Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research
The Australian National University

Education, Training and Indigenous Futures

Research Summaries
Adrian M. Fordham and R.G. (Jerry) Schwab

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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:

Research Publication:
Paper presented the Governments and Communities in partnership Conference, Centre for Public Policy, Melbourne University 2006

Name of Researcher(s):
J. Hunt

Time period:
2006

Geographic location:
Australia-wide

Methodology
Draws upon commonwealth policy announcements, available research and evaluation literature on the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) trials and Shared Responsibility Agreements, Regional Responsibility Agreements and relevant literature on Indigenous governance.

Aims
This paper outlines key elements of the 'new arrangements' for Commonwealth service delivery for Indigenous Australians, then explores the extent to which they represent ‘new governance’ approaches which might enable Indigenous people to shape their own future in partnership with governments.

Selected findings and insights:
Despite negative reports about the success of the COAG trials (as of 2006, which were then confirmed in 2007 when the evaluation reports were released e.g. the Wadeye trial, NT), there were instructive findings:

- A Queensland government evaluation of the Cape York (Qld.) highlighted the importance of several factors for success: these include having a Cape York Strategy Unit which acted as a single contact point for the Australian and Queensland governments; the ‘Government Champions' process, by which CEOs from different Queensland Government departments had special responsibilities for activities in different communities; and ‘Negotiation Tables' by which governments engaged with communities and generate Community Action Plans.

- However in the NSW trial, at Murdi Paaki, issues relating to the capacities and resource levels of the pre-existing Indigenous Community Working Parties, and particularly their Chairs and some members emerged, as well as the ability of the Community Working Parties to communicate with the communities.

- The measurement of success needed to be addressed more comprehensively: at the Shepparton (Vic.) site, the Indigenous community developed its own ‘Scorecard’ against which to measure progress, but has been critical of the way local Indigenous capacity has been overlooked by government programs, especially in the employment area.
The key players in the new arrangements in terms of the partnerships with Indigenous communities were the Indigenous Coordination Centres (ICCs) which were, in effect, a ‘one-stop-shop’ for Indigenous interaction with the Australian Government, and ideally, for other jurisdictions as well.

- Inadequate staffing levels, insufficient seniority and existing skill levels among ICC staff, as well as greater resources spent by Indigenous communities in dealing with more government agencies than previously due to the ‘whole of government’ approach, were concerns that had been raised.

Shared Responsibility Agreements (SRAs) were agreements between the government and Indigenous communities or groups, to provide a discretionary benefit in return for community obligations – and are over and above essential services and basic entitlements.

SRAs were designed to contribute towards the long-term vision and plans that Indigenous people have for their communities, their children and grandchildren without trying to address everything at once, and sit within a broader context of ‘mutual obligation’ policy.

- By August 2006, there were 187 SRAs in place. These were signed directly between Commonwealth government agencies and Indigenous communities, or with community organisations; a small number had been made with Traditional Owner groups or sub-groups of a community.
- A number also involved other partners, such as state, territory and local governments, mining companies or other corporations.
- About 12-15% of Indigenous communities had entered into SRAs at that time.

The size and scope of the agreements varied considerably, ranging from as low as $2000-$10,000 through to $2m. at a COAG trial site; most were between $40,000- $300,000. (Note: no financial data available for some SRAs)

- Most SRAs focused on health and nutrition, children and education, youth, sport and recreation, housing, transport, culture, community development and a range of community services. A very small number related to economic enterprises or governance.

At the time of this research, there was a shift away from small, single issue SRAs towards more comprehensive SRAs, which still appeared to be subsidiary to the proposed RPA mechanisms which are expected to deal with higher level goals. Nevertheless Commonwealth government departments had over $75m. in their 2006-07 budgets identified for expenditure on SRAs over the following four years.

Several criticisms about SRA had been raised since their inception, including

- mismatch between obligations Indigenous people enter into and the benefit delivered;
- the extent to which government agencies were able to meet their obligations;
- lack of transparency and openness to public scrutiny;
- absence of performance indicators [these do appear to be included in new SRAs] and lack of independent evaluation;
- the extent to which SRAs represented funding for discretionary or basic services; and
- the extent to which SRAs were actually partnerships and the extent to which communities were aware of their obligations, with a disparity of power relationships between communities and government departments
Most importantly, the paper identifies the potential for the SRAs to distract service delivery departments from re-examining their mainstream delivery processes to ensure adequate Indigenous coverage and to better integrate their service delivery. The ‘whole of government’ approach, combined with SRAs, could result in a greater emphasis upon individual grants and more of them, as one study in Queensland found. The paper however notes that:

- The Northern Territory (NT) bilateral agreement with the Australian government indicated that joining up at a high level can reduce the number of programs and funding sources, suggesting that such high level program coalescence may prove worthy of more attention, both within and between governments. If Indigenous communities on the ground were to have an experience of more genuinely joined-up governance then they needed to access joined-up funding in a far more comprehensive way.

Apart from improved networking of government agencies to facilitate integrated program delivery, the paper addresses the issue of networking between government agencies and Indigenous organisations. The paper highlights:

- significant cultural differences which needed to be understood by both parties;
- differences in power relationships which may disenfranchise the Indigenous organisations; and
- a lack of Indigenous governance structures at regional levels which limited the extent to which regional planning and implementation processes could be developed.

Educational implications:

This paper provides an excellent introduction to the Commonwealth Government's new arrangements for targeted service delivery to Indigenous communities through SRAs. Schools and training providers already play a role in many SRAs and it will be necessary to examine the relationship between SRAs and the proposed Educational Partnership Agreements, where there is the potential for overlap. [partnerships]

There are also important lessons that can be learnt from the early experiences with SRAs which, if taken into account, can facilitate effective Educational Partnership Agreements, including:

- principals working with the Indigenous school community to develop mutually acceptable and culturally relevant ways of developing Educational Partnership Agreements;
- spending time developing cross-cultural understandings among both the Indigenous community and school staff of the values attached to education, school curricula and pedagogy, and school operations. [This may require preparedness on the part of the school to adapt to the needs of the Indigenous community as much as requiring the Indigenous community to adapt to the needs of the school.]
- clearly identifying parent/carer obligations and clearly identifying school obligations and establishing transparent monitoring of both. [partnerships] [cross-cultural understanding]

Relevance:

Domain 2: School and Community Partnerships

Educational partnership agreements and SRAs.

Related papers:
