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Summarising: Smith, From COAG to Coercion: A Story of Governance Failure, Success and Opportunity in Australian Indigenous Affairs
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:
From COAG to Coercion: A Story of Governance Failure, Success and Opportunity in Australian Indigenous Affairs

Research Publication:
Draft paper
In preparation


Name of Researcher(s):
D.E. Smith

Time period:
2007

Geographic location:
Australia

Methodology:
Based on detailed evidence from over a dozen different ‘case studies’ of Indigenous governance in action across a diverse range of community, geographical, cultural and political settings across Australia. These case studies were undertaken as part of the Indigenous Community Governance Project.

Aims:
The purpose of this paper is to identify aspects of governance within government agencies which influence the extent to which agencies have effectively related to Indigenous communities in program delivery and policy implementation.

Selected findings and insights:
This paper is set within the context of the Commonwealth government’s intervention strategy in Indigenous communities as a response to claims of sexual abuse in those communities. The paper suggests that it is important to evaluate the ‘whole-of-government’ policy of service delivery that has been operating in Indigenous Affairs since 2002 and identify the lessons that can be learnt from the approach.

The paper makes the following observations based upon the outcomes of the Indigenous Community Governance Project (ICGP).

Firstly, the CAEPR research confirmed that the exercise of practically effective, culturally legitimate governance in Indigenous communities was critical to providing a foundation for addressing and sustaining their social well-being and economic development.

- The research reported that amidst the failures there were extraordinary successes in community governance: Indigenous people in their organisations and communities were working to address complex internal relationships and representation issues in order to develop legitimate governing arrangements that win the support of their members;
• Indigenous groups were reassessing their cultural histories and geographies in order to promote greater legitimacy and accountability of leadership and decision-making; and

• There were innovative governing structures being designed to suit changing contemporary conditions;

Secondly, in regard to the Indigenous communities involved in the case studies the research concluded that:

• When Indigenous people develop their own institutions rather than adopt externally created rules, their governance capacity and confidence appeared to be significantly strengthened. Community groups and leaders used their cultural values and social relationships as an asset to help them build stronger governance.

Thirdly, the paper identified a range of what it terms ‘institutional failings’ on the part of government agencies in implementing a whole-of-government approach to Indigenous Affairs.

• There was no single whole-of-government policy approach — rather, there were several and organisations and communities were routinely confronted by different whole-of-government policies and strategies from different departments and jurisdictions;

• Government agencies tended not to be able or willing to work together within a whole-of-government approach;

• The increased number of programs and complexity of funding arrangements have exacerbated community and organisational dysfunction and poor governance; and

• There appeared to be a disjunction between government policy and on-the-ground implementation.

Fourthly, the paper found that there appeared to be a shift in the extent to which culture was taken into account by government agencies, with policy and program solutions increasingly seeking to quarantine culture to one side.

• The primary mode of departmental interaction with community organisations was one of managerial governance that focused on compliance and grant acquittal.

This was in contrast to the research findings that cultural legitimacy can provide a powerful mechanism for accountability and effectiveness.

Finally, the paper concluded that,

• By and large, governments did not recognise the positive developmental role of good governance, and their efforts to facilitate Indigenous governance capacity-building at the local level remained ad hoc, uncoordinated, erratically funded, poorly implemented, and rarely followed up.

Educational implications:

This paper emphasises to educational policy makers and educational leaders in schools of the importance of allocating time and resources to developing school community governance arrangements that seek to build on the strengths of Indigenous communities rather than imposing school community governance structures upon them. It also emphasises the need for educational institutions to consider their capacity to participate in school community governance and their ability to work alongside other government agencies and organisations in broader educational partnership arrangements. [governance]
Relevance:

*Domain 2: School and Community Education Partnerships*

Use and negotiation of educational partnership agreements between schools and communities

Educational partnership agreements and Shared Responsibility Agreements (SRAs)

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