

CLOSING THE GAP - 10 YEARS ON

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Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull began the 2016 Closing the Gap (CTG) Prime Minister's Report with the statement that "Indigenous economic development is at the heart of the national agenda." While that may be true, if the government continues on its current trajectory it is unlikely to achieve its stated objectives. Sustineo strongly believes that the government must shift from a policy based on the perceived deficits of Indigenous Australians to one that is centred on the strengths of Indigenous people, and the positives of Indigenous culture.

The 2016 Gap Day marks 10 years since the campaign to close the gap in social outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians began. The campaign led to the establishment in 2008 of the federal government's central Indigenous affairs policy framework, Close the Gap (CTG). This policy framework encompasses eight goals, reported on annually in the CTG Prime Minister's Report, aimed at eliminating disparities between Indigenous and other Australians, with a particular focus on health, education and employment. Annual reports have consistently shown mixed results against targets, despite persistent and bipartisan support. The 2016 report was no different in this regard, showing that fewer than half of the eight CTG goals are on track, and echoing the format and language of previous reports.

The language that is used in these reports, and the concepts underlying the policies, are important as they frame the way that the public and policy makers engage with the topic. Unfortunately, the policy response of successive governments has contributed to the development of an understanding of that gap that is focused on the perceived deficits of Indigenous peoples in comparison to other Australians.

This understanding is compounded by the graphical representation of the gap and the negative language used to describe and engage with this representation, focusing on the

deficiencies in Indigenous lives, and on the behavioural change necessary on the part of Indigenous people in order to remedy such deficiency.

When the benchmarks against which the gap is measured are the outcomes for non-Indigenous Australians, there is an inclination to expect that improved outcomes are dependent on Indigenous people conforming to mainstream expectations. Consequently, the onus for change is placed squarely with Indigenous people themselves, leaving them solely accountable when change does not occur. Mainstream institutions and systems, the existing structures in health, education and employment, are insulated from the expectation to change.

The consistent and persistently negative way that Indigenous affairs has been framed by government has resulted in Indigenous affairs being understood in terms of deficit - the focus is on apparent shortcomings of the Indigenous community. This negative and deficit-focused discussion of Indigenous affairs is pervasive in Australia, appearing at all levels of the public conversation, in the media and in government, as reflected in the CTG policy. This leads to an atmosphere in which these are the only terms by which both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians may understand or discuss Indigenous affairs and Indigenous Australians themselves. Such an atmosphere leaves little room for the acknowledgement, or even celebration, of difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.

We do not intend to diminish the problem of Indigenous disadvantage, or diminish the negative lived experiences of Indigenous people. Rather we suggest that the means of addressing Indigenous disadvantage must be reassessed. Indigenous Australians are a diverse group, demographically, geographically and culturally, and recognition of this must characterise the policy approach. Research has shown that where Indigenous cultural difference is incorporated into policies designed to reduce Indigenous disadvantage, results are superior to those where it is not considered. These programs are more likely to embrace the strengths and capabilities of those people they are targeted at, and incorporate those capabilities in their implementation. Examples include the various Indigenous ranger programs that exist across Australia, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health practitioner programs that employ health workers in urban, regional and remote Australia.

The most recent CTG Report has shown some promise that policy is beginning to move in the right direction. The focus of the language has shifted somewhat to focus on the 'performance' of Indigenous people and their 'improvement' against social indicators. The 2016 Report also recognises the value of localised solutions, such as employing local people in services like the Remote Schools Attendance Strategy, and support for the Indigenous visual art industry.

These are promising changes, but there is certainly scope for more to be done and, with current progress, more will certainly need to be done if we are to Close the Gap.