in Australia today, despite consistent desire and demands from Indigenous people for decision-making influence (Hunt, 2013). Australia is a long way from the international ideal of participatory involvement by marginalised people in development processes (Cornwall, 2011), and the Indigenous right to participate in decision-making, with free and informed consent, conferred by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UN General Assembly, 2007; Articles 18 & 19). This may well be an ongoing critical flaw in Australia's Indigenous policy making.

Furthermore, government policies founded on measuring relative socio-economic indicators and closing gaps between population groups, almost implicitly downplay the significance of unique Indigenous priorities and world views, because such factors are not measurable against the indicators for the majority non-Indigenous population. This means that important Indigenous-specific values and priorities are excluded from the framing of both policy problems and solutions. Aboriginal people may be extremely frustrated that factors they consider vital to community well-being are therefore not able to be included in the policies governments design to improve Indigenous welfare.

In Australia, Indigenous communities frequently prioritise maintenance of cultural identity and connection to country as strong imperatives for well-being, but they are also keen to seek out ways to overcome intolerable disadvantages that affect their lives. As has been clear in the Walgett case study, community members may be particularly eager to have a strong hand and say in promoting identified community priorities that can simultaneously strengthen culture and improve livelihoods.

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