

A way forward

- 6.1 In this chapter the Committee provides an overview of the report, an assessment of progress, and an emphasis on the importance of change. The Committee particularly stresses the need for a new approach by the government sector, and the need to build the capacity of Indigenous communities and organisations.
- 6.2 This inquiry has primarily been concerned with measures to improve the delivery of services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, particularly measures to build the capacities of governments, together with Indigenous organisations and communities, to result in the more effective management, funding and delivery of services. These services involve mainstream and Indigenous-specific services delivered by government agencies, departments and offices, as well as services delivered by Indigenous organisations on behalf of governments.
- 6.3 The standard of living of many Indigenous Australians is well below the national average, and on most scales, Indigenous Australians are disadvantaged, having lower life expectancy, lower health levels, lower education and training rates, lower employment levels, and higher contact with the criminal justice system. The causes of disadvantage are complex and multifaceted, and relate to a variety of causes, including historical circumstances. Yet despite this chronic state of disadvantage, Indigenous people tend to access services at a rate lower than that of other Australians. Therefore, the Committee has focused on strategies to improve the delivery of appropriate and effective services to a level that is equitable to that of other sectors of Australian society.
- 6.4 Policy options for the delivery of services to Indigenous communities are complicated by a number of factors including the chronic state of

disadvantage, multiple and overlapping causes of disadvantage, geographic dispersal and remoteness, specialist needs requiring tailored programs, and jurisdictional blurring and cost shifting.

- 6.5 Measures to address Indigenous disadvantage require the efforts of Indigenous organisations and individuals, together with a collaborative and cooperative effort at all levels of government. It was frequently put to the Committee that there are no magic solutions or ‘silver bullets’, that there is no ‘one size fits all’ solution, and that measures to address Indigenous disadvantage transcend political cycles and require long term commitment and cooperation. As ATSIC stated:

No one has all the answers. The solutions, which contribute to long-term, sustainable development, will come from sharing knowledge and information about what works on the ground.¹

The inquiry

- 6.6 Over the course of almost two years of inquiry, the Committee has received evidence from individuals, Indigenous and non-government organisations, and governments from all over Australia concerning the improvement of services to Indigenous Australians. Although many Indigenous Australians live in urban areas and rural centres, much of the evidence related to Indigenous communities in rural and remote areas, which is reflected in the report. It is in many of the smaller rural and remote communities that the levels of service delivery are lowest and the levels of disadvantage are highest.
- 6.7 As outlined at the commencement to chapter three, the Committee agreed that for there to be a real change in the effectiveness of service delivery, and ultimately improvements in the outcomes for Indigenous Australians, a significant change in the approach of governments needs to occur. The primacy of the role of government led to the construction of the report addressing the terms of reference in the reverse order to that in the original referral.
- 6.8 There were two main themes in the evidence. Firstly, that Indigenous people understand the issues, want to take responsibility and control, and want to work in collaboration with governments; and secondly, the need for governments to change the way they do business, both with Indigenous Australians, and within and between governments.

1 ATSIC, Submission 66, p. 12.

- 6.9 The main arguments surrounding Indigenous community organisations and the delivery of services involved governance and the need for corporate management training, while the main arguments surrounding government changing the way it does business involved integration within and between governments, together with engagement in genuine communication and partnerships with Indigenous communities.
- 6.10 The main emphasis for building the capacity of Indigenous individuals, families and communities, involved Indigenous people wanting to be able to exercise genuine decision-making control over their daily lives. Empowering and supportive approaches were identified as the main strategies to improve quality of life and to reduce dependence on service delivery.

Progress

- 6.11 Over the length of the inquiry, developments and progress have been made across all levels, though the Committee is sceptical over how much real progress has actually been made in either absolute or relative terms.
- 6.12 The Committee believes there is a balance between recognising that addressing the complex and entrenched nature of Indigenous disadvantage will take time, and recognising the urgency of addressing, or the very least, alleviating, the chronic state of Indigenous disadvantage.
- 6.13 Although the responsibility for the provision of the majority of services to Indigenous Australians remains primarily with the States and Territories, the Commonwealth Government has a significant leadership role. Acting alone it cannot ensure the most effective use of resources. However, the Commonwealth has achieved considerable indirect influence over the actions of State, Territory and non-government providers through the development of partnerships, agreements and other collaborative arrangements, national policies and its leadership in key Ministerial councils.
- 6.14 The Committee notes key Commonwealth developments, including: the release of the Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage framework commissioned by COAG and undertaken by the Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision; the 2003 Indigenous Compendium reviewing government service provision to Indigenous Australians; the findings of the 2001 Commonwealth Grants Commission inquiry into Indigenous funding; and the whole of government COAG Indigenous communities trials.

- 6.15 The evidence suggests, however, that though developments are occurring, progress is slow. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner's 2003 report was critical of progress in addressing the chronic state of Indigenous disadvantage, indicating that what change is occurring is slow, and may not necessarily be sustainable in the long term. The Commissioner reported that it was difficult to see any progressive trend towards the reduction of inequality, even in areas where there had been some improvement in absolute terms:

There is an overwhelming sense that the crisis situation that Indigenous peoples face is highly likely to worsen substantially over the next decade due to the faster growth rate of the Indigenous population (in other words, that government programs will not be able to keep up with the growth of the Indigenous population with the result that it will become increasingly difficult to maintain the status quo or prevent a further deterioration in key areas of well-being). The absence of a clear accountability framework for governments, including benchmarks and targets, is a matter of great urgency in addressing this situation.²

- 6.16 The Committee too, is sceptical of progress, while also acknowledging the inadequacies in data collection that may show such progress or lack thereof. The Committee also contends the importance of benchmarks and holding governments to account in relation to outcomes.

The importance of change in the government sector

- 6.17 There is significant onus on governments to address the needs of Indigenous Australians more appropriately and more effectively, both through changes in the direct provision of services, and through changes to the provision of funding for Indigenous organisations to deliver services.

The delivery of services by governments

- 6.18 There are many aspects of government service delivery, from higher level policy and program development, to the on the ground, face to face service delivery. Interwoven with this is the provision of mainstream and
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2 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Dr. William Jonas AM, 2003, *Social Justice Report 2003*, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Sydney, p. 3.

Indigenous-specific services. In addition, the whole service delivery context is overlaid by jurisdictional and responsibility blurring, combined with cost-shifting. This produces a complex web of service delivery.

6.19 The challenges faced by governments are multifaceted, and organisational structures and operations are entrenched. Capacity building for governments is not an easy task, and while the Committee acknowledges that organisational change takes time, strong leadership and a commitment to change can speed up the process considerably.

6.20 Evidence received by the Committee argued the need for governments to build their capacity on two main levels: firstly, by increasing communication and cooperation within and between governments, and secondly, by improving communication and cooperation with Indigenous communities and groups. This second element involves taking a capacity building and empowering approach to the delivery of services, and engaging in developmental activities such as mentoring and skill transfer. It also involves accepting, at a policy level, that each community is different, and that approaches to addressing the needs in a community must acknowledge 'where the community is at'. Some governments articulated an understanding of such approaches, for example, FaCS emphasised in its submission that there was no one model for building community capacity, but that there were a number of guiding principles. The Committee particularly notes three of these principles:

- build on community strengths;
- start from local conditions; and
- value cultural strengths.³

6.21 The Western Australian Government Inquiry into Response by Government Agencies to Complaints of Family Violence and Child Abuse in Aboriginal Communities, *Putting the Picture Together*, undertook a comprehensive review of service delivery and outlined a number of 'best practice' suggestions. Among those specific to family violence, was a service delivery strategy that the Committee sees as applicable to guide programs across many service delivery areas. The research indicated that approaches to service delivery are most successful when they:

- are tailored to meet the needs of specific localities;
- are based on community development principles of empowerment;

3 Kingsley *et al* cited in Department of Family and Community Services and Centrelink (FaCS), Submission 46, p. 20.

- are linked to [other] initiatives... and similar problems in a holistic manner;
- employ local people where feasible;
- respect traditional law and customs where appropriate;
- employ a multidisciplinary approach;
- focus on partnership between agencies and community groups;
- add value to existing community structures where possible...; and
- place more emphasis on intervention that maintains family relationships and “healing”.⁴

6.22 The Committee received evidence of governments and their agencies/departments/offices taking such a capacity building and developmental approach to working with Indigenous organisations and communities to improve service delivery. The Committee is heartened to hear of such developments, and eager to know how much genuine capacity building is occurring, and to see evidence of real outcomes and improvements.

6.23 At the Commonwealth level, it is understood that the COAG Indigenous community trials are operating on a framework with a similar approach to that outlined above, and at State and Territory levels a multiplicity of projects are underway or being developed to incorporate principles of community development and empowerment.

6.24 The Committee is concerned that strong emphasis is being put on the COAG Trials when they are yet to show tangible results, or to set or achieve benchmarks in all Trial sites. The Trials are being promoted as a symbol of change, and as an indication of a Commonwealth commitment to both Indigenous communities and to whole of government coordination. However, the Committee has concerns regarding their experimental nature and that concrete indications of progress or publication of outcomes are yet to be produced, and believes that an effective reporting and accountability process needs to be implemented.

The delivery of funding by governments

6.25 Though many Indigenous organisations are now delivering services to their own communities, they are doing so on behalf of governments,

4 Blagg, H., cited in: Gordon, S., Hallahan, K. & Henry, D., 2002, *Putting the picture together: Inquiry into Response by Government Agencies to Complaints of Family Violence and Child Abuse in Aboriginal Communities*, Department of Premier and Cabinet, Western Australia, p. 396.

through the provision of public funding. Governments therefore, have a responsibility to ensure those funds are dispensed appropriately and effectively. Reconciliation Australia's submission cited John Ah Kit MLA, who said:

I can't overstate the importance of capacity building for Aboriginal community organisations. Without it we're just setting up Aboriginal people to fail. There is no point in Aboriginal people having power to make decisions unless we make sure they have the knowledge, skills and capacity to make those decisions.⁵

- 6.26 The detrimental effects of devolving resources and responsibilities without appropriate capacity were highlighted to the Committee with events such as the recent collapse of the Tiwi Health Board.
- 6.27 The Committee emphasises the importance of governments recognising where communities or organisations are at, and responding to that level through the provision of appropriate support, and, if a community is effectively delivering services and meeting accountability requirements, to allow those organisations freedom to operate. The Committee was repeatedly told that all Indigenous families and communities are different, and that there is no one size fits all approach to address the complex sets of issues faced by each family or community. As a way of acknowledging this diversity, and the various stages different communities were at, one witness told the Committee:

We developed... a program called "hands on, hands off and hand up". Basically, you categorised the communities into those three areas. If it was "hands on", they needed lots of work; they needed to have lots of agencies working collaboratively. If it was "hand up", they needed less support, maybe the generation of income, but obviously a concerted effort to give the community a hand up. If the community or the organisation was doing exceptionally well, we called it "hands off"—leave them bloody alone, give them the money and let them get on with the job.⁶

- 6.28 Indigenous Business Australia reinforced that capacity building needs to be accompanied by a power shift, indicating that:

5 Reconciliation Australia, Submission 55, p. 10.

6 Professor John Lester, Wollotuka School of Aboriginal Studies, and Umulliko Indigenous Higher Education Research Centre, University of Newcastle, Transcript (07.04.03), p. 572.

International research would suggest that there would seem little point pursuing capacity building unless Indigenous people are concurrently being given genuine opportunities to exercise decision making power over those matters which are central to their future.⁷

- 6.29 Though many Indigenous organisations successfully apply for funding to deliver government services to their communities, the overwhelming evidence received by the Committee suggests that the way in which governments deliver funding often compromises the ability of Indigenous organisations to appropriately or sustainably address their needs. These criticisms include the length of funding cycles; the complex reporting requirements; the piecemeal nature of funding; the focus on funding for ‘trials’, but not for ongoing, successful programs; and the lack of government integration resulting in duplication over funding areas and intended outcomes.

The development of partnerships between governments and Indigenous groups

- 6.30 Evidence submitted to the inquiry emphasised the need for governments to engage in genuine partnerships with Indigenous groups, and explored methods for developing the effectiveness of such partnerships in the delivery of services.
- 6.31 The Committee wishes to highlight the importance of the development of genuine partnerships, which involve a sharing of power and responsibilities, as FaCS noted:

A partnership is not the same as a purchaser/provider relationship...a philanthropic/beneficiary relationship ... [or] a funder/grantee relationship. The key elements that distinguish a “partnership” relationship from other kinds of relationships include:

- shared goals;
- shared risk;
- shared power;
- shared work and contributions; and
- that all parties benefit.⁸

7 Indigenous Business Australia (IBA), Submission 29, p. 6.

8 FaCS, Submission 46, p. 37.

- 6.32 The Committee emphasises that partnerships are not about consultation, nor about the imposition of policy on communities, but they are about genuine dialogue, and shared and agreed upon responsibilities and outcomes.

Building the capacity of Indigenous organisations

- 6.33 Evidence to the inquiry brought attention to accountability issues in the expenditure of public funding by Indigenous organisations. There was evidence to suggest that accountability issues were both real and imagined. There was an overwhelming call for appropriate corporate governance training. As DIMIA stated:

[Governments]... tend to use Indigenous community organisations as the principal vehicle for delivering government programs. That ranges from everything from primary health care to housing, legal aid, even forms of local government and day-to-day policing functions... That puts an enormous amount of pressure on those communities and on the community organisations. Often they are communities that are suffering abnormal degrees of dysfunction, be it substance abuse, violence or whatever. So community capacity building becomes quite central in those circumstances because these communities and their organisations are the vehicles we are using for the delivery of government programs.⁹

- 6.34 In smaller, rural and remote communities, the provision of government services from outside the communities can be prohibitively expensive and time consuming due to distance factors, whereas Indigenous organisations within these communities are well placed to deliver services in a more cost effective manner. This serves the purposes of governments, who are obliged to provide such services to all Australians, and it serves the interests of Indigenous communities who wish to take responsibility for service provision, deliver such services in ways appropriate to their people, and to provide local jobs.
- 6.35 In responding to calls for greater involvement in the planning and delivery of services, the development of Indigenous organisational capacity becomes essential. Evidence cautions a shifting of the power

9 Mr Peter Vaughan, Office of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (OATSIA), Department of Immigration and Indigenous and Multicultural Affairs (DIMIA), Transcript (04.06.03), p. 681.

balance from governments to communities without the accompaniment or assurance of appropriate capacity. Richie Ahmat told the Committee that Indigenous people want to take responsibility, but that there needs to be a genuine power shift with that responsibility that allows a greater level of autonomy:

We are saying the key word for Indigenous people in Australia is to take responsibility. We want to take the responsibility, but you have to undo the shackles. We always talk about the shackles—well you have to undo those shackles, because there are enough of us now, who are smart and astute, to deliver for our mobs a better lifestyle, better health, economic development, the range of works, whatever you want to call it. But we are saying, “Let us take the lead role.”¹⁰

Governance

- 6.36 The importance of governance was a central theme in evidence regarding capacity building in Indigenous organisations. The Harvard Model was referred to in evidence, both in support of its applicability to Indigenous organisations in Australia, and in criticism of the model’s appropriateness given the differences between Australia and North America’s historical events and contemporary policy. The Committee contends that, though the North American Indian historical and policy contexts are different, the model makes useful observations and suggestions on Indigenous governance.

Building the capacity of Indigenous individuals, families and communities

- 6.37 The Committee received a wide range of evidence relating to service delivery, particularly concerning the roles of governments, and, to a lesser extent, issues surrounding Indigenous organisations. Much of the evidence regarding Indigenous organisations related to the expectations placed on them by governments, and so involved suggestions on how to build the capacity of governments to respond to these issues. In relation to building the capacity of individuals, families and communities, it was difficult to separate out ways to build capacity, without referring to the services that could help build those capacities. Thus, the last chapter addressing the terms of reference focused on Indigenous-driven initiatives

10 Mr Richie Ahmat, Cape York Land Council, Transcript (07.07.03), p. 785.

that were addressing issues of Indigenous disadvantage in ways that involved capacity building and empowerment. Many of these initiatives involved helping people to help themselves.

- 6.38 The Committee believes there is a balance between acknowledging the chronic state of Indigenous disadvantage and promoting the success of initiatives that are having an impact on addressing such disadvantage. Though there is a very long way to go until Indigenous Australians are experiencing a quality of life equitable to that of Australian society as a whole, progress is occurring, change is slow, and positive stories need to be told, as Reconciliation Australia's 2003 report stated:

The positive news is essential to combat commonly held misconceptions about Indigenous Australians and to demonstrate that when Indigenous communities are supported in taking control, persistent problems can be overcome... Publicising such positive initiatives has the added advantage of encouraging and informing others who are looking to find ways to make a worthwhile contribution to reconciliation.¹¹

- 6.39 Sharing positive stories is important, both to address commonly held negative misconceptions of Indigenous Australia, and to share information and models that work. As DIMIA told the Committee:

Many communities have, in the face of these difficulties, achieved successes that are inspirational and a source of great community pride. It is important that these successes are acknowledged and celebrated. Information about them needs to be shared, so that other communities can consider applying and adapting them to their own needs, and governments use them to inform policy making and programme delivery.¹²

Conclusions

- 6.40 The Committee believes that implementation of its recommendations should improve policy direction and management structures, and improve service delivery to Indigenous Australians. The recommendations in this report aim to ensure that:

- basic data collection is nationally consistent and comparable, and focussed on outcomes;

11 Reconciliation Australia, *Reconciliation: together we're doing it: 2003 Reconciliation Report*, p. 11

12 DIMIA, Submission 42, p. 13

- the Government institute a coordinated annual report to Parliament on its progress in achieving agreed outcomes and benchmarks;
- a comprehensive evaluation is made of the COAG Trials, and a regular report on progress is made to Parliament;
- improved integration, coordination and cooperation within and between levels of government in consultation with Indigenous Australians occurs;
- a strong commitment is made to improving the capacity of government agencies; and
- the development of partnerships between the private/corporate/philanthropic sectors and Indigenous organisations is encouraged and supported.

6.41 Underlying these recommendations is the essential need for a total cooperative effort by all Australian governments.

6.42 Although the recommendations in the report are directed at government, there are clearly complex challenges confronting Indigenous Australia. As the Queensland Government told the Committee, Government must take responsibility for those things it is best placed to do, and communities must take responsibility for those things they can only do themselves. Communities cannot be expected to solve their own problems, and government is not capable of improving life in communities without the commitment of the community.¹³

6.43 There is much that governments can do to assist and support Indigenous communities in setting their own priorities and establishing governance structures. As outlined in the report, many Indigenous organisations and communities face complex demands. Much can be done to assist the development of leaders and managers, to mentor and train staff, to ensure that available staff to assist organisations and communities are properly accredited and held responsible for their performance, and to generally enhance the capacity of Indigenous organisations to meet corporate governance accounting requirements, and to encourage good institutional governance. A positive sign in this area is the initiatives being taken to develop partnerships with government and private sector/aid organisations.

13 Queensland Government, Submission 56, p. 7.

- 6.44 The Committee was heartened to hear of the many success stories from Indigenous communities where innovative and creative ways of facilitating empowerment, building capacity, and addressing community issues were improving the lives of community members. The Committee particularly commends Indigenous communities' partnerships with the corporate sector, philanthropic organisations, governments, and government agencies, departments and offices.
- 6.45 Key elements of the way ahead therefore involve major challenges to governments, to Indigenous organisations and to communities and individuals. It involves a revision of approaches by governments and a move away from conventional methods of service delivery which reinforce dependency to the pursuit of real partnerships with Indigenous organisations and communities. A challenge to move from the rhetoric of partnerships to being a real resource, together with a commitment to incorporating capacity building into the design and implementation of partnerships for service delivery. Not only do governments need to take steps to change the outlook and direction of their own agencies and to provide an integrated approach and lift the capacity of their own officers, steps also need to be taken towards enhancing the capacity of Indigenous organisations.
- 6.46 This inquiry has largely been about service delivery, and about building the capacity of stakeholders. At the first level, this involves building the capacity of governments to be more responsive and effective in addressing the service delivery needs of Indigenous Australians. The second layer, which meshes and overlaps with that, is about building the capacity of Indigenous people and organisations so that they can then deliver or influence the delivery of services more effectively. The third layer is about building capacity so that the need for service delivery is reduced, and the way to do that is work together to improve Indigenous people's quality of life.
- 6.47 The Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision produced the *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2003* report, in the forward of which Chairman Mr Gary Banks stated:
- During our consultations, we learned of many initiatives that were making a difference at the community level. However, progress at this level may not be evident in aggregate statistics. Such initiatives underline the importance of governments' contribution, but they also show that other ingredients are needed. As one Indigenous leader has publicly declared, "man cannot live by service delivery alone". Contributions from the private sector and,

not least, Indigenous people themselves, will also be important to overcoming Indigenous disadvantage.¹⁴

- 6.48 Clearly the first priority is alleviating the chronic state of Indigenous disadvantage, an intermediate step involves the development of Indigenous organisations delivering service to their own people, and the final goal, is a reduction in the need for government service delivery. As part of this progression, and in moving beyond the current level of need for service delivery, employment through small business and enterprise development is essential.

Barry Wakelin MP

Chairman

June 2004

14 Mr Gary Banks, Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (SCRGSP), 2003, *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2003*, Productivity Commission, Canberra, p. v.