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Summarising: Hunt & Smith, Strengthening Indigenous Community Governance: A step towards advancing Reconciliation in Australia
Responsibility for the preparation of this research summary rests with the authors of the MCEETYA report *Education, Training and Indigenous Futures: CAEPR Policy Research 1990–2007* and not the original author(s) of the summarised material.

Title of Research:
Strengthening Indigenous Community Governance: A step towards advancing Reconciliation in Australia

Research Publication:
Paper presented at Peace, Justice and Reconciliation in the Asia-Pacific Region Conference, Queensland University, 2005

Name of Researcher(s):
J. Hunt and D.E. Smith

Time period:
2005

Geographic location:
Australia-wide

Methodology:
Draws upon literature on governance issues for Indigenous peoples as a basis for developing and implementing a series of case studies of Indigenous governance across Australia.

Aims
This paper provides an overview of the CAEPR project, undertaken jointly with Reconciliation Australia, of Indigenous governance in Australia.

Selected findings and insights:
The governance environment comprised many Indigenous community-based organisations delivering government funded services: legal services, health services, childcare services, women’s centres, art centres, sporting clubs, community stores, land-holding organisations, employment and economic development organisations, and general community councils and resource agencies.

There was a perceived need for a more unified, properly resourced and effective approach to Indigenous governance at the local level
• This required a targeted and sustained commitment by governments, leaders and organisations to improving the capacity for effective governance.

The principles and practice of governance were not culture-free. They were the product of cultural values, institutions, behaviours and motivations.
• There were cultural determinants of leadership, representation, accountability and what is judged to be ‘successful’, ‘good’, ‘bad’, ‘effective’ and ‘ineffective’ governance.
• Indigenous concepts and practices of governance were often at variance with those of non-Indigenous people.
This Project investigates the cultural forms and bases of Indigenous Australian systems of authority, law, leadership, legitimacy, representation, participation, accountability and decision-making. The paper emphasises the importance of

- a ‘cultural fit’ or sufficient ‘common ground’ that could be achieved between the types of Indigenous governing structures and procedures a group wanted to develop, the culturally based standards and values of its members, and the external standards and expectations of capable, effective governance that may be imposed by government.

This overview paper provides some preliminary findings from a set of Australia-wide case studies.

On government policies and program delivery

The changing political and policy climate, prevailing jurisdictional arrangements and government funding frameworks, as well as bureaucratic staff turnover, had major impacts on the scope and exercise of Indigenous governance at the community level.

- Few government departments appeared to have effective mechanisms for managing conflicts that arise with Indigenous organisations, or have insufficient understanding of the Indigenous world.
- There was a lack of capacity within government for ongoing evaluation of their policy practice and service outcomes in the area of Indigenous governance.
- Governments’ lack of stable, adequate resourcing, and workable mechanisms for delivering streamlined funding were having significant negative impacts on the viability of some governing organisations.

On governance processes and practice

There was considerable variation in the extent to which organisations were able to establish and maintain necessary support systems: the design of sound financial management and administrative systems, including information technology, and strategic planning.

- There was poorly developed governance training, education and mentoring for community organisations – and this impedes progress.

Leadership, representation and voice

There was an urgent need for a focus on what constitutes ‘leadership’ amongst Indigenous groups, and on leadership development, mentoring and training at the local level as well as preparing for the next generation of leaders by providing pathways for gaining the necessary skills, including mentoring.

Legitimacy and effectiveness

For governing institutions to be effective, the study found that they must be legitimate in the eyes of the people they serve, working within Indigenous values, shared beliefs, and agreed rules. They must also be seen to be legitimate by external government agencies as well as other Indigenous organisations:

- many Indigenous community organisations were experiencing considerable difficulty in finding the form of such a ‘two-way’ legitimacy.
- organisations which were succeeding in commercial, service delivery and other functions were those which were actively trying to find a workable ‘two-way’ form of legitimacy for both their members and external parties – by selectively drawing on both Indigenous and non-Indigenous solutions and processes.
The overview paper points to important issues regarding Indigenous decision-making and conflict resolution, and the relationship between governance and economic development.

Educational implications:

This paper provides an excellent introduction to Indigenous community governance issues and is therefore relevant to the development of educational partnerships between educational authorities and Indigenous communities – particularly those broader partnerships aimed at pathways development. It emphasises the importance of educational institutions involved in the negotiation of such partnerships in understanding the cultural context of Indigenous governance and at the same being aware of, and addressing, the difficulties experienced by Indigenous communities in dealing with government agencies. That is, the development and implementation of effective educational partnerships requires both Indigenous representative bodies and government agencies, such as schools and tertiary institutions, being able to adapt and develop mutually and culturally acceptable ways of operating to ensure legitimacy. [culture] [partnerships]

Relevance:

Introductory Topic: Culture, Community and Family Life

Domain 2: School and Community Partnerships

Use and negotiation of educational partnerships between schools and communities

Related papers

J. Hunt The Indigenous Community Governance Project (ICGP) ICGP Project Summary 2007