



**PILBARA
REGIONAL
COUNCIL**

Leading the Way . . .

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ASHBURTON

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*Pilbara Wealth
Sustaining the Nation*

CAPACITY BUILDING INQUIRY
Submission No. 41

AL/3/10
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The Committee Secretary
House of Representatives
Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

INQUIRY INTO CAPACITY BUILDING IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission into this Inquiry.

Time and lack of resources has regrettably not permitted a full response to this Inquiry addressing in detail the terms of reference provided.

Nevertheless, on behalf of the Pilbara Regional Council, which represents the four Pilbara local governments of the Shires of Ashburton, East Pilbara and Roebourne and the Town of Port Hedland, I would like to provide summation of general comments received from our members.

Efforts to build the capacities of our Pilbara regional communities (Aboriginal communities and those mainstream towns with a significant Aboriginal population) tend to be fragmented at best.

The remote Pilbara regional area has a population estimated at 43,000 people spread over an area of over 500,000 square kilometres and has many culturally different communities. The skills and resources needed to address fundamental issues of community health and services are very limited and are not applied within a co-ordinated framework of long term objectives, strategies and action plans to achieve improved outcomes.

The social and physical health of a community typically depends significantly on the competence and personal commitment of the employed Community Co-ordinator and this unfortunately can vary widely between communities. The delivery of Government services can be irregular due to the problems of distance, under-resourced agencies and frequent changes in key staff.

There is a fundamental inadequacy of training for community leaders and community members in developing sustainable and disciplined community social structures. This inadequacy must be addressed if the capacity of Aboriginal communities for self determination and management is to be achieved. While there is often funding available through ATSIC and other agencies for infrastructure requirements, there is a pressing need for funding for developing social and leadership capabilities.

The current regional structures of indigenous governance basically comprise the ATSIC Regional Council and the Pilbara Commission of Elders. The Western Desert Puntukurnuparna Aboriginal Corporation and other area based groups also provide a governance function, but these primarily comprise language groupings and do not cover the entire Region. Achieving a regional structure which adequately represents all Aboriginal groups and communities and effectively delivers quality services to all Pilbara communities, which range from 50 people to over 300, is problematic.

Government agencies can find it difficult to build genuine partnerships with Aboriginal agencies and groups due to some residual distrust (mainly arising from past practices) and the typical lack of staff continuity in Government agencies due to short duration placements which mitigates against the development of personal relationships which are typically of paramount importance to Aboriginal people. Trust must be earned through personal contact rather than being assumed by the position held within an agency.

The lack of real operating autonomy that local or regional Government agency offices have is also a factor. The structure of State Government service delivery in particular is compartmentalised into narrowly defined functional areas rather than being integrated. Further, service delivery is often driven by process that is prescribed centrally and that is based on a significantly different set of operating parameters than is the case in the Pilbara. This 'departmentalised' structure is appropriate for metropolitan areas where depth of expertise and significant staff resources are applied in specific functional areas; but it is inflexible and inefficient in regional and remote areas.

If serious about enhancing the capacity of communities to self manage, Governments will need to commit to the process by providing a more integrated, flexible, better resourced programme delivery based on the achievement of outcomes negotiated and agreed with the communities, rather than focussing on centrally prescribed service delivery processes.

It is noted that these factors also produce generally poor coordination between Government agencies (both State and Federal) at both the community and regional levels.

There is also an obvious lack of cooperation and coordination between Aboriginal agencies. While there are many reasons for this, the market arena generated by Government in tendering the provision of services is a major factor. Agencies become very protective of their services and rarely cooperate with another agency even if it means a more effective and efficient service delivery to their own people, as this could threaten their funding provision.

The accountability of service delivery to communities should be examined and improved through the measurement of delivery methodology and outcomes.

I thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this Inquiry.

Tony Ford
Chief Executive Officer