

The appropriateness and effectiveness of the objectives, design, implementation and evaluation of the Community Development Program (CDP)

A Submission to the Finance and Public Administration References Committee from Tjuwanpa Outstation Resource Centre Aboriginal Corporation

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Introduction

Tjuwanpa Outstation Resource Centre Aboriginal Corporation (Tjuwanpa) is an Indigenous Corporation registered under the Corporations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) Act, 2006.

The 37 outstations serviced by Tjuwanpa are home to Western Aranda kin groups. They are scattered across some 4500 square kilometres of ranges and plains that surround Hermannsburg (Ntaria) Community, which was established as the Hermannsburg mission settlement. Although six of the outstations in the western region require travel of an hour or more, 31 are within a 20 to 40-minute drive to the Tjuwanpa Resource Centre which is situated about 2km from Hermannsburg, approximately 130km South West of Alice Springs.

Since the incorporation of the Resource Centre in 1984, government grants for outstation housing, water reticulation and power have been channelled through Tjuwanpa. Government revenues underpin the local economy and service delivery arrangements. Tjuwanpa currently administers a Women's Ranger program and the Stronger Communities for Children program in the Hermannsburg area. Tjuwanpa has a long history of administering the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP). It was among the first organisations affected at the beginning of "the intervention," when the Federal Government initially ceased CDEP and implemented "Work for the Dole," only to reinstate CDEP shortly afterwards. Tjuwanpa administered the RJCP and now the CDP program, to a region including the Tjuwanpa outstations, Hermannsburg, Areyonga (Utju), Kings Canyon Outstations, Jaye Creek Outstations and Wallace Rockhole.

a. The adequacy of the policy process that led to the design of the CDP

Tjuwanpa is not aware of the process that led to the decision to cease RJCP and implement CDP, as Tjuwanpa was not consulted in relation to this.

b. The nature and underlying causes of joblessness in remote communities

Much has been written about the impact of dispossession, institutionalisation, and historical government policies on Aboriginal peoples and it is not our intention to further explore this here. However, an additional cause of joblessness is the lack of employment opportunities in remote communities.

c. The ability of the CDP to provide long-term solutions to joblessness, and to achieve social, economic and cultural outcomes that meet the needs and aspirations of remote Indigenous people

This is perhaps the nub of the issue in relation to the many employment and community development programs that have been implemented in remote Aboriginal communities over the past several years. That is, that it is unrealistic to expect any program in itself to provide solutions to joblessness and to achieve appropriate social, economic and cultural outcomes. The cycle is a familiar one.

The typical cycle goes something like this;

The current program has been in place for x years and has not been the "silver bullet" that was imagined in the design stage. It is therefore decided that the current program is largely flawed and what is required is a completely different approach. A new program is rolled out with very different expectations and approaches to the last. Organisations implement the new program and work with community members to assist them to understand what is required to comply. The reasons for the changes are not transparent. Community members eventually work out what "hoops need to be

jumped” in order to meet the requirements of the new system. Every time there is a change, community members tend to become less engaged in the process, anticipating that the current system will last only until the government changes the rules again. Each program lasts for as long as it takes to realise that it is not the “silver bullet” that was envisioned at the design phase. -And the cycle repeats itself....

d. The impact of the CDP on the rights of participants and their communities, including the appropriateness of the payments and penalties systems

While the current payment system is being understood by job seekers, the participation expectations are unrealistic, and the penalties imposed are too harsh, leaving people without funds and causing hardship to the most disadvantaged in our society.

It is unrealistic to expect community members to participate for 25 hours per week, 52 weeks of the year. The lack of flexibility in relation to participation is a major flaw of the current program, as it does not allow sufficient space for family, cultural and community events. In addition, many participants don't have access to phones/communication technology to contact Tjuwanpa if they are unable to meet their participation requirements for a valid reason. It is unrealistic to align compliance with mainstream programs when the capacity that exists in the mainstream does not exist in remote areas.

However, perhaps the biggest weakness with the current system is the efforts required to re-engage with the system once penalties have been imposed. It is not uncommon for jobseekers to spend two to four hours waiting to speak with The Participation Team at Centrelink. People are beginning to disengage with the program completely as they are finding the process with the Participation Team difficult, not only due to the long wait times but also due to language issues. Centrelink should increase its service so as to reduce waiting times. The attitudes of some Centrelink staff in relation to this issue have also been disappointing, in that they have implied that if jobseekers don't comply, then the wait time is justified. Perhaps there also needs to be some work done to address a work culture which permits Centrelink staff to make judgements of jobseekers who seek to re-connect with the program.

Despite these flaws, Tjuwanpa is of the view that the current system could be modified rather than scrapped and a new system imposed. This is further discussed below.

e. The funding of the CDP, including the use of unspent funds in the program

The current funding arrangements are much improved compared with RJCP which included the administration-heavy Participation Account. The Participation Account required the provider to generate invoices within the RJCP system, such that it was akin to operating two accounting systems. While the current monthly payments are dependent on a very manual data system, with the need for attendance and compliance to be entered by the end of each month, considering Tjuwanpa's resources, it is a more workable model.

Unspent funds could go towards job creation schemes such as those that were referred to as “converted jobs” and provide “50:50” funding (50% employer funded, 50% government funded). Another strategy would be to increase the employer incentive within the current program to encourage further employment.

f. the extent of consultation and engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the design and implementation of the CDP, and the role for local decision making with the program

As outlined at point a) above, Tjuwanpa is unaware of any consultation and engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the design on the CDP, and as also discussed, the rules for implementation have not been flexible. However, as an Indigenous organisation, the Board has been involved in decision making where there are opportunities to do so, such as in the design of activities within the guidelines imposed.

g. Alternative approaches to addressing joblessness and community development in remote Indigenous communities

Tjuwanpa would like to see the current CDP program maintained but modified such that its participation requirements are more realistic and its rules regarding activities are more flexible. Participants took a long time to adjust to the changes but have now gained an understanding of the process. As a provider, Tjuwanpa has worked hard to inform and educate participants and community in what is required in the very compliance-driven CDP model, and does not want to see change (again) for change's sake, unless the changes are of benefit to participants and community.

The modifications Tjuwanpa would like to see include a reduction in the participation requirement to an average of 15 hours per week, with some flexibility from week to week, including for example, the capacity to bank hours. This type of participation requirement would better enable community members to meet their family and cultural obligations, while still requiring participation similar to that of a part time employee.

In addition, it is not always possible to undertake activities that replicate work. While there are some opportunities for this, it is unrealistic to achieve this for every jobseeker, all of the time. More flexibility for community members to work with service providers to negotiate activities that seek to improve health and wellbeing for example, would provide positive outcomes while providing more opportunities for local decision making and input into activity design. This would provide opportunities for communities to build on their strengths such that the program is seen in a more positive rather than punitive light.

Central to the modifications would be more resourcing of Centrelink to cut down wait times, and a change to its workplace culture such that good service is provided in a non-judgmental way that does not seek to punish again those who have already been penalised.

Tjuwanpa, as an Indigenous organisation, located within the community, with historical relationships across the region, is in a unique position to engage with jobseekers, community members and organisations. CDP has provided Tjuwanpa with an income stream that is allowing the Board to reinvest back into the community through, for example, the creation of jobs and the provision of improved infrastructure.

Rather than abolishing CDP and starting again from scratch, Tjuwanpa would support an approach that explores what's currently working and makes modifications where it would improve the service to people in remote areas, and better acknowledges the differences between mainstream and remote areas.