



Responsive Public Management

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The Indigenous communities of Australia and their role in public management

There are persistent inequalities between Australia's Indigenous groups – which represent 2.5% of Australia's 22 million inhabitants – and other groups¹. In November 2008, with an eye to reducing these inequalities, the government signed the National Indigenous Reform Agreement (NIRA)², which sets out a strategy entitled "Closing the Gap". This initiative calls for increased involvement of Indigenous communities in administrative decision-making processes.

Against the backdrop of historically strained relations³, the Australian authorities and the Indigenous communities (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people⁴) have embarked on a far-reaching programme of national reconciliation. After the formal apology issued by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in 2008⁵, official and constitutional recognition of the country's Indigenous populations at a federal level is currently the focus of political discussions⁶.

Closing the Gap

Australia's Indigenous populations suffer from inequalities in the areas of health, education and economic participation. To deal with this situation, in 2008 the Council of Australian Governments (COAG)⁷ signed the NIRA, which set six major targets:

- To close the life-expectancy gap within a generation
- To halve the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five within a decade
- To ensure access to early childhood education for all Indigenous four-year-olds in remote communities within five years
- To halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievements for Indigenous students within a decade
- To halve the gap for Indigenous people aged 20-24 in Year 12 or equivalent attainment rates by 2020
- To halve the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a decade

This strategy concerns a number of public policy areas, particularly governance and leadership⁸. This involves providing support for Indigenous communities and boosting their organisational capacities, with the goal of shifting the relationships between the various stakeholders to create

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009

² <http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/indigenous/progserv/ctg/Pages/NIRA.aspx>

³ <http://reconciliation.org.au/nsw/education-kit/land-rights/>

⁴ The Torres Strait Islands are a group of more than 270 small islands located between northern Australia (Queensland) and the southern coast of Papua New Guinea.

⁵ Particularly with respect to the "Stolen Generations"; watch an extract from the speech:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b3TZOGpG6cM>

⁶ A national referendum on the constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is expected by or before 2013, but a date has not been set: <http://www.smh.com.au/national/push-to-recognise-indigenous-australians-in-constitution-20120119-1q7oy.html>

⁷ An organisation consisting of Australia's various authorities (federal, state, and territorial governments)

⁸ Not to mention early childhood development, schooling, health, economic participation, healthy homes and safe communities.

genuine partnerships and to provide a more effective response to the needs of the Indigenous populations. To this end, financial assistance, partnership tools and training sessions in leadership and in financial and administrative management have been introduced. In so doing, the authorities hope to encourage self-management by the communities and foster a virtuous cycle by bringing their leaders and local civil society (e.g. NGOs) into the decision-making process. Ultimately, the goal of this consolidation is to improve living conditions while transforming Indigenous populations into key players – they express their concerns to the authorities and play a role in the implementation of the resulting policies. For their part, the various governments must establish a trust-based partnering relationship based on existing structures.

Continuing previous initiatives

Closing the Gap was introduced in 2008, but other strategies for redefining relations between Indigenous communities and the authorities have existed for much longer. They include Shared Responsibility Agreements (SRAs), Regional Partnership Agreements (RPAs) and the COAG Trials⁹. These allow the authorities to encourage initiatives developed by the communities, while providing a response to local requests and local issues.

All these¹⁰ involve the joint responsibility of the communities, their representatives and local and/or federal authorities. In exchange for significant involvement by the community – such as a commitment to ensure upkeep and maintenance of equipment, for example – they provide public funding for development projects as well as help in carrying them out. The concept of shared responsibility to ensure effective development is a key part of all of them¹¹. In general, they also include assessments to ensure project monitoring. The 2006 COAG Trial Evaluations¹² showed that Indigenous leaders were relatively satisfied with government efforts to involve the Indigenous communities.

Example: the Bardi Jawi people in Western Australia

Each partnership is a response to a specific situation, and the idea of a blanket response was set aside in favour of customised solutions. For example¹³, the Bardi Jawi¹⁴ people benefit from a specific Local Implementation Plan (LIP)¹⁵ designed to improve relations between the primary local stakeholders: the Community Councils and the Bardi and Jawi Niimidiman Aboriginal Corporation. The Corporation's influence in the decision-making process grew following a Native Title Determination procedure¹⁶ in August 2010. The inhabitants' requests, which take the form of objectives in the LIP, are focused on clarifying the decision-making process, i.e. identifying the role and the skills of each stakeholder, as well as ensuring better cooperation and coordination between them and drawing up a shared agenda. To do this the Community Councils and the Bardi and Jawi Niimidiman Aboriginal Corporation have organised workshops to develop a shared working culture and to jointly address major issues, particularly land rights, land use and farming.

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⁹ The COAG Trials are agreements signed with Australia's six states and the ACT, which emphasise innovative partnerships.

¹⁰ http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/indigenous/progserv/families/Pages/regional_partnership_agreements.aspx

¹¹ <http://www.atns.net.au/subcategory.asp?subcategoryid=108>

¹² http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/indigenous/pubs/evaluation/coag_trial_site_reports/overview/Documents/COAG_Trials_Overview.pdf

¹³ One of the case studies cited in "Closing the Gap Prime Minister's Report 2012", p. 43.

¹⁴ A people consisting of three communities in Western Australia; each community has a representative community council.

¹⁵ Within the framework of the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Service Delivery.

¹⁶ In this procedure, the Federal Court of Australia recognises the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to land and waters according to their traditional laws and customs (http://www.fedcourt.gov.au/litigants/native/litigants_nt_what.html). The Bardi and Jawi Niimidiman Aboriginal Corporation has thus been designated a Prescribed Body Corporate (a body that represents the group and manages their native title rights) [http://www.dmp.wa.gov.au/documents/LandAccess_NT_PBC\(1\).pdf](http://www.dmp.wa.gov.au/documents/LandAccess_NT_PBC(1).pdf).