

BARRIERS FACE REMOTE ENGAGEMENT TEAMS IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

The Federal Government's deployment of Remote Engagement Teams (RETs) in remote Indigenous communities will be limited in their ability to reduce remote Indigenous disadvantage. While the program has been implemented with the intention of facilitating greater communication between government and community, RETs have been designed from an Anglo-Australian viewpoint that does not recognise the importance of crucial Indigenous cultural factors, and therefore will be limited in their ability to address causes of Indigenous disadvantage. The way in which the RETs are structured does not acknowledge the contextual factors that are important in Indigenous communities, specifically that hierarchy and representation is not accepted in traditional Indigenous culture, and that knowledge and power in communities cannot be acquired quickly. This paper will discuss some of the fundamental barriers RETs face to reduce remote Indigenous disadvantage.

RETs operate in remote Northern Territory (NT) Indigenous communities to facilitate cross-cultural community-government communication.¹ The intent of the government is that improved communication through this process will result in more effective funding and program implementation to reduce Indigenous disadvantage, which remains systemic and prevalent² in many remote Indigenous (hereafter referred to as Aboriginal³) communities.

RETs are comprised of Government Engagement Coordinators (GECs) and Indigenous Engagement Officers (IEOs)⁴ and were enacted as a Council of Australian Governments (COAG) National Partnership Agreement, an extension of 'The Intervention'⁵ policies. The RETs were established in response to requests by communities affected by the Intervention for increased consultation regarding future government policy that was directly targeted at them.⁶

The GEC role is designed to provide a single government interface for their allocated remote NT Aboriginal communities. Specifically, each GEC is intended to act as a coordination and liaison point between their designated communities and the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C).⁷ Cultural insight into existing and proposed government initiatives is provided by the Indigenous Engagement Officer (IEO), a local Aboriginal community member who consults with and represents community members.

¹ Federal objectives in non-remote locations are achieved through other government structures, the private sector, Non-Government Organisations and Not-for-Profits. Department of Social Services 2013(a).

² This disadvantage and poverty is experienced at a rate disproportionate to the average Australian. Bandias, Fuller and Holmes 2012; Evans 2012; Holland 2015; Hunter 2009 p. 52; Hunyor 2014 p. 2-7; Mazel 2009.

³ This piece takes discusses remote Aboriginal communities from mainland remote Northern Territory. Torres Strait Islanders and other Indigenous cultures can differ significantly.

⁴ Department of Social Services 2013(a), p. 2; Department of Social Services 2013(b), p. 1

⁵ Colloquially known as 'The Intervention', the Northern Territory Emergency Response involved the suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act in 73 remote NT Aboriginal communities in response to the 'Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle: Little Children are Sacred' report. For discussion see: Altman 2007; Department of Social Services 2013(a); Department of Social Services 2013(b); Gordon 2008; Harrison 12 March 2013; Wild and Anderson 2007.

⁶ Department of Social Services 2013(a), p. 2 Department of Social Services 2013(b), p. 2

⁷ Abbott 10 August 2013; Australian Government (date not specified); Australian Parliament (date not specified); Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet 2014.

Although cultural contact since colonisation has increased familiarity between normative Australian political structures and traditional Aboriginal cultures⁸, this is influenced by the extent of individual and community cultural exposure and integration. Being remote means that these Aboriginal communities have had less intense contact with Anglo-Australian culture, and therefore their 'traditional culture' – language, religion, kinship, and politics – is embraced to a greater extent relative to urban communities.⁹

There are two significant concerns regarding the ability of RETs to singularly reduce disadvantage in remote Aboriginal communities.

First, political representation by itself cannot remedy all of remote Aboriginal disadvantage. Aboriginals face historically compounded cultural and social disadvantage, in addition to ineffective political representation. Creating a direct communication channel to convey community needs to the Federal government only addresses one source of remote Aboriginal disadvantage.

Second, the structure of RETs reflects typical Australian political institutions which are likely to be inappropriate in remote Aboriginal communities. Hierarchy and representation are not always considered legitimate in traditional Aboriginal culture, where decentralised group (particularly family) collaboration and agreement¹⁰ is emphasised. Hierarchy or the general ability of an individual to represent a group of people¹¹ is often continuously contested. In contrast, hierarchy and representation are fundamental to the RET model.

In traditional Aboriginal culture knowledge, power, and influence are acquired over time, but RETs are expected to produce time-efficient majority-based decisions in the short to medium-term. These timeframes are not appropriate for sustainable and significant change within traditional Aboriginal culture and communities, as they do not reflect the timeframes necessary for non-community member GECs to become trusted and influential. Compounding the issue, the influence of and community trust in RETs as government positions may also be damaged by cuts to Federal Government funding of established organisations and structures that service remote communities. These organisations and structures provide important alliances which may assist RETs to achieve CTG and COAG outcomes.

The hierarchical and representative design of RETs presents several barriers which undermine their ability to successfully achieve their objectives. RETs are an attempt to reduce the cultural inappropriateness of Australian political structures in remote Aboriginal communities, without altering the essence of those structures. Although well-intentioned, RETs ability to achieve Federal CTG and COAG objectives are limited as:

- representation is a restricted and incomplete remedy to remote Aboriginal disadvantage
- hierarchy and representation are not accepted in traditional Aboriginal culture
- influential community knowledge and power are not acquired immediately or even necessarily in the short term.

⁸ Particularly for urban and rural Indigenous- see footnote number three. Further, this change may have been mostly uni-directional- for example, Australian assimilation policies have been systematically directed at Aboriginal Australians and migrants, not Anglo-Australians. For discussion see: Billings 2009; Mazel 2009, p. 480-482.

⁹ Issues facing remote Aboriginals economically, politically and culturally are quite different to country and urban Indigenous Australians. This piece takes only remote Aboriginal culture and communities as its focus.

¹⁰ Most power being *contested* (not absolute) and belonging to a *group* of elders. Austin-Broos 2003; Fryer-Smith 2002, Hiatt 1984

¹¹ Consensus, relationships, shared experiences, kinship, relationship maintenance and group membership may be considered centrally important in defining the 'person' and the wider group in which they exist. Austin-Broos 2003, Gibson 2010; Hiatt 1984, Meggitt 1964.

References:

- Abbott, T. 10 August 2013. Liberal Party of Australia, 'Tony Abbot- Establishment of a Prime Minister's Indigenous Advisory Council', accessed at < <http://www.liberal.org.au/latest-news/2013/08/10/tony-abbott-establishment-prime-ministers-indigenous-advisory-council>>
- Altman, J. 2007. 'Is this going to assist vulnerable Australians?'. *Impact*, Winter: 10-11.
- Austin-Broos, D. 2003. Places, practices and things: the articulation of Arrernte kinship with welfare and work. *American Ethnologist*, 30(1):118-135.
- Australian Government (date not specified). 'Department of Social Services', accessed at <<http://www.australia.gov.au/directories/australia/social-services>>
- Bandias, S., Fuller, D., Holmes, S. 2012. 'Aboriginal Economic and Human Development in the Northern Territory of Australia: To Work or Not to Work. A Clash of Non-Indigenous Beliefs'. *Economic Papers: A journal of applied economics and policy*, 31(1): 50-62.
- Billings, P. 2009. 'Still paying the price for benign intentions? Contextualising contemporary interventions in the lives of aboriginal peoples'. *Melbourne University Law Review*, 33(1): 1-38.
- Department of Social Services, 2013(a). 'Draft Implementation Plan: Stronger Futures in the Northern territory: Implementation Approach for Remote Engagement Teams'.
- Department of Social Services, 2013(b). 'Stronger Futures Remote Engagement Workforce Strategy: Remote Engagement Team Fact Sheet'.
- Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2014. 'Annual Report 2013-2014'.
- Evans, B. 2012. 'Northern Territory Emergency Response: criticism, support and redesign', *The Australian journal of rural health*, 20(3):103-107.
- Fryer-Smith, S. 2002. 'Aboriginal benchbook for Western Australian courts'. Australian Institute of Judicial Administration: Carlton, Victoria.
- Gibson, L. 2010. Making a life: getting ahead, and getting a living in Aboriginal New South Wales. *Oceania*, 80(2):143-160.
- Gordon, S. 2008. 'The Northern Territory Emergency Response: a reflection', *Sydney Papers*, 20(3):34-55.
- Hiatt, L.R. 1984. 'Aboriginal Political life'. Presented at the Wentworth lecture. Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies: Canberra.
- Holland, C. 2015. 'Close the Gap: Progress and priorities report 2015'. Close the Gap Campaign Steering Committee.
- Hunter, Boyd. 'Indigenous Social Exclusion: Insights and Challenges for the Concept of Social Inclusion'. *Family Matters*, 82, 2009: 52- 61.
- Hunyor, J. 15 August 2014. Letter. North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency. Accessed at <https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/09_2014/222_-_north_australian_aboriginal_justice_agency.pdf>
- Mazel, O. 2009. 'Development in the First World: Alleviating Indigenous Disadvantage in Australia- the Dilemma of Difference'. *Griffith Law Review*, 18(2): 475-502.
- Meggitt, M. J. 1964. Indigenous forms of government among the Australian Aborigines. *Bijdragen tvt de Taal -, Land-en Volken kunde* 120: 163-78.
- Harrison, D. Sydney Morning Herald, 13 March 2012. 'Call for NT intervention policy to face human rights test'.
- Wild, R. and Anderson, P. 15 June 2007. 'Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle: Little Children are Sacred'. Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse, 2007.