

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION
OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY**

CAPACITY BUILDING INQUIRY
Submission No. ...19.....

**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING COMMITTEE ON
ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER AFFAIRS**

**SUBMISSION TO THE PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO CAPACITY
BUILDING IN INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS**

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1. What is this submission about?

This submission is about capacity building in Aboriginal Communities in the Northern Territory. It is in response to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs inquiry into capacity building in Indigenous communities.

This submission emphasises the role that local government and local governing bodies play in relation to the issue of building capacity in Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory. The reason for this, is that in many instances Councils constitute the only, or most focal, administrative organisation in Indigenous communities and therefore, the view taken here is that questions about capacity building in such communities are very much linked to the role and function of Councils.

The Association is very much committed to capacity building for Councils in the Northern Territory indeed, it constitutes an objective of the Association (see next section). The Association is very much a service organisation to local government in the Northern Territory and it would like to expand its range of services so that it can be in a position to offer them at a level similar to that afforded to Councils by their respective associations interstate.

This submission is divided into five parts. The first deals with the what the submission is about. The second part provides information about the Local Government Association of the Northern Territory (LGANT) and its membership. The third part provides commentary about how capacity can be improved with an emphasis on improving administrations. The fourth part look at how Councils can better deliver services and the fifth part is concerned with the role that governments can play in developing management structures and policy directions.

2. What does the Local Government Association of the Northern Territory stand for and who are its members?

The Local Government Association of the Northern Territory (LGANT) is the peak representative body for Local Government in the Northern Territory.

Membership of the LGANT comprises the 65 local governing bodies in the Northern Territory recognised by the Commonwealth and Northern Territory Governments for the purpose of determining the distribution of Local Government Financial Assistance Grants.

The 65 Local Governing bodies in the Northern Territory comprise:

- 6 Municipalities
- 30 Community Government Councils
- 28 Association Councils incorporated under NT and Commonwealth legislation
- 1 Special Purpose Town – Jabiru

Only 5% of the Northern Territory land area is incorporated into local government areas, however, 90% of the population of the Northern Territory live in the cities, towns and communities within this area. Darwin City Council is the largest Local Government body in the Northern Territory with a population 72,582 followed by the Alice Springs Town Council with 29,791. In remote areas of the Northern Territory there are 42,027 people in small communities, cattle stations and mining towns.

The objectives of the Association are to:

- Initiate, promote and foster the development of strong, effective Local Government throughout the Territory;
- represent, promote, maintain and protect the interests of members and Local Government generally;
- provide information and advise to members on matters affecting Local Government;
- monitor proposed legislation and keep members informed of proposals of government's affecting Local Government;
- make legislative proposals to governments on issues that the Association considers necessary;
- provide services as agreed to by resolution of members and/or Executive; and
- support the Australian Local Government Association, State Local Government Associations and any other organisation committed to objectives similar to those of the Association.

LGANT is represented on the National Executive of the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA). The ALGA has been established by State/Territory LGA's to represent Local Government at the National level.

3. How can capacity be improved?

Capacity building can be improved for Councils in remote parts of the Northern Territory by taking action to improve administration and upgrade the skills of elected members and staff and potential staff. Improving administration has many elements to it, which involves efforts from Councils themselves and support from other agencies.

These activities are central to building capacity and include the fundamental prerequisite for a huge amount of effort going into literacy and numeracy for Indigenous persons. Without this long term effort capacity building will be severely stymied.

Amongst other things, the actions that need to be considered include:

Community Governance and Indigenous Leadership

- a. support services in the form of recruitment and human resource management (including performance appraisals for Chief Executive Officers);
- b. provide amendments to the *Local Government Act* to improve accountabilities and the legislative framework for the administration of Councils including:
 - providing a clearer delineation of the responsibilities between the elected and administrative arms of Councils;
 - specifying the information that Councils must provide to members of the public; and
 - specifying the plans that Councils must prepare and publish;
- c. elected member and staff development courses across a broad range of topics to assist Councillors and staff to both better understand and implement their roles including;
 - the legal responsibilities of an elected member;
 - land use planning; local strategic planning and policy making;
 - performance appraisals of the Chief Executive Officer;
 - cross cultural training for elected members and staff;
 - teamwork, communication and conflict in local government;
 - meetings in local government;
 - strategic planning in local government;
 - local government finance;

- community consultation and participation in local government;
 - ethics and codes of conduct for elected members and staff;
 - change in local government;
 - policy development in local government;
 - regions and resource sharing in local government;
 - service to citizens and complaints handling in local government;
 - developing a human resource policy manual for staff.
- d. information technology that leads to connectivity with other Councils and involves better use of common business systems;
 - e. resource sharing amongst Councils;
 - f. programs that can enhance the preservation of Aboriginal culture and language;
 - g. forging partnership or contractual agreements with other spheres of government;
 - h. economic development, particularly the creation of small business ventures and enterprises that can increase investment and expand the employment bases of towns;
 - i. literacy and numeracy, work experience and recreational programs that increase the skills of persons, particularly youth, to be able to gain employment and confidence in themselves;
 - j. commitments by governments to long term community education programs in such matters as personal finance, environmental health, the ill effects of excessive alcohol, gambling and drug misuse, nutrition, healthy lifestyles;
 - k. establishing local governments whose constitutions are inclusive of traditional owners of Aboriginal land and Indigenous customs;
 - l. the expansion of community services, including libraries, sport and recreation and art and cultural activities;
 - m. improvements in infrastructure including housing, water, sewerage, electricity, telecommunications, roads and airstrips;
 - n. online support and information that can be used for administrative support, eg., employment contracts, unfair dismissal laws, records management;
 - o. the enactment of local laws to provide a regulatory framework for order in towns;
 - p. support for the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) in its current form; and
 - q. forums for elected members and staff to network and improve their knowledge and understanding of governance issues.

All of the above actions will, if implemented effectively, lead to capacity building in communities. The main thrust of the above suggestions are that capacity building is about improving the skills and knowledge of people in local government so they can better maintain facilities and deliver services to residents and in so doing improve their quality of life and opportunities to excel in life.

As mentioned, underpinning, and included amongst the above actions, is a great need to improve the literacy and numeracy of indigenous persons. **True empowerment comes with literacy, both in a personal sense and a professional sense, and it is this aspect of that is more important for capacity building than most of the actions suggested.** It is crucial to all of the other actions and has to be seen as an integral part of each one.

4. How can Councils better deliver services?

Councils can better deliver services if criteria such as that listed below is met:

➤ the Council's organizational structure/culture:

- supports the goals of the organization;
- is structured so as to competently complete the key administrative functions of:
 - asset management;
 - financial management;
 - records management;
 - human resource management; and
 - information management;
- is responsive to the needs and wishes of the traditional owners on whose lands Council provides services and maintains facilities;
- demonstrates a willingness to provide information about its activities to its citizens;
- supports teamwork and an understanding of roles amongst elected members and staff;
- is receptive to change and resource sharing amongst its neighbouring councils;
- supports cross cultural communication and training;

- strongly supports the professional development of elected members and staff;
 - is bound by, and achieves compliance with, rules for accountability and a code of conduct for elected members and staff;
 - encourages community consultation and participation as well as community education;
 - is geared towards effectiveness (doing the right things) and efficiency (doing things right);
 - has a strong service orientation towards the citizens of the local government area;
 - is committed to workplace literacy and numeracy; and
- staff and elected members of Council have the prerequisite skills, knowledge and experience to perform the duties required of them;
- Council has a corporate plan which:
 - is linked to employee positions and Council's budget and information system ;
 - establishes the values by which Council intends to operate;
 - is directed at achieving outcomes in the areas of governance, environment, infrastructure, community services and economic development;
 - has management plans for each of the programs in its corporate plan; and
 - is committed to establishing land use agreements with traditional owners;
- the financial resources of Council are committed to services which are a priority for the local government area;
- communication with internal and external parties occurs in a timely manner; and
- support from outside agencies is timely and appropriate.

5. How can government agencies improve management structures and policy directions?

Actions that governments can take to improve management structures and policy directions for local government are:

Management structures

- ensure legislation is up to date with other State jurisdictions in terms of providing an adequate administrative framework for local government to operate under;
- enlist the expertise of former or current Chief Executive Officers of Councils when working with local governments to establish or amend organisational structures or set up and establish committees;
- research the organisational structures of Councils elsewhere, including interstate, to gain an appreciation of the type of structures that work effectively;
- provide grants to organizations that can provide direct or 'hands-on' services to local government such as human resource management support, corporate planning, mentoring, meeting procedures, recruitment, elected member training, grant submissions (this is also a policy direction);
- when amalgamating Councils or increasing the workload of senior management through resource sharing arrangements care needs to be taken to ensure that the new structure or responsibilities reflects a higher level of competency and remuneration, eg going from a works manager to an engineer, accountant to corporate services director, etc.;
- Many Councils now have budgets in excess of \$3M, some are as high as \$13 M. They need highly competent professional staff at the senior management level of the calibre and on conditions similar to those in local government interstate if Councils in the Northern Territory are to compete effectively in the labour market and have people that can handle this level of responsibility;

Policy directions

- work towards standardising the reporting requirements for grants to Councils to reduce the administrative workload for acquitting them including the use of on-line processing;

- make greater use of interpreters and presentation software with emphases on visual information when trying to get messages across to Indigenous persons;
- ensure with community education programs that they are 'long term' (like the road safety ones) so that the messages for change are capable of inducing effect;
- try to have grant approvals in place by 1 July each year to enable Councils to make the full use of the financial year and the 'Dry' season especially for building projects;
- include the cost of training for personnel in grant conditions, particularly that associated with cross cultural training and inductions for remote area living;
- make grants more longer term so that Councils can plan better for their the delivery, continuity and cessation of grant purposes;
- include literacy and numeracy training for Indigenous persons in grant conditions;
- provide grants to Local Government Managers Australia to enlist senior managers from interstate to the Northern Territory for short secondment periods;
- ensure that 'cost shifting' to local government does not occur with programs because other spheres of government choose to discontinue funding or are not prepared to meet the full cost of their own programs and want local government to make up the shortfalls;
- Territory and Federal Governments should leave 'hands-on' administrative matters in local government to non-government organizations because they are better equipped to handle them;
- coordinate recruitment regimes so that there is more collaborative efforts from agencies involved together in recruiting senior management to local governments.

Many of the issues listed under community governance should also be considered as potential policy directions for governments as well.