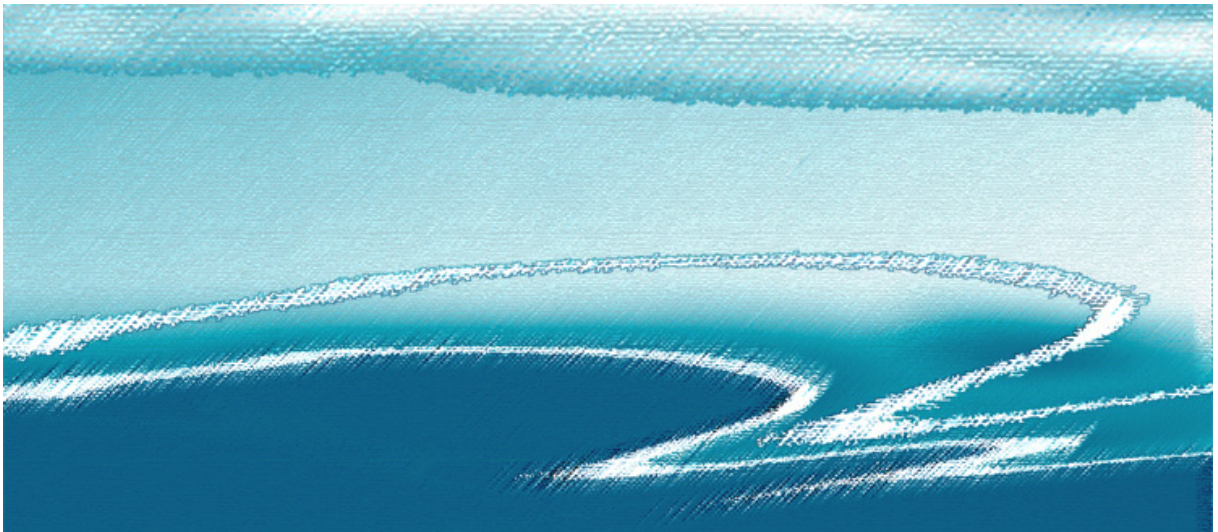


Evaluation of the Murdi Paaki COAG Trial



Prepared for: Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination

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Executive summary

Background

This is a formative evaluation of the COAG Trial in the Murdi Paaki region of north-west New South Wales. It has been prepared by Urbis Keys Young on behalf of the Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination (OIPC) and the Murdi Paaki Steering Committee. The evaluation builds on a review of community governance in the Murdi Paaki region in 2005, also undertaken by Urbis Keys Young.

The Murdi Paaki COAG Trial is one of eight Trials being carried out around Australia, with the aim of improving coordination of government services for Indigenous people based on priorities agreed with communities. Each Trial is led by one Australian Government and one State/Territory Government agency – the ‘lead agencies’.

The Murdi Paaki Trial site corresponds to the region served by the former Murdi Paaki ATSIC Regional Council, and includes sixteen major Aboriginal communities. The main goals of the Trial are set out in a Shared Responsibility Agreement signed on 22 August 2003 by the Department of Education, Science and Training (on behalf of the Australian Government), the Department of Education and Training (on behalf of the NSW Government) and the Murdi Paaki Regional Council. They are:

- Improving the health and wellbeing of children and young people
- Improving educational attainment and school retention
- Helping families to raise healthy children
- Strengthening community and regional governance structures.

To date activity under the Trial has focussed mainly on building the governance capacity of Indigenous communities and developing structures and strategies for addressing priorities identified by communities at local and regional levels.

Features of the Murdi Paaki COAG Trial

Key features of the Murdi Paaki COAG Trial have included the following:

- The Trial has involved broadening the membership and the role of the pre-existing Indigenous Community Working Parties (CWPs) in each community, to enable them to function as the key point of contact between government and the local Indigenous community. Administrative/secretarial assistance has been provided to assist the Community Working Parties in playing this role.
- With support from external consultants, each Community Working Party has developed a Community Action Plan (CAP) that identifies local service needs and priorities and aims to assist in ensuring a better coordinated approach to service planning and delivery by both State and Australian Government agencies.
- At regional level the voice of the Aboriginal community has been represented first by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) Regional Council and subsequently (since the abolition of ATSIC in June 2005) by the new Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly.
- The Murdi Paaki COAG Trial is managed on the ground by an Action Team, based in Dubbo and Bourke. Action Team members include regional managers from DEST, DET and the NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs, along with the manager of the Bourke Indigenous Coordination

Centre. The Action Team engages directly with each Community Working Party and serves as a new channel of communication between communities and government.

- To further assist in promoting communication among State and Federal agencies and between these agencies and the people of the region, two structures have been created. The Murdi Paaki Steering Committee provides overall direction for the Trial, with particular responsibility for strategic planning, communication strategies, and monitoring and evaluation. The Murdi Paaki Regional Group consists of regional managers from key Commonwealth and State agencies, and is responsible for the implementation of Community Action Plans.

Findings

- Both DEST and DET have demonstrated a strong commitment to the Murdi Paaki COAG Trial and to promoting positive change in government and communities. Representatives of both lead agencies have developed strong relationships in communities and have established a visible presence in the region. Among stakeholders familiar with the COAG Trials elsewhere in Australia, Murdi Paaki is regarded as the most advanced Trial site in terms of community capacity and governance.
- Consultations undertaken in six communities in the Murdi Paaki region in 2005 indicated strong support for certain elements of the Trial – in particular the ‘refreshed’ Community Working Parties, Community Action Plans, and the work of the Action Team. However, there was (and still is) community frustration over the speed that the Trial has progressed and a perceived lack of improvement in the way government services are delivered on the ground.
- While working towards the Trial’s objectives is clearly a long-term project, progress has been made in enhancing the capacity of both governments and communities to work with each other. Structures to promote coordination between government agencies working in Murdi Paaki have been established. The governance capacity of communities has improved, and many communities appear better able to articulate their priorities to government in constructive fashion. Stakeholders consulted believed that these developments have improved the capacity of government and community to work towards the objectives and priorities articulated at the Trial’s commencement.
- Despite positive feedback from both government and community on the principles and objectives of the Trial, progress to date has been slow. Considerable delays were experienced in finalising all sixteen Community Action Plans, which in turn has affected government’s ability to address the region-wide priorities identified through the CAPs.
- The involvement of Australian and State Government departments (apart from the lead agencies) in the Trial has evidently varied, and the capacity of the government sector to act in coordinated fashion to address Indigenous needs is – according to many stakeholders – still quite limited. Stakeholders stressed that non-lead agencies in particular must learn to work with other government departments and with CWPs if service delivery and government/community relations are to improve.
- Recently all NSW Government agencies active in Murdi Paaki signed an agreement outlining the nature of future whole of government working arrangements. The agreement sets out specific strategies for acting in coordinated fashion with other agencies. The recently signed Bilateral Agreement between the Australian and NSW Governments also incorporates principles for intergovernmental and interagency coordination. Government stakeholders regard these formal arrangements as an important step towards improved government services for Indigenous people in the Murdi Paaki region.
- Feedback from stakeholders indicated strong support for the work of the Action Team, which was regarded as central to the progress under the Trial to date. The Action Team has focussed on building relationships with CWPs and coordinating whole of government responses to community priorities. The continuity of Action Team personnel – who have come to represent the ‘faces of

government' in communities – has been important in building trust between government representatives and CWP members.

- Some uncertainty was evident in the region about the respective roles of DEST and OIPC following the introduction of the new national arrangements in Indigenous affairs. While Commonwealth lead agency responsibilities in Murdi Paaki remain with DEST, OIPC now plays an active role in the 'suite' of Trials around the country. OIPC is, among other things, strongly promoting the use of Shared Responsibility Agreements between government and community. Numbers of those consulted believed there was a need for better communication with government officials on the ground about the functions of each agency in the context of the Trial and the new arrangements.
- Seventeen Shared Responsibility Agreements have been signed in the Murdi Paaki region since the inception of the Trial – some before and some after the new Indigenous affairs arrangements came into effect. People consulted during the study raised a number of issues relating to SRAs; for example, some of the early SRAs were regarded as dealing in considerable detail with relatively small matters. While the Australian Government has indicated that SRAs are in general not intended to relate to core government responsibilities and services, there has in Murdi Paaki been some disagreement or uncertainty about what matters can and cannot be appropriately included in an SRA.
- Analysis of the content of CAPs has recently been undertaken in order to generate a comprehensive regional overview of community needs. The Steering Committee and Regional Group plan to use this information to guide the development of services in a way that is in keeping with community priorities, and an implementation plan based on identified community needs is currently in development.
- Government representatives emphasised the importance of developing concrete initiatives to respond to the major priorities identified in CAPs. The last phase of the Trial, during which a range of such initiatives are to be implemented, will determine whether the new working arrangements in Murdi Paaki have in fact been successful in promoting better coordinated government service delivery, and whether they are likely to lead to improvements in health, education, employment and other critical areas.

Next Steps

- The majority of stakeholders believe that government needs to continue to support key elements of the Murdi Paaki Trial – CWPs, CAPs and simpler working arrangements between communities and government – if community support for the Trial is to be maintained.
- There is some community uncertainty about what arrangements will be carried forward after 2007. If government intends to maintain the status of CWPs as a central feature of government/community interaction into the future, it should communicate this to communities as a matter of priority.
- Stakeholders consistently emphasised that the challenges that the Trial is designed to address are complex and long-term, and that the commitments of community and government to achieving the Trial's objectives need to be sustained. Substantially improving outcomes in key areas like education and employment is likely to take decades rather than years. A five-year 'Trial', then, can be expected to lay the groundwork for positive change, rather than bring about major improvements on the ground.
- There is no obvious reason why that the existing arrangements should not be maintained at least until the Trial officially lapses in 2007. It is worthwhile at this stage for the Steering Committee to consider what arrangements need to be put in place beyond 2007 to ensure momentum built under the Trial is not lost. However, it is acknowledged that any final decision about the future of the Trial rests with the Council of Australian Governments.

Abbreviations

AGs	Attorney-General's Department (Australian and New South Wales Government)
ATSIC	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission
ATSISS	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services
CAP	Community Action Plan
CDEP	Community Development Employment Program
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
CWP	Community Working Party
DAA	New South Wales Government Department of Aboriginal Affairs
DEST	Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training
DET	New South Wales Government Department of Education and Training
DEWR	Australian Government Department of Employment and Workplace Relations
DoHA	Australian Government Department of Health Ageing
FaCS	Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services (prior to January 2006)
FaCSIA	Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (from January 2006 onwards)
MPPP	Murdi Paaki Partnership Project
MPRA	Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly
ICC	Indigenous Coordination Centre
OIPC	Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination
SRA	Shared Responsibility Agreement

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A full list of individuals and organisations consulted for the evaluation are provided at Appendix A.

1 Introduction

In early 2006 the Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination (OIPC), in partnership with the Murdi Paaki Steering Committee, commissioned Urbis Keys Young (UKY) to undertake a formative evaluation of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Trial in the Murdi Paaki region of New South Wales. This report presents the evaluation findings in line with OIPC's evaluation terms of reference.

The evaluation builds on consultations on community governance with Indigenous communities in the Murdi Paaki region, carried out by Urbis Keys Young in early 2005.

1.1 The Murdi Paaki COAG Trial

In November 2000, the COAG agreed that all governments would work together to improve the social and economic wellbeing of Indigenous people and communities. The COAG decision recognised that the commitment by Commonwealth and State/Territory Governments to Indigenous issues is spread across many agencies and programs, with the result that activity is often fragmented.

COAG later agreed, in April 2002, to trial new ways of working together with Indigenous communities in up to ten regions across Australia. It agreed that both outcomes and management approaches needed to be improved, and that two approaches were necessary:

- Governments must work together better at all levels and across all departments and agencies
- Indigenous communities and governments must work in partnership and share responsibility for achieving outcomes and for building the capacity of people in communities to manage their own affairs.

One of the trial sites selected was the Murdi Paaki region in north-western New South Wales. The Murdi Paaki region includes the major Indigenous communities of Bourke, Brewarrina, Broken Hill, Cobar, Collarenebri, Coonamble, Dareton, Enngonia, Goodooga, Gulargambone, Ivanhoe, Lightning Ridge, Menindee, Walgett, Weilmoringle and Wilcannia. Murdi Paaki corresponds to the former Bourke ATSIC region, and covers the traditional lands of a number of Aboriginal nations or language groups. These include the Paakantji, Ngiyampaa, Wangaaybuwan, Ngemba, Wayilwan, Murrawari, Wangkumara, Muti Muti, Ualroi, Baranbinja, Malyangapa and Gamilaroi nations.

At the time of the 2001 Census, there were 7,542 Indigenous people living in the Murdi Paaki region, or some fourteen per cent of the total population. Communities with the largest Indigenous populations (in absolute terms) are Broken Hill, Bourke, Brewarrina, Coonamble, Walgett and Wilcannia.

Government involvement in each of the COAG Trials around Australia is coordinated by one Australian Government agency and one State/Territory Government agency. The 'lead agencies' in Murdi Paaki are the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) and the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET).

From the community side, the COAG Trial is being progressed by the Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly (at the regional level) and by Community Working Parties (CWPs) in each of the sixteen Indigenous communities in the region. Together, these two structures constitute the primary mechanisms for Indigenous community governance in the Trial site. The distinctive features of the Murdi Paaki COAG Trial (including the work of the lead agencies and of CWPs) are described in more detail in Chapter 2 of this report.

In July 2004 the Australian Government put in place new arrangements for Indigenous affairs. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) was abolished, and the Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination now has responsibility for coordinating a whole of government approach to Indigenous affairs. The Australian Government has also established Indigenous Coordination Centres (ICCs) in a number of regional locations across Australia (usually locations where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services (ATSIS) offices were previously based). In north-western New South Wales there are ICCs in Bourke and Dubbo. The role of the OIPC and the ICCs in the Murdi Paaki COAG Trial is discussed later in this report.

1.2 This evaluation

The Australian Government has decided to commission independent evaluations of all of the COAG Trial sites; OIPC is managing the evaluation process in relation to each Trial. A two-stage evaluation process is planned, with the first stage concentrating on learning from the Trials and contributing to their future development, and the second stage (scheduled for 2007-8) involving a more comprehensive assessment of the outcomes and achievements of each Trial.

This report represents a first-stage or 'formative' evaluation of the Murdi Paaki COAG Trial. It is based on consultations carried out with community and government representatives during the first half of 2006. The report also builds on consultations with communities and CWPs in six locations in the region conducted by Urbis Keys Young in 2005 on behalf of DEST and DET. The present evaluation involved the following research tasks:

- face-to-face and telephone interviews with representatives of key Australian and NSW Government departments
- telephone interviews with representatives of non-government organisations in the region
- consultation with the Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly (Bourke)
- consultation with the Murdi Paaki Steering Committee (Sydney)
- review of key documents and literature relating to the Murdi Paaki COAG Trial.

A full list of stakeholders consulted is provided in Appendix A, and a copy of the interview guide used in these discussions is reproduced in Appendix B. OIPC's evaluation terms of reference can be found in Appendix C.

As mentioned above, Urbis Keys Young undertook community consultations in the Murdi Paaki region in 2005 on behalf of DEST and DET. These were designed to provide objective information relating to community governance in the region, and to identify any areas for potential improvement. A report on these consultations, *Community Governance in the Murdi Paaki Region*, was produced for the Murdi Paaki Steering Committee in mid-2005. While the involvement of the Murdi Paaki Action Team was crucial to the success of that project, there was relatively little input from government into the 2005 research.

The current evaluation focused on seeking information and feedback from government representatives, with community input being sought from the Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly rather than at the community level. Findings from the 2005 community consultations have been integrated into this report where appropriate, in order to achieve a balance between community and government input into the evaluation of the COAG Trial.

2 History and Features of the Murdi Paaki COAG Trial

2.1 Overview

This chapter presents information on the features of the COAG Trial in the Murdi Paaki region. After outlining the conditions and challenges at the start of the Trial, each of the key elements of the Trial is described; the extent of the community's involvement in setting the objectives and priorities for the Trial is also discussed. A summary of key dates and events in the Trial's history is provided at the conclusion of the chapter.

2.2 Initial challenges

2.2.1 The Indigenous population of Murdi Paaki

The *Murdi Paaki Indicators Report* (collated in October 2005) provides some information on the nature of the Indigenous population and the challenges facing the region at the start of the Trial.¹ The indicators reported below are drawn from data collated by DAA for the first *Two Ways Together Indicator Report*, and are based on the six former ATSI regions of New South Wales (Murdi Paaki, Binaal Billa, Kamilaroi, Queanbeyan, Many Rivers and Sydney).

- There were 7,542 Indigenous people in Murdi Paaki in 2001, representing some 13% of the total population of the region. The median age of the Indigenous population was 21 years, compared with 40 years for the non-Indigenous population.
- In 2003 the percentage of *non*-Indigenous students in Murdi Paaki in the two highest bands for literacy and numeracy in Year 3 was three times that of Indigenous students. The situation was similar for literacy and numeracy in Year 5.
- The Year 7-10 apparent retention rate for Indigenous students was considerably lower in Murdi Paaki (66%) than in NSW overall (80%) in 2002. The Year 7-12 apparent retention rate was also much lower in Murdi Paaki (21%) than NSW overall (30%).
- The unemployment rate for Indigenous people in Murdi Paaki was 23.9% in 2001, compared with 9.8% for the total Murdi Paaki population and 23.1% for the Indigenous population of NSW.
- In 2002, the rate of imprisonment of Indigenous people across NSW was highest in Sydney and in Murdi Paaki. Just over 1% of the Indigenous population of each region was in prison at that time; this compares with 0.2% of the total population of Murdi Paaki which was in prison.
- In 2002, the victimisation rate for domestic violence for Indigenous children and young people was higher in Murdi Paaki (27 per 1,000 population) than for any other region of NSW.
- In 2001-2, the Murdi Paaki region had the highest rate in NSW (37 Indigenous children per 1,000 population) of Indigenous children and young people involved in reports where assessment determined abuse/neglect issues.
- The Binaal Billa (87%) and Murdi Paaki (86%) regions had the highest proportion of Indigenous children and young people placed with Aboriginal families or in kinship care in 2001-2.

¹ There is relatively little useful statistical information relating to the health of the Indigenous population in Murdi Paaki in this report. Although such information can be found in a report on *Health in the Murdi Paaki Region* (produced by the Far West Area Health Service), this report was not available to the study team.

- In 2001, 11.2% of the Indigenous households in social housing in Murdi Paaki were overcrowded, compared to 2.2% of the total population of the region. Murdi Paaki had the highest proportion of overcrowding in Indigenous social housing households of any region in NSW.

2.2.2 Regional priorities

On 22 August 2003, the Murdi Paaki Regional Council, DEST and DET signed a Shared Responsibility Agreement setting out the four regional priorities for the Trial. These were:

- Improving the health and wellbeing of children and young people
- Improving educational attainment and school retention
- Helping families to raise healthy children
- Strengthening community and regional governance structures.

These four priorities represent the aims of the Trial as agreed by governments and communities in the region, and reflect the conditions and challenges as perceived at the start of the Trial. They are generally consistent with more recent feedback of communities, who identified the following broad areas of need in their subsequent Community Action Plans:

- *Community* (eg community engagement, identity, safety and security, empowerment)
- *Employment* (eg skills training and assessment, business development, employment opportunities, CDEP)
- *Health* (eg access to services, drug and alcohol education, access to facilities, health education)
- *Culture* (eg education and support, cultural preservation, sensitivity and awareness, access to traditional lands)
- *Community Working Party Governance* (eg processes, representativeness, accountability, education of CWP members)
- *Education* (eg student support, school policy and curriculum development, improvement in education attainment).

Additional information on the Community Action Plans is provided in Section 2.3 (below).

2.3 Key Elements of the Trial

2.3.1 Community Working Parties

Community Working Parties (CWPs) play a central role in the Murdi Paaki COAG Trial, and are the primary mechanism for representation and consultation at the community level.

CWPs were originally established in the region in the mid 1990s, on the initiative of the Murdi Paaki Regional Council. Their purpose was originally to provide community liaison relating to the planning and provision of housing under the Aboriginal Community Development Program. Membership of the Working Parties was 'refreshed', however, at the commencement of the COAG Trial, and they now have responsibilities for dealing with a wide range of issues affecting the community and its relationships with government bodies – specifically issues related to the planning and delivery of government services. In the present context, the role of CWPs centres on community governance rather than the day-to-day coordination of the delivery of services to each community. At the start of the Trial, government and Murdi Paaki Regional Council representatives worked together to

encourage a process whereby Working Party membership was broadened, with individuals being nominated or elected to reflect a range of community organisations and interests.

The CWPs are unincorporated bodies, do not employ staff and do not manage funds. The current basis for the make-up of CWP membership appears to be broadly similar in each community. Some people have come onto the CWP as representatives of local Aboriginal organisations, or possibly as Aboriginal representatives of key government agencies; other individuals have become members of the CWP as community elders or through representing particular interests within the community – for instance, women’s issues.

The size of the CWP varies from one community to another, from about 15 people up to about 45. Non-members can attend CWP meetings, but it seems that this is not generally common – despite CWP efforts in several communities to encourage broader participation.

2.3.2 Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly

The Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly (MPRA) is the peak regional Indigenous community body in the Murdi Paaki region, and is recognised by governments as the primary point of Indigenous community contact, coordination and input at the regional level. The MPRA is in some senses the successor to the Murdi Paaki Regional Council (the operation of Regional Councils having ceased as part of the abolition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission), although its membership, structure, powers and responsibilities differ from those of the Regional Council. Until 2005 (when it was acknowledged as taking over from the Murdi Paaki Regional Council), the MPRA was officially known as the ‘CWP Chairs Forum’.

The MPRA is chaired by Mr Sam Jeffries, former Chair of the Murdi Paaki Regional Council; Mr Jeffries is an independent Chair popularly elected by the Assembly. Membership of the Regional Assembly consists of the Chairs of each of the sixteen Community Working Parties in the Murdi Paaki region. Like the CWPs themselves, the Regional Assembly is unincorporated, does not employ staff, and does not manage funds directly. However, the Regional Assembly is a crucial source of community input into service delivery across the region, including the allocation of government funds. The MPRA’s responsibilities include advocacy, strategic planning, the development of service agreements, and lobbying government. Its operation is guided by a Governance Charter endorsed by members of the Assembly.

A Shared Responsibility Agreement sets out the roles and responsibilities of the Regional Assembly, as well as the government’s commitments in supporting its work. This SRA (originally signed 22 August 2003 but amended 1 August 2005 to take account of the abolition of ATSIC) also provides for secretariat support for CWPs through the funding of CDEP places and the provision of appropriate training for people in secretariat positions. An additional SRA (signed 3 December 2004) provides for further funding to support CWPs, including for secretariat and administrative support and IT infrastructure.

2.3.3 Community Action Plans

Each of the sixteen Indigenous communities in the Murdi Paaki region was asked to develop a Community Action Plan (CAP) to identify key local priorities. Development of the CAPs was overseen by the Community Working Parties, in consultation with community members and Aboriginal community organisations. A facilitator/consultant was employed in each case to support the CAP development and documentation.

Although the methodology for developing CAPs was not prescriptive and varied from one community to another, a majority of plans include a profile of the community in question, vision statement(s), goals, aims and strategic actions for achieving those goals and aims.

In early 2006, FCSIA undertook a detailed analysis of the content of the thirteen CAPs completed at the time, to identify priorities for government action from a region-wide perspective. Through that analysis, ten themes areas were identified, capturing the various actions documented in the CAPs; these were (in no particular order):

- Education
- Culture and wellbeing
- Health
- Employment and enterprise development
- Economic development
- Children and young people
- Families
- Law and Justice
- Housing and Infrastructure
- Community Governance.

Of all the actions presented in the CAPs, the most frequent topics or themes were 'community' (the most mentioned), 'employment' and 'health'. The outcomes of FCSIA's analysis were presented to the Murdi Paaki Steering Committee and the Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly, and will be used to guide government activity in the region (including the work of the COAG Trial) in the future.

As of May 2006, all sixteen communities have a completed Community Action Plan. FCSIA plans to integrate the most recent CAPs into its analysis of region-wide priorities.

2.3.4 Shared Responsibility Agreements

As part of the new arrangements in Indigenous affairs which came into effect 1 July 2004, the Australian Government is encouraging Indigenous communities to enter into Shared Responsibility Agreements (SRAs). SRAs spell out what communities, governments (at all levels) and others will contribute to achieve long-term changes in Indigenous communities. SRAs often relate to funding that governments provide through *additional* programs, projects and services for Indigenous communities; they are not designed to modify or supplant governments' *core business* with communities.

In the Murdi Paaki region, seventeen SRAs have been signed to date. Some of these are region-wide, addressing governance structures, priorities and commitments from the regional perspective. Other SRAs have been signed with individual communities, identifying each partner's responsibilities in relation to projects specific to those communities.

Of particular interest in the context of the COAG Trial are six regional SRAs which have been signed in Murdi Paaki. These agreements establish regional priorities and recognise the Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly and the Community Working Parties as the primary structures for community representation and consultation (signed August 2003, August 2005 and December 2005). Regional SRAs have also ensured that CWP's have the IT, secretariat, technical and professional support they require for continued operation.

On 6 April 2005 a regional SRA was entered into to trial evaporative air cooling in the region through the retrospective installation of evaporative air cooling units in community owned Indigenous housing in selected communities. This regional SRA has now seen the three local communities of Ivanhoe, Lightning Ridge and Collarenebri negotiate local Air Cooling SRAs which fall under the umbrella of the Regional Air Cooling SRA.

A further nine local SRAs have been entered into by governments and individual communities in Murdi Paaki. Each of these local SRAs differs in location and content. In Bourke, three local SRAs have been signed to date and focus on the establishment of a Community Assistance Night Patrol (CAP), the development of an education and training project specifically focused on Bourke, and support for the Bourke Yaamma Cultural Festival.

Similarly, the community of Brewarrina (through the Ngemba CWP), has entered into four local SRAs. These focus on a variety of community projects, including one targeting disengaged youth and a homemakers initiative. The community has also entered into two SRAs pertaining to the purchase of a bus for Community use and the establishment and maintenance of community parks.

In addition, the community of Enngonia has signed one SRA to establish a distance education initiative within the community.

Further details on the government and community responsibilities outlined in the various SRAs signed in Murdi Paaki can be found in Section 3.5.

2.3.5 Community Governance Workshops

A key focus of the Murdi Paaki COAG trial to date has been an emphasis on developing trust, building relationships, and strengthening governance. To advance these principles, two Community Working Party (CWP) Governance Workshops have been held each year in the Murdi Paaki region since March 2004.

To date five Workshops have been held in the region, and a sixth is being planned for late 2006. Information on the focus of each of the workshops which have been held to date is provided below.

First Workshop (8-10 March 2004)

The first CWP Governance Workshop was held in Cobar on 8-10 March 2004. The workshop focused on strengthening community and regional governance structures, a key priority identified under the Murdi Paaki regional Shared Responsibility Agreement (SRA) signed in August 2003.

Second Workshop (21-23 September 2004)

As a consequence of the positive feedback received from the community about this first workshop, a second CWP Governance Workshop was subsequently held in Cobar. This second workshop built on the first, and encouraged robust discussions about the progress of the trial, emerging issues and the future of community governance in the region.

Third Workshop (5-7 April 2005)

The third workshop was held under the theme *Practical Partnerships Towards Shared Responsibility*, and was aimed at developing a common understanding between communities and government of the concept of 'shared responsibility,' a key principle underpinning the COAG Trials. The workshop was designed to build momentum in the development of local SRAs with each of the 16 communities in the region. Other objectives of the workshop included:

- opportunities for CWP members to discuss how to improve the attendance, retention and achievement of school children in the Murdi Paaki region
- introducing CWP members to employment brokers in the Murdi Paaki region
- building on the skills of community leaders to participate in the development of SRAs.

The Minister for Education, Science, and Training, Dr Brendan Nelson, attended this workshop.

Fourth Workshop (25-27 October 2005)

This workshop focused on employment and economic issues in the Murdi Paaki region with a view to enhancing the economic capacity of the Murdi Paaki region and its population. Key workshop activities included:

- discussing the issues inhibiting economic development in the Murdi Paaki region
- sharing stories of best practice, areas of need, and potential solutions
- meeting key employment service providers in the Murdi Paaki region.

The NSW Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Mr Milton Orkopoulos, attended this workshop.

Fifth Workshop (2-4 May 2006)

At the request of community members, the fifth Governance Workshop held in the Murdi Paaki region focused on health issues faced by Indigenous communities. As a part of this workshop participants, including community members and government representatives, had the opportunity to share their experiences and important information relating to health of Indigenous communities in Murdi Paaki.

The Minister for Education, Science, and Training, Julie Bishop, attended this workshop.

2.3.6 Murdi Paaki Partnership Project

Indigenous communities in the Murdi Paaki region identified the lack of suitable locally-based technical and professional support as a significant barrier to their ability to interact and liaise with governments and negotiate agreements to improve services. The Murdi Paaki Partnership Project (MPPP) is designed to strengthen the operation of Community Working Parties through the provision of such support by eight Community Facilitators (or one for every two CWPs in the region). A Shared Responsibility Agreement establishing the MPPP was signed by the Regional Assembly and the Australian and NSW Governments on 26 October 2005.

At the local level, Community Facilitators are employed by local host organisations, with support from a local reference group comprised of CWP members and representatives of the community, business and government (including local government where possible). Employment of Facilitators is triggered once communities have a completed Community Action Plan in place, and is subject to the approval of the CWP. At the time of writing the majority of Facilitator positions had been filled by suitably qualified individuals.

2.3.7 COAG Trial Action Team

The COAG Trial Action Team consists of representatives of DEST and DET (based in Dubbo), DAA (based in Bourke) and the Bourke Indigenous Coordination Centre. The Action Team can be said to represent the 'face of government' for Community Working Parties, providing a link between communities and the government sector. Action Team members attend monthly CWP meetings,

relay community feedback and concerns to various government agencies (including the lead agencies), and coordinate whole-of-government responses to priorities identified by CWPs.

The Action Team originally consisted of one officer from each of the two lead agencies and the Bourke ATSI Office. Membership of the Action Team was expanded in 2005 to include representation from the NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs.

2.3.8 Government structures

In addition to the Action Team, a number of government structures have been put in place to support the COAG Trial. The most important of these are the Murdi Paaki COAG Trial Steering Committee and the Murdi Paaki COAG Trial Regional Group.

The Steering Committee provides overall direction for the Trial, with particular responsibility for strategic planning, communication strategies, monitoring and evaluation, and the implementation of Community Action Plans. Membership of the Steering Committee includes senior representatives of DEST and DET (co-chairs), the Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly, OIPC and DAA.

The Regional Group consists of regional managers from key Commonwealth and State agencies, and is responsible for the implementation of Community Action Plans through core business, Shared Responsibility Agreements or other processes. The Regional Group was restructured in early 2006 to reflect the key regional priorities identified through analysis of CAPs. The Regional Group will now focus on four key portfolio areas:

- Education, Training, Employment and Economic Development
- Health, Housing, Families and Young People
- Law and Justice
- Environment, Culture and Heritage.

In addition to these formal interagency structures, the lead agencies have each committed resources to support the Trial, in addition to their involvement in the Action Team. For example, DEST has actively engaged members of its senior executive in the Trial through visits to communities in Murdi Paaki, and dedicated two-full time positions in its Canberra office to the work of the Trial.

2.3.9 Monitoring and evaluation

There have been a number of initiatives which relate to the monitoring and evaluation of the Murdi Paaki COAG Trial:

- In 2003 the Murdi Paaki Steering Committee developed a Monitoring and Evaluation Framework to guide the evaluation of the Trial. The Framework was designed to provide information in three areas:
 - Progress in implementing the Trial
 - Community Perspectives on the Trial
 - Outcomes in key priority areas.
- In 2005 DEST and DET commissioned an independent review of community governance in the Murdi Paaki region. This involved consultation with six communities across the region to assess community governance issues in the context of the Trial.

- In 2006, as previously explained, OIPC commissioned the present study as the first part of a two-stage evaluation of the Trial. The information and feedback collected through this evaluation will represent a 'baseline' for comparison when the Murdi Paaki and other COAG Trials are comprehensively evaluated in 2007/8.
- Strategic indicators have been developed to monitor progress under the Trial. These indicators relate to the strategic areas for action set out in the COAG *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* Reporting Framework and the regional priorities for the Murdi Paaki COAG Trial. Data is expected to be gathered at both regional and community level. Regional level data is available through the *Two Ways Together Murdi Paaki Indicators Report*, produced in October 2005 and based on data mainly from 2002-3.

2.4 Community involvement in setting the Trial's objectives and priorities

During the initial phase, community involvement in setting the Trial's objectives and priorities largely took the form of the Murdi Paaki Regional Council's input into the initial SRA with the two lead agencies. This SRA (signed in August 2003) set out the four priority areas for the Trial (see Section 3.5 of this report).

As the Trial has progressed, community involvement in planning and decision-making has grown, particularly once CWP membership was broadened and governance processes began to work more smoothly. More recently, community input into priority-setting has taken several forms, including:

- The development of Community Action Plans by every Indigenous community in the region
- Negotiation between CWPs and government around the substance of various local SRAs
- Ongoing consultation with CWPs by members of the Action Team
- Attendance by CWP Chairs at meetings of the Steering Committee and the Regional Group
- Regular governance workshops attended by both community representatives and senior government officials
- Representation of the Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly on the Steering Committee.

Consultations with communities undertaken in 2005 indicated broad support for the core ideas behind the COAG Trial, including making it simpler for communities to deal with government and promoting a whole of government response to the needs identified by Indigenous communities. Although the term 'COAG Trial' is not necessarily well understood across the broad Indigenous community, the key elements of the Trial – including the CWPs, the MPRA, and the Action Team – are perceived positively by both CWP members and other community members.

2.5 Timeline

The following summary of key dates and events includes some significant related developments as well as matters directly associated with the Murdi Paaki COAG Trial. It is based on various documents provided to the evaluation team as well as information gleaned from interviews with stakeholders.

2002

- The Council of Australian Governments decides to undertake a series of Trials around Australia to promote whole-of-government approaches to meeting the needs of Indigenous communities.

Murdi Paaki is chosen as a Trial site, with DEST and DET to represent the Australian and New South Wales Governments respectively.

2003

- The Murdi Paaki Action Team is established. The Action Team initially consists of one officer from each of the two lead agencies based in Dubbo and an officer from the ATSI Bourke office (later the Bourke Indigenous Coordination Centre).
- Membership of Community Working Parties is refreshed to take account of their expanded role in the context of the COAG Trial.
- The Murdi Paaki Steering Committee and the Murdi Paaki Regional Group are established to guide the direction and implementation of the Trial.
- The Murdi Paaki Steering Committee develops and endorses a Monitoring and Evaluation Framework for the Trial. Implementation of the Framework becomes the responsibility of the Murdi Paaki Data Working Group.
- The Commonwealth Government, NSW Government and the Murdi Paaki Regional Council sign a Shared Responsibility Agreement (dated 22 August) to set the groundwork for the Murdi Paaki COAG Trial. Key elements of the SRA include: recognising the Murdi Paaki Regional Council as the peak regional body and the primary point of Indigenous community contact; the acknowledgement of Community Working Parties as the peak community bodies and the primary points of Indigenous community contact in each community across the region; and identifying key regional priorities for the COAG Trial. Consistent with the expressed needs of communities, the SRA also provides for a secretariat position to support each of the sixteen Community Working Parties in the region.

2004

- The inaugural Community Working Party Governance Workshop is held in March, bringing together for the first time representatives of the sixteen CWPs, as well Australian and State Government representatives, to progress the Trial.
- On 1 July the Australian Government's new arrangements in Indigenous affairs come into effect. Key features include: the abolition of ATSIC and ATSI; the establishment of the Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination (within the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs) as the primary Commonwealth coordinating body on Indigenous matters; the establishment of 22 Indigenous Coordination Centres (with a Centre in Bourke, then also in Dubbo from late 2005) to coordinate Australian Government service provision on the ground; and the promotion of Shared Responsibility Agreements between Indigenous communities and governments as a mechanism for achieving long-term changes at the community level.
- DEST and DET engage consultants to assist Community Working Parties in the development of Community Action Plans, which are aimed at identifying key priorities for each community.
- The Commonwealth Government, NSW Government and the Murdi Paaki Regional Council sign a Shared Responsibility Agreement (dated 3 December 2004) which provides for further funding to support CWPs, including for secretariat and administrative support and IT infrastructure.

2005

- The NSW Government launches its ten-year plan aimed at tackling the social and economic problems facing Aboriginal people, *Two Ways Together*. The funding package associated with the plan targets five areas for action: reducing incarceration and family violence; improving the literacy

and numeracy rates of Aboriginal students in years 3 and 5 and improving school retention rates; reducing Otitis Media infections; increasing Aboriginal employment, and improving living conditions.

- The lead agencies commission an independent review of community governance arrangements, based on consultation with six communities in the Murdi Paaki region. The findings are used to inform the Steering Committee of progress to date and possible future directions.
- Membership of the Murdi Paaki Action Team is enhanced to include a representative of the NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs.
- The Murdi Paaki Steering Committee endorses the Murdi Paaki Strategic Plan. The Strategic Plan sets out principles and information to assist Trial partners in planning, coordinating and implementing the Trial.
- The Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly is formally recognised as the successor to the Murdi Paaki Regional Council as the primary structure representing the Indigenous community at the regional level; this recognition takes the form of an amendment to a pre-existing Shared Responsibility Agreement (signed 1 August 2005).
- The Australian Government, the NSW Government and the Regional Assembly sign a Shared Responsibility Agreement establishing the Murdi Paaki Partnership Project on 26 October. This initiative is designed to strengthen the operation of Community Working Parties through the provision of local-based technical and professional support by eight Community Facilitators.
- OIPC creates a new ICC in Dubbo, which has overall responsibility for the Murdi Paaki region in liaison with the Bourke ICC.

2006

- Community Action Plans (CAPs) are completed for each of the sixteen Indigenous communities in Murdi Paaki. FCSIA undertakes analysis of the CAPs to identify key region-wide priorities for government.
- The Murdi Paaki Regional Group is restructured to focus on four key priority areas: education, training, employment and economic development; health, housing, families and young people; law and justice; and environment, culture and heritage.
- OIPC commissions a formative evaluation of the Murdi Paaki COAG Trial, to incorporate the findings of research with communities undertaken in 2005.
- The Australian and NSW Governments sign a bilateral agreement on Aboriginal affairs for the period 2005-10.

3 Processes

This chapter presents evaluation findings relating to the processes established through the Murdi Paaki COAG Trial. These are based on consultations with representatives of government and community, as well as analysis of key documents and literature. The key features of the Trial are summarised below, and are described in more detail in Chapter 2.

- The Trial has involved broadening the membership and the role of the pre-existing Community Working Parties in each of those communities, to enable them to function as the key point of contact between government and the local community. Some administrative/secretarial assistance has been provided to assist the Community Working Parties in playing this role.
- With support from external consultants, each Community Working Party has developed a Community Action Plan that identifies local service needs and priorities and aims to assist in ensuring a better coordinated approach to service planning and delivery by both State and Australian Government agencies.
- At regional level the voice of the Aboriginal community has been represented first by the ATSIC Regional Council and subsequently (since the abolition of ATSIC) by the new Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly.
- The Australian and NSW Government lead agencies have established a small Action Team, based at Dubbo, which includes full-time representatives of both agencies, which engages directly with each Community Working Party and serves as a new channel of communication between communities and government.
- To further assist in promoting communication among government agencies and between government and community, two structures have been created. The Murdi Paaki Steering Committee provides overall direction for the Trial, with particular responsibility for strategic planning, communication strategies, and monitoring and evaluation. The Murdi Paaki Regional Group consists of regional managers from key Commonwealth and State agencies, and is responsible for the implementation of Community Action Plans.

3.1 Role of the lead agencies

By all accounts both DEST and DET have demonstrated a strong commitment to the Murdi Paaki COAG Trial and to promoting positive change in government and communities. Both lead agencies have developed strong relationships in communities and have established a visible presence in the region.

The progress made by the lead agencies in Murdi Paaki was ascribed to several factors. First, the involvement of senior bureaucrats since the Trial's commencement meant that Trial-related initiatives have had agency-wide support. Second, the allocation of resources to the Trial resulted in departmental positions specifically dedicated to the Trial. Third (and perhaps most significantly), the work of the Murdi Paaki Action Team has been crucial in maintaining relationships at the community level and in mobilising government resources within and outside the lead agencies. Continuity of personnel within the Action Team has been particularly important in building positive government/community relations.

As a number of people saw it, there appears to be some contrast between the involvement of the two lead agencies over the Trial's history. While DEST was said to be actively involved from the very beginning, it took some time for the NSW Government to fully recognise DET's lead role in the Trial.

There now appears to be much stronger recognition of DET's position as the primary State Government agency in Murdi Paaki.

The relationships between DEST and DET developed through the Trial were said to have had positive implications for those agencies' work in other regions and also on non-Indigenous issues. For example, cross-jurisdictional relationships between senior bureaucrats have benefited from contact through the Trial.

Stakeholders also mentioned the level of integration between the Action Team and the local ICC(s) as a problem while the new arrangements were being put in place. Although the Bourke ICC has officially been part of the Action Team since the ICC's establishment, the Bourke ICC manager position was vacant for some time, which reportedly affected the level of integration between the work of the ICC and that of the Action Team. This position was filled in early 2006; there is now said to be a greater level of communication and collaboration as a result.

3.2 Role of other agencies

Stakeholder comment was gathered on the role of DAA and OIPC in the Murdi Paaki COAG Trial.

The involvement of DAA has increased substantially since it joined the Action Team in 2005. Since that time DAA was said to have improved the ability of DET and the Action Team to mobilise resources and support from non-lead agencies at State level. The engagement of senior DAA personnel in the Trial appears to have been especially important in this regard.

Feedback on the role of OIPC in the Trial was more complex. While some stakeholders welcomed the additional funding for Trial-related initiatives (and especially for SRA-based projects) made available through OIPC, concerns were expressed that OIPC (and the local ICC) has devoted too much attention to the development of SRAs, perhaps at the expense of the working relationships between government and community built up through the Trial outside of the SRA context. Further feedback on OIPC is reported in Section 4.4; comments on the SRA process are presented in Section 3.7.

3.3 Coordination within and between governments

The Murdi Paaki Action Team is the primary mechanism in place to improve day-to-day coordination between and within governments. At present representatives of four agencies comprise the Action Team: DEST, DET, DAA and the Bourke ICC.

At the strategic level, there are several mechanisms to guide the work of the Trial. These include the Murdi Paaki Steering Committee, the Murdi Paaki Regional Group, the Western Regional Coordination Management Group and the CEOs Group on Aboriginal Affairs (the latter two being State Government structures not specific to the Murdi Paaki COAG Trial). The Action Team, Steering Committee and Regional Group have been described in Chapter 2.

As noted above, feedback from stakeholders indicated strong support for the work of the Action Team. Feedback relating to the roles of the Steering Committee and the Regional Group was more mixed. While certainly important in building senior agency commitment to the Trial, both structures were seen as too large to respond quickly to emerging issues. The size of the Regional Group was said to be particularly unwieldy, with 27 Commonwealth and State agencies represented along with a range of NGOs and local government. Officials familiar with the Regional Group's purpose were optimistic that its recent restructure – into four sub-groups with responsibility for different portfolio areas – will facilitate more positive results in the future.

Over the four or so years that the Trial has been in operation, relatively little was said to have been achieved in improved service delivery for Indigenous people, particularly from the community perspective. Where no additional funding was available to support their involvement in the Trial,

stakeholders close to the Trial referred to the difficulties in getting non-lead agencies to demonstrate flexibility and act in whole of government fashion.

In April 2006 all member agencies of the Regional Coordination Management Group (ie all NSW Government agencies active in Murdi Paaki) signed an agreement outlining the nature of future whole of government working arrangements. The agreement sets out specific strategies for acting in coordinated fashion with other agencies. The recently signed Bilateral Agreement between the Australian and NSW Governments also incorporates principles for intergovernmental and interagency coordination. A number of government stakeholders consulted for this evaluation regarded these formal arrangements as an important step towards improved government services for Indigenous people in the Murdi Paaki region.

3.4 Interaction between the Trial and other government agencies and programs

While it is not within the scope of this evaluation to comment on the new arrangements in Indigenous affairs as such, many stakeholders provided feedback on how they thought the new arrangements had affected the COAG Trial. A number of those interviewed – including both government and community representatives – questioned the value of OIPC's involvement in the Trial. They believed that OIPC did not always adhere to processes established through the Trial, and that financial resources have been difficult to access since the introduction of the new arrangements.

Under the new arrangements, much of the funding previously managed by ATSIC has been distributed to 'mainstream' agencies, which (according to those consulted for this evaluation) do not always have the knowledge or relationships to work effectively with Indigenous communities. While ICCs – through which Commonwealth programs can be accessed through the one 'shop front' – are designed to help communities access government programs and services, it was said that the ICCs in Murdi Paaki had not yet established trusting relationships with communities in the region. According to some stakeholders, this has meant that Aboriginal organisations and individuals have found it difficult to source funding for worthwhile initiatives since the new arrangements came into effect. There appears to be a perception among some community members that the new arrangements have to date meant more bureaucracy rather than less.

Further, the Action Team and other people working in the region have needed to spend time and energy helping communities understand and work with the new arrangements. Although the principles behind the Trial and the new arrangements are complementary in some respects, the complexities associated with an entirely new system of government service provision has to some extent diverted the lead agencies (and other Australian Government departments) from their commitments under the Trial.

3.5 Local government

The involvement of local government in the Trial or Trial-related initiatives appears to have been limited to date. Although there are a small number of projects which included local government input or participation (see Section 4.5), Councils were said to regard the COAG Trial as a 'creature of the Commonwealth and the State,' and as a result do not regularly engage with Community Working Parties or the Action Team. However, community representatives did mention the Central Darling Shire Council as having taken a positive approach to working with Indigenous communities in its jurisdiction.

When asked how local government might be encouraged to take a more active role in the Trial (for example by communicating regularly with CWPs), stakeholders noted that Councils operate on very tight budgets, and that additional resources would promote more regular community liaison and contact with the Action Team.

3.6 Working relationships between government and community

Working relationships between government and community exist in two contexts: through Community Working Parties (at the local level) and through the Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly (at the regional level).

The Action Team has focussed on building relationships with CWPs and informing CWP members of their roles and responsibilities. Although there has been slow progress in some communities, there appears to be a much greater capacity among CWPs to work with government in constructive fashion than there was at the Trial's outset.

There was some stakeholder discussion of the circumstances in which government might work with *individuals and families* rather than with *communities* through CWPs. Many of those consulted emphasised the need to work through CWPs where possible (in keeping with the principles of the Trial); however, it was acknowledged that in some circumstances – such as where poor governance arrangements exist or where there is a high degree of interfamily conflict – it will be necessary to work directly with community members rather than with CWPs or other community bodies. Nevertheless, some people saw some inconsistency between the Australian Government's desire to work with individuals and families and the role of CWPs as 'gatekeepers' in the Murdi Paaki Trial.

The consultations undertaken in 2005 indicated community concerns about the level of access that CWPs enjoyed to senior officials within government. CWPs expressed their desire to work with the 'decision-makers', rather than only with comparatively junior personnel on the ground. This feedback resulted in a concerted effort by senior bureaucrats to engage with communities directly, through (for example) six-monthly Community Governance Workshops and through Steering Committee meetings in the region. More recently, CWP Chairs have been invited to attend meetings of the Steering Committee in Sydney. Both government and community representatives were positive about these developments.

3.7 Shared responsibility and SRAs

3.7.1 Signed SRAs

As noted in Chapter 2, seventeen Shared Responsibility Agreements have been signed in the Murdi Paaki region since the inception of the Trial – some before and some after the new Indigenous affairs arrangements came into effect. People consulted during the study raised a number of issues relating to SRAs – for example:

- Some of the early SRAs were regarded as dealing in considerable detail with relatively small matters.
- While the Australian Government has made it very clear that SRAs have no relevance to core government responsibilities and services in health, education and training, law enforcement, employment services and the like, there can in practice be disagreement about what matters can and cannot be appropriately included in an SRA.
- In the specific case of the Murdi Paaki COAG Trial, some stakeholders see SRAs as having been 'grafted on' to planning and decision-making that was already well advanced through the CAP process. There was some frustration over the length of time it has taken to negotiate and finalise certain SRAs and receive associated funding.

Such issues are further discussed in Section 3.5.2.

- Copies of all the SRAs signed to date were available to the evaluation team. Analysis of their content indicates that the bulk of signed SRAs are in keeping with the four principal objectives of

the COAG Trial. The regional SRAs (ie those signed by the Regional Council/Regional Assembly) are designed to improve community governance, while the local SRAs (ie those signed by individual CWPs) relate to such areas as environmental health, community/family wellbeing, the engagement of young people in community life and education, and crime prevention. A small number of SRAs do not relate directly to the objectives of the Trial but are clearly in line with community priorities (for example, mitigating the geographical isolation of Brewarrina residents through the provision of a community bus).

Of the sixteen communities in the Murdi Paaki region, six have to date been party to an SRA. The recent finalisation of CAPs and the planned development of tailored initiatives to meet the needs of individual communities may lead to additional SRAs being negotiated.

Regional SRAs

As noted above, the Murdi Paaki Regional Council and its 'successor', the Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly, are signatories to six SRAs.

- Four of these (dated 22 August 2003, 3 December 2004 (two agreements), and 1 August 2005) relate to the provision of administrative and secretarial support to the sixteen Community Working Parties. The shared responsibilities under these three SRAs are wide ranging, reflecting their regional nature. The administrative support specified in one agreement (3 December 2004) includes the provision of computers and related items, such as internet access and IT training.
- Another SRA involving the Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly (26 October 2005), the Murdi Paaki Partnership Project, provides for locally-based professional and technical support to strengthen the operation of the sixteen CWPs through the appointment of eight Community Facilitators. The Australian and NSW Governments have each agreed to contribute up to \$1 million over 2 years to support the MPPP. The MPRA's responsibilities under the agreement include providing local level organisation, guidance and monitoring of the project. Additional information on the MPPP can be found in Section 2.4.6.
- The final SRA signed at the regional level (6 April 2005) relates to the expansion of the Climate Control Project through the installation of evaporation cooling units. The Climate Control Project commenced in Weilmoringle in 2003; under the SRA with the Regional Assembly an additional seven communities in the Murdi Paaki region with community-owned housing will have cooling units installed. This will take place on a priority basis, subject to the availability of local resources. SRAs are to be negotiated with each community that receives the air cooling units, with community responsibilities tailored to the circumstance in each community.

Local SRAs

- An SRA signed on 3 December 2005 with the Ngemba CWP relates to the re-engagement of Indigenous youth. Other SRAs involving the Brewarrina community relate to establishing a Ngemba Women of Brewarrina Homemakers/Healing Program (signed 6 April 2005), establishing two garden parks (signed September 2005) and purchasing a small bus for community use (also signed September 2005).
- Three SRAs signed with the Bourke CWP are intended to improve educational outcomes for children and young people and provide opportunities in the area for re-engagement in learning (signed 3 December 2004); to establish a 'Community Assistance Patrol' to reduce opportunities for community members to become involved in illegal activity or behaviour that may have lasting adverse effects on themselves or others (signed 3 December 2004); and to make possible a cultural festival that took place in 2005 (signed 2 Nov 2005).

- The Ivanhoe CWP signed an SRA on 26 October 2005 for the installation of evaporative air-cooling units in up to twenty designated community controlled housing assets in Ivanhoe that do not currently have air-cooling, and for some additional replacement units.
- The SRA involving the Enngonia CWP (signed 6 April 2005) provides for an distance/outreach education program for students who would not otherwise be able to access education facilities.
- SRAs relating to installation and maintenance of evaporative cooling were signed on 19 April 2006 with the Collarenebri and Lightning Ridge communities.
- At the time of writing a number of other local SRAs were under development or close to being finalised.

3.7.2 Government commitments through SRAs

While DET and DEST are contractual partners to all SRAs, other Australian and NSW government departments are also committed through a number of these. For example:

- DEWR has committed to providing sixteen CDEP places for secretariat positions to support CWPs and to providing up to \$176,000 per annum to support employment in those positions (SRA signed 3 December 2004)
- FaCS/FCSIA has committed to providing up to \$334,000 to support the Murdi Paaki Partnership Project (SRA dated 26 October 2005)
- TAFE NSW is to provide relevant accredited training for the Ngemba Aboriginal Women's Homemaker/Healing Program (SRA dated 6 April 2005)
- The Yamma Festival in Bourke (SRA dated 2 November 2005) is supported either financially or in-kind by the following government agencies: DEST, OIPC, DEWR, DCITA and AGs (Commonwealth); DET, State and Regional Development, Premiers, DAA, and NSW Police (State); and the Bourke Shire Council.

It was reported that government has not delivered on certain SRA commitments. These include the purchase of a community bus and the building of an oval in individual communities; by some accounts the funding for these projects had not yet been released by the agencies responsible, despite the SRAs in question having been signed some time ago.

Stakeholder feedback on government commitments through the COAG Trial (beyond specific commitments made through SRAs) is discussed in Section 3.8.

3.7.3 Community commitments through SRAs

The community responsibilities specified in SRAs at the regional level are naturally of a different order to those set out in local-level SRAs. Community commitments in regional SRAs generally fall to the MPRA (ie CWP Chairs) or to CWPs in each location. For example, CWPs are expected to represent without favour the interests of their communities to government.

At the local level, SRAs specify both *community* and *family/individual* commitments. Community commitments are generally made at the organisational level – CWPs, local community bodies and so forth – while family/individual commitments set expectations on 'ordinary' community members to contribute in certain ways to achieving the objectives of the SRA.

In most cases there is an intuitive connection between the community/family/individual commitments in the local SRAs and the project or issue that is the subject of each SRA. However, there exist a number of commitments where no natural links between community responsibilities and the issue

being addressed seem to apply. (For example, an SRA devoted to a homemakers/healing program in Brewarrina includes the expectation that community members will ensure young people attend school.) Some stakeholders observed that it is difficult to encourage (or enforce) adherence to these kinds of commitments, since there is no clear link in the minds of community members between the project and what is expected of them. In fact, in some circumstances individuals in the community may not even be aware of these 'obligations', making the notion of 'shared responsibility' a problematic one. Section 3.7.5 (below) discusses these and related issues further.

Since this current study involved relatively little consultation on the community side (concentrating instead on the feedback of government stakeholders), it was not possible to explore in detail progress under each of the local SRAs signed in Murdi Paaki. Community representatives provided more general feedback on SRAs and the SRA process, and mostly from a region-wide perspective.

It is nonetheless worth noting that not all of the local SRAs specify performance indicators for assessing whether the SRA is working – with some of the performance indicators appearing to draw a rather tenuous connection between a given project and proposed measures of performance. This situation is consistent with government feedback that it has sometimes been difficult to monitor the extent to which community commitments are being met and the effect this has had on progress under each SRA.

3.7.4 Stakeholder feedback on SRAs

Many comments were received about the content of SRAs and the process for their development and negotiation.

Some of the SRAs signed in Murdi Paaki at the community level were considered to be overly specific or fine-grained, with government and community responsibilities set out in relation to what some stakeholders saw as relatively minor projects. Local SRAs of this kind were thought to encourage project-based, 'stop-start' funding rather than long-term investment in communities and partnerships. By contrast, the several regional SRAs signed to date – including one setting out the overall objectives of the COAG Trial and another formally recognising the legitimacy of the Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly – were considered to be appropriate and worthwhile.

Government stakeholders frequently mentioned a preference for 'comprehensive' SRAs, which would be broader in scope and which could evolve to incorporate a number of separate initiatives targeting key issues and incorporating multiple approaches to addressing them. SRAs of this kind were regarded as the likely next step for communities in the Murdi Paaki region; the more specific SRAs signed to date were considered to be part of the process leading towards more meaningful SRAs addressing multiple issues in each community. One advantage of comprehensive SRAs would be in avoiding the need for communities to commit to the same undertakings (for example, taking children to school) in multiple agreements.

In similar vein, some of those interviewed foreshadowed the development of a Regional Partnership Agreement in Murdi Paaki, which would (among other things) provide for suitable resourcing of the Regional Assembly. It is understood that to date only one Regional Partnership Agreement has been signed (in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands in Western Australia), although the Commonwealth is encouraging their development more widely. A Regional Partnership Agreement (or additional SRAs at the regional level) was regarded by some stakeholders as potentially useful in establishing a framework for interaction between government and community in a way that will be recognised as legitimate by communities and community members.

Numbers of those consulted during the study argued that since the introduction of the new Indigenous affairs arrangements there had been an inclination to over-use of SRAs, as well as misunderstandings over the circumstances in which their development is appropriate (for example, in relation to special or additional initiatives that are distinct from general service planning and delivery).

Some believed that there had been a tendency to regard the sheer number of SRAs signed as an end in itself, almost regardless of the nature or value of the initiatives concerned.

In the particular context of the Murdi Paaki COAG Trial, both government and community stakeholders claimed, a requirement to develop and sign an SRA had in some cases been imposed onto a process that was already well advanced through a Community Action Plan. As people on the ground saw it, this had tended to mean frustration and long delays in consulting and negotiating with a series of government agencies ('You can go around in circles 300 times negotiating an SRA').

Many comments were received by the study team about the most appropriate types of commitments that should be built into SRAs. There appear to be different understandings among government officials about when SRAs need to be signed and when they are not required. While some government officials believed that SRAs are to apply only to additional or extra initiatives that are not part of existing programs or services, in practice it was said to be difficult to determine exactly what constitutes government's 'core business'. There appear to be conflicting messages coming from different Commonwealth agencies about when SRAs need to be developed, and some government representatives interviewed for this evaluation admitted being confused about what the situation is under the new arrangements.

Many government representatives believed that comprehensive SRAs may represent a solution to some of the problems described above. Nevertheless, the extent to which every community in the region will tolerate another round of SRA-negotiation (on top of those SRAs signed to date *and* the development of CAPs) is open to question – although the employment of Community Facilitators to assist in negotiating and developing future SRAs should make this process easier.

3.7.5 Stakeholder feedback on 'shared responsibility'

Along with specific comments about the SRA process, there was feedback on the concept of 'shared responsibility' in relation to the Murdi Paaki COAG Trial.

Some government representatives expressed concern about a perceived conflation between 'shared responsibility' and 'mutual obligation' on the part of individuals and families. They believed that it is not appropriate to assign 'responsibilities' at the individual level in every case (especially where an SRA moves beyond issues specific to particular communities or localities, or where there is no clear relationship between the issue the SRA is designed to address and any community obligations), and that there needs to be an education process among the bureaucracy and in communities about reasonable expectations regarding SRA and other commitments. 'We need to be more subtle and broad about articulating communities' responsibilities,' said one official.

Other government representatives, on the other hand, emphasised the need for behavioural change in communities to improve outcomes in education, employment, housing and other areas. The emphasis on *individual responsibility and behavioural change* was particularly apparent in discussion with OIPC officers, whereas representatives of the lead agencies and other government representatives particularly emphasised the responsibilities of *government* in supporting community capacity and in delivering services.

Community feedback indicates concern that responsibility has been given to CWPs to identify needs and priorities without ensuring that they have the support and expertise needed to do so effectively and in representative fashion. It was observed that some community members (in particular CWP members) have dedicated an enormous amount of time and energy to the Trial process, without these efforts being properly recognised. While such problems were particularly pressing in the early stages of the Trial, they were said to remain in some communities.

3.8 Government commitments under the Trial

Clearly the major government commitment to date in relation to the Murdi Paaki COAG Trial has been on the part of the lead agencies. In general terms, both DEST and DET have delivered on their commitment to support the Trial through personnel on the ground, with the Action Team establishing solid working relationships with CWPs and other government officials. Other significant commitments made by government include the provision of secretariat support and the funding of Community Facilitators positions to support the operation of CWPs.

Some feedback gathered by the study team suggests that non-lead Australian Government agencies have generally been more active around their responsibilities under the Trial than State agencies. The reasons for this were said to be twofold: first, because Commonwealth departments enjoy a much greater degree of discretion than State agencies in the allocation of funding (particularly at the regional and local level); and second, because State Government employees have a larger role in direct service provision, and that consequently greater organisational changes are required if State agencies are to properly address the needs of Indigenous people through improved service delivery.

From the community perspective, a number of those who spoke with the study team were not convinced that government is as committed to the success of the COAG Trial as the CWPs. In some instances government agencies were said to be unresponsive to community priorities as expressed through CWPs and CAPs. Such issues were not seen to be uniform across the government sector; rather, certain agencies (and levels of government) were seen as 'repeat offenders,' having ways of operating which do not fit well with the COAG Trial or the role of CWPs. Agencies which were said to have operated outside of established protocols from time to time – for example by not consulting CWPs about issues affecting their communities, or making funding decisions unilaterally – included DoHA, DEWR, DoCS and NSW AGs. As one person put it, such agencies 'need to be reminded of how business needs to be done.'

The perception of many community members who were consulted in 2005 was that while government agencies might talk about consultation and coordination, little had actually changed at that stage in the way they went about their business. In this sense it was suggested that government was not fulfilling its part of the COAG agreement.

3.9 Community commitments under the Trial

Indigenous communities and governments clearly have very different capacities to contribute to the Trial process. Policy makers therefore need to be realistic about what can be reasonably expected of communities and community members through the Trial and through SRAs.

There are a number of ways in which communities have delivered on their commitments in relation to the Murdi Paaki COAG Trial. For example:

- Membership of Community Working Parties was refreshed at the outset of the Trial, and the role of CWPs was expanded to include a much greater range of issues relating to government services. CWPs are in many cases viewed by their communities as legitimate and representative structures for identifying community priorities and liaising with government.
- Community Action Plans setting out the needs and aspirations of communities have been developed by each of the sixteen Indigenous communities in the region.
- CWP members (and especially CWP Chairs) have dedicated much time and energy to building community cohesion and governance capacity. Their work includes preparing for and attending CWP meetings, attending regular Community Governance Workshops, and attending meetings of the Murdi Paaki Regional Council and Regional Assembly. In line with the non-incorporated status of CWPs, CWP members have not been financially rewarded for these activities.

When community consultations were undertaken in 2005, it appeared that some CWPs (although not all) had not been able to successfully communicate their role to community members and to promote the CWP as a means for community input into government service provision. We note that at the time some CWPs did not enjoy the resources and support (such as secretariat workers and IT infrastructure) that was required to do this effectively.

3.10 Changes over the course of the Trial

3.10.1 Changes in government structures and processes

One of the major changes over the course of the Trial has been the introduction in mid-2004 of the Australian Government's new arrangements in Indigenous affairs. The role of the OIPC is a relatively new one in Murdi Paaki (as elsewhere); ICCs have also been established in Bourke and (more recently) in Dubbo.

3.10.2 Changes at the community level

The work of the Trial is not confined to governments and service providers, with considerable activity on the community side. As a result of this work, governance capacity in communities has greatly improved since the Trial's commencement, and community members are now better able to articulate their needs and preferences through CWPs. CWPs are also a focus of community attention and have contributed to social cohesion in some locations. Section 3.10 provides further discussion of community skills, leadership and governance capacity.

3.11 Support among the broader Indigenous community

Community feedback indicates that community sentiments are generally in line with the underlying aims and objectives of the Trial. Although the concept of the Trial is not necessarily well understood in the broader community, the core idea of *making it simpler for communities to deal with government* is seen as important and positive by many people, even those who have little contact with CWP business. Indeed, the overall success of the 'refreshed' CWPs, which meet regularly and are regarded (by both communities and government) as legitimate and representative structures for community consultation, is a clear indication of community support for and ownership of the Trial.

Both community and government representatives expressed the view that governments must continue to support the key elements of the Trial – CWPs, CAPs, Community Facilitators and simpler working arrangements between communities and government – if community support for the Trial is to be maintained.

3.12 Community skills, leadership and governance capacity

Building community governance capacity through Community Working Parties has proved a slow process in some locations, while in other communities (particularly where local organisations were already operating with broad community support) CWPs have been better able to work effectively with government. One particular problem in this regard has been ensuring that CWP members understand the responsibilities of CWPs and their role in providing input into the provision of government services.

In addition, CWPs struggled early on to find administrative and professional support to assist them in their work. This appears to have been a major issue where the resources of local organisations (whether government agencies or Aboriginal organisations) have not been available to support CWP business. The need for secretariat and other support for CWPs has been recognised by government through the signing of SRAs providing for secretariat positions in each community and, more recently, the employment of eight Community Facilitators to work with CWPs.

Despite early problems, governance capacity has evidently improved since the Trial's commencement. Communities are said to be much better able to engage with government in positive and constructive fashion. Community participation in the process of developing CAPs has apparently been a major step in building leadership skills and partnerships at the community level. CWP members also understand their roles much better as a result of the CAP process.

Community consultations revealed that CWP members and other community members consider the present CWPs to be a significant advance on the governance arrangements in place in the past. The working parties that existed before membership was 'refreshed' through the COAG Trial were described as generally less representative and less effective – even taking into account their limited focus on housing and environmental health matters. Nor were other organisations such as Land Councils generally regarded as an effective forum for community debate and decision-making. The typical comment heard during community consultations was that the CWPs – with membership drawn from various community organisations, elders and other groups such as women and young people – are in a better position to serve the interests of the community as a whole. Many stakeholders believe that CWPs will eventually be able to fulfil their intended role, which was described as 'keeping governments accountable.'

The leadership of CWP Chairs (who also sit on the MPRA) is another significant factor affecting governance capacity in each community. Community consultations indicated that the effectiveness of Chairpersons – their ability to promote positive change for the community – is in many ways dependent on the Chair's own personality and background. Some Chairs appear to enjoy strong backing across their community, while for others such support is more difficult to come by. Being a strong leader was not the only attribute that community members desired from the CWP Chair: it was also emphasised that these representatives need to regularly communicate CWP activities to the local community, and to convey to 'ordinary' people that the CWP is acting in the interests of the whole community.

Limited secretariat support has meant that CWP Chairpersons (and sometimes other CWP members) have often needed to perform tasks that could be handled by suitable support staff – for instance, preparing documents for CWP consideration, drafting minutes, notifying members of forthcoming meetings and the like. The time pressures that these activities have placed on Chairpersons – particularly those individuals with existing full-time responsibilities – has led some to suggest that Chairs be financially compensated for their work in this regard.

CWP members in the various locations covered by the 2005 study had different perspectives on the issue of whether they had had appropriate training to assist them in their role. CWP Chairpersons may learn quite a lot about the COAG Trial and related matters through attending six-monthly Community Governance Workshops. Attendance at these Workshops also helps inform the Chairs about what other CWPs are doing. This kind of learning, however, does not necessarily flow on to all CWP members.

At the regional level, the abolition of ATSIC and the subsequent devolution of the Murdi Paaki Regional Council was seen as having resulted in a major gap in Aboriginal community input at the regional level. The Regional Council's notional successor, the MPRA, was said to have much less power and discretion under the new arrangements, and to lack proper support to operate effectively and persuasively. Both government and community stakeholders expressed concern that the Commonwealth's focus on working with communities, families and individuals would come at the expense of regional community input. The MPRA was said to have great potential as a constructive Aboriginal voice in the region, so long as resources are dedicated to supporting its work.

4 Progress to Date and Lessons Learnt

This chapter discusses progress to date under the Murdi Paaki COAG Trial and the lessons learnt, as informed by stakeholders consulted for the evaluation.

4.1 Identifying and addressing community needs

The primary structures for identifying the needs and aspirations of community through the Murdi Paaki COAG Trial are the sixteen Community Working Parties in the region. All sixteen CWPs have developed Community Action Plans identifying priorities for each community.

Community feedback indicates strong support for the CAPs, which are regarded as an accurate reflection of community sentiment. They are also regarded by some as 'living documents' which will evolve over time as community needs change. It has taken much longer than anticipated to complete all sixteen CAPs, due to a range of factors outside government's control. The nature of planning for the Trial was such that the majority of CAPs needed to be completed before comprehensive regional planning could take place to respond to community priorities. Delays in finalising CAPs held up the progress of the Trial overall, to the frustration of both community and government stakeholders. However, as noted elsewhere in this report, the development of CAPs was an important step in building community support for CWPs and the Trial generally, and also contributed to the level of cohesion and goodwill in individual communities. Apart from the lengthy period over which it took place, the CAP process was regarded in a positive light by the majority of stakeholders.

Late in 2005, the Regional Group collated all action items from completed CAPs into a regional 'matrix' that clustered these under *Two Ways Together* themes. Early in 2006, Australian and/or State Government agencies were identified as 'lead' agencies for each action item. The Regional Group was also restructured to reflect the different areas of responsibility in implementing action items. The 'matrix' will continue to guide the work of the Regional Group and its member agencies.

FCSIA recently completed an analysis of the content of the CAPs in order to generate a comprehensive regional overview of community needs. The Steering Committee and Regional Group plan to use this information to guide the development of services in a way that is in keeping with community priorities. The analysis provides a region-wide perspective on the challenges that the Steering Committee must address during the last stage of the Trial and beyond, and government representatives emphasised the importance of developing concrete initiatives to respond to the major priorities identified through FCSIA's analysis.

4.2 Ongoing community support

We have noted that the following four key regional priorities were identified at the start of the Trial, and built into a regional SRA:

- Improving the health and wellbeing of children and young people
- Improving educational attainment and school retention
- Helping families to raise healthy children
- Strengthening community and regional governance structures.

Broadly speaking, communities continue to support the objectives and priorities agreed at the start of the Trial. In particular, communities are supportive of the need to build up the capacity for community governance through CWPs and the MPRA.

The sixteen CAPs subsequently developed allow government to identify community priorities in more detail and to examine which are most pressing from a regional perspective. (Further information on the substance of CAPs is provided in Chapter 2.)

4.3 Positives and negatives from a community perspective

The 2005 consultations indicated that, among community members with a good understanding of the purpose of the COAG Trial and the mission of the CWPs, there is a good deal of optimism and support for the current arrangements. It was generally agreed that the Trial, the CWPs and Community Action Plans are good mechanisms for seeking better coordination of government services based on community priorities. CWP members in various locations pointed to specific initiatives that had received CWP endorsement and had brought about benefits for the community. They also looked forward to more such examples once the various CAPs were implemented.

Across most of the communities consulted in 2005, the message was that the operation of the CWP was contributing to the flow of information within the community and had helped to create better links and greater cooperation amongst existing organisations. The CWPs were said to have created a useful avenue for contact and communication among various groups, contributing to an increased level of community consensus. This was seen as a significant achievement. The fact that the CWPs are unincorporated and do not control funds was said to help make them acceptable to other community organisations, since they were less likely to be seen as a competitor or rival.

According to community representatives, one limitation on CWP effectiveness was the perceived unwillingness of some government agencies to embrace the new CWPs and the COAG Trial as a way of working with communities as a whole and acting on their priorities. While some government agencies or personnel seemed happy to work with the CWP arrangement and to act on CWP decisions, it was said, others remained unresponsive.

Some CWP members also believed that not enough direction had been provided to the CWPs at the commencement of the Trial to enable them to understand their roles and how decisions were to be made. This meant – at least in the eyes of some – that CWPs had struggled on their own to work within a system they didn't fully understand. In addition, an acknowledgement of the considerable contribution that CWP members (and CWP Chairs in particular) are making to the Trial was regarded as appropriate. While the issue of compensating CWP members/Chairs financially is contentious, some recognition of their work is supported. In the words of one Chair: 'We need the respect and recognition for what we're doing for our people.'

One further problem from the community perspective is the substantial delay that is said to be associated with negotiating and finalising Shared Responsibility Agreements. While CWPs in some cases have agreed relatively quickly to the conditions set out in an SRA, it has taken some months to get government sign-off on the release of associated funds. This is a source of continuing frustration for CWP members, with a number of negotiated SRAs still unsigned.

4.4 Positives and negatives from a government perspective

According to many stakeholders, the lead agency arrangements in the Murdi Paaki COAG Trial have to date worked remarkably well. The contribution of the Action Team to the Trial was frequently mentioned as contributing to what has been achieved to date. In addition, the commitment of senior officials in both lead agencies has added impetus to the Trial process.

Outside of the lead agencies, there appears to have been a variable degree of response to community needs and concerns identified through CWPs and CAPs. Many departments were said to have found it difficult to adopt the whole of government approach required in addressing Indigenous disadvantage. Most of those interviewed ascribed such difficulties to organisational and cultural

barriers within bureaucracy, rather than anything directly associated with the Murdi Paaki COAG Trial. Nevertheless, stakeholders emphasised that non-lead agencies must learn to work with CWPs if service delivery and government/community relations are to improve.

Stakeholders made mention of several agencies when asked which parts of government had embraced the Trial and which might improve. Positive comments were received about DEST, DEWR and FaCS/FCSIA (at Commonwealth level) and DET, DoCS and DAA (at State level). Meanwhile, there have reportedly been problems achieving the required level of engagement from DoHA (on the Commonwealth side) and Police, AGs and State and Regional Development (on the State side).

The establishment of OIPC raised some concerns among those working on the ground in Murdi Paaki, and uncertainty over the respective roles of DEST and OIPC/ICCs in the Trial has reportedly created some difficulties in coordinating Commonwealth activity. By the time the new Indigenous affairs arrangements came into effect, the lead agencies in Murdi Paaki had made considerable progress in engaging with communities and in establishing structures for interagency coordination – particularly when compared with other Trial sites. As OIPC sought to contribute to various sites across the country, it no doubt encountered different needs from one Trial site to another. In Murdi Paaki, it was less obvious how OIPC could best make a positive contribution to the Trial.

Government stakeholders also raised concerns over what appeared to be unilateral funding decisions in relation to some communities and funding programs on the part of OIPC. It will be important in the future to clarify the respective roles of the lead agencies and OIPC and to build on progress made to date in building the capacity of communities to work with government.

4.5 Trial-related initiatives

The key elements of the Murdi Paaki COAG Trial are described in detail in Chapter 2, and feedback about these is provided throughout this report. Initiatives that have arisen through the signing of Shared Responsibility Agreements are described in Section 3.5. However, there are a number of smaller Trial-related initiatives that are not described elsewhere.

- The Rivertowns Project is an initiative of the NSW Premier's Department, and has been undertaken through local government. The Project involves the work of community facilitators in four communities in the Rivertowns area; it was expanded with State and Commonwealth funding to become the Murdi Paaki Partnership Project.
- Activities under the Drug Education Strategy in schools have used the CWP model to involve communities in the education process. DET encouraged the involvement of CWPs to demonstrate to other agencies how the new community structures can be coordinated with existing government programs.
- DEST has recently announced funding under the National Accelerated Literacy Program for services in the Bourke region.

Community representatives consulted in 2005 gave a number of concrete examples of other initiatives that have been supported or facilitated by CWPs and have produced benefits for the local community. These included:

- improved community relationships with local schools
- arranging prompt response to housing maintenance needs
- development of a local park
- a program to encourage secondary schools students to participate in part-time employment

- establishment of a youth group
- better communication between community leaders and Police, enabling faster Police response times to matters brought to their attention
- successful conduct of a Well Persons' Health Check
- an eight-day cultural festival.

Stakeholders were confident that there would be many more community benefits and improvements once CAPs and SRAs are fully established and implemented.

4.6 New ways of doing business

The Murdi Paaki COAG Trial has in various ways contributed to new and positive ways of doing business, on the part of both governments and community.

- Community Working Parties are now the primary mechanism for identifying community priorities and concerns. This is a significant advance on previous arrangements, under which different community organisations, families and individuals would deal with government separately.
- CWPs and the MPRA are unincorporated bodies, do not employ staff and do not manage funds. Both community representatives and government officials regard such arrangements as appropriate and as contributing to the effective operation of these bodies.
- The Action Team now constitutes a visible 'face of government', meaning that (in theory) communities/CWPs need only deal with one set of government officials instead of negotiating separately with each and every government agency. While the capacity of governments to work in coordinated fashion is still being built, this represents an important step towards simplifying relationships between communities and the government sector.

4.7 Government coordination and service delivery

There was mixed feedback from stakeholders about the extent to which government programs and services are being delivered in more coordinated fashion as a result of the Trial. Community representatives felt that there had been little improvement in government services on the ground, although examples of good outcomes were mentioned in relation to some government programs. Existing problems with coordination and service delivery were said to stem from the unwillingness of some government agencies to engage meaningfully with CWPs.

People consulted in various communities in 2005 referred to the apparent lack of coordination between or even within government agencies, and gave some examples of decisions that seemed arbitrary and did not reflect any local community input. It was said that grants of funds, for example, might be made to communities in pursuit of agency programs or priorities of one kind or another, but without reflecting local needs or opportunities as people in the community saw them. In smaller communities it appeared that shortcomings in agency co-ordination has tended to lead to an under-supply of services; in larger centres there was in some situations a duplication of services or functions resulting from a lack of effective inter-agency co-operation.

Responding to community doubts about the extent of change under the Trial, some government representatives observed that it has been necessary to await the completion of Community Action Plans in all sixteen communities before a comprehensive strategy for addressing community priorities could be implemented at the regional level. The relatively slow progress on CAPs in some communities has therefore hampered government's ability to respond quickly to issues identified in communities where CAPs have been in place for some time.

Government officials interviewed for this evaluation believed that a number of agencies have embraced the principles of the Trial, while for others bringing about changes in service delivery and in departmental approaches to working with communities will take further work. By way of generalisation it was said that human service agencies had to date done better in this regard than economic and natural resource agencies. That said, stakeholder feedback indicates that continuing cultural change at virtually all levels of the bureaucracy was required if a whole-of-government approach was to be sustained.

At the Commonwealth level, a number of people saw the new arrangements in Indigenous affairs as adding another layer of complexity to the work of the Murdi Paaki Trial. OIPC's involvement in the Trial tends to be seen by community representatives at this stage as bringing additional bureaucracy without any obvious benefits in improved coordination and service delivery.

4.8 Evidence of better outcomes and working arrangements

Among stakeholders familiar with the COAG Trials elsewhere in Australia, Murdi Paaki is regarded as the most advanced Trial site in terms of community capacity and governance. Community members also regard CWP as a significant advance on previous arrangements, and most CWPs appear to have the support of their respective communities.

From the government perspective, improved structures for government coordination and communication have been put in place (for example, the Action Team and the Murdi Paaki Steering Committee), although the extent to which this has translated into better outcomes for Indigenous communities and individuals is at this stage quite limited. Stakeholders argued that the Trial is a long-term initiative and that better outcomes will eventually flow on from better inter-agency coordination and improved community governance.

4.9 Unintended consequences

One feature of the Murdi Paaki COAG Trial is the sheer size of the Trial site. While there have been some difficulties in coordinating government activity across all communities in the region, stakeholders commended COAG and the lead agencies for their willingness to implement changes across the region. One benefit of engaging community representatives at regional level (notably through the Regional Council and the Regional Assembly) was said to be the strong sense of Aboriginal community identity across the region. However, a few government stakeholders expressed reservations about the large size of the Trial site and the implications this has for engaging with individual communities in tailored fashion. Delays associated with awaiting the completion of CAPs in every community before a comprehensive regional strategy could be implemented was cited as one disadvantage of instituting a 'Trial' across a region with a large number of communities.

As noted elsewhere in this report, there have been some tensions and misunderstandings in both government and communities since the new arrangements in Indigenous affairs came into being. These problems could be regarded as an unintended consequence of the interface between two initiatives – one by COAG and one by the Australian Government – designed to improve services for Aboriginal people. As at other Trial sites, there is a need to clarify the ways in which the lead agencies and OIPC can best contribute to better outcomes for Indigenous people and communities.

4.10 Achieving agreed objectives and priorities

Stakeholders consistently emphasised that the challenges that the Trial is designed to address are complex and long-term, and that the commitments of community and government to achieving the Trial's objectives need to be sustained. Substantially improving outcomes in key areas like education and employment is likely to take decades rather than years. A five-year 'Trial', then, can be expected to lay the groundwork for positive change, rather than bring about major improvements on the ground.

While working towards the Trial's objectives is clearly a long-term project, substantial progress has been made in enhancing the capacity of both governments and communities to work with each other. Structures to promote coordination between government agencies working in Murdi Paaki have been established, as well as lines of communication between key personnel. Further, the governance capacity of communities has improved, with communities better able to articulate their priorities to government in constructive fashion. These developments are likely to contribute significantly to achieving the objectives and priorities articulated at the Trial's commencement.

Before this can take place, however, stakeholders agreed that government and community must develop and implement concrete initiatives to address the priorities identified in Community Action Plans. While some such initiatives are already in place – for instance, in the area of education – the Trial is yet to result in substantial action in important areas like economic development, domestic violence or child health. If satisfactory progress towards the objectives of the Trial is to be made, government must build on what has been achieved to date (eg in community governance and ground-level working relationships) through additional programs and services that can make a tangible impact at community level.

5 Next Steps

5.1 Achievements to date

Stakeholders consulted for this evaluation emphasised that addressing the needs of Indigenous communities in Murdi Paaki (as elsewhere) requires long-term investment on government's part and sustained commitment from key individuals in communities. On the whole, stakeholders believed that substantial achievements have been made under the Trial, particularly in enhancing governance capacity among communities. Both government and community representatives were optimistic that these will eventually translate into substantial improvements in individual and community outcomes.

Nevertheless, it was recognised that progress under the Murdi Paaki COAG Trial has not kept pace with community expectations. Long delays while communities developed their CAPs, along with lengthy negotiations over SRAs, have limited the amount that could be achieved in the first two to three years of the Trial.

The Murdi Paaki COAG Trial is in some senses reaching its final stage, with CWP arrangements firmly in place and CAPs completed in all sixteen communities in the region. Accordingly, there was optimism on the part of those consulted that the Trial's last phase will yield substantial benefits for communities so long as government can respond appropriately and in coordinated fashion to community needs. In particular, the need to develop practical ideas to enhance employment opportunities and economic development (through education and training as well as by other means) was said to be a key priority over the coming months.

5.2 Likely barriers to progress

- To date some non-lead agencies have struggled to sufficiently respond to the needs and priorities identified by communities through CWPs and Community Action Plans. The recent restructure of the Murdi Paaki Regional Group is intended to generate a better response in key areas across the region. However, a comprehensive implementation plan (based on the CAPs) is required to assist governments in determining how best to respond to community priorities and how to ensure the involvement of non-lead agencies.
- Communities have identified a lack of resources as a barrier to achieving better working relationships with government. In particular, Community Working Parties and the Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly require administrative and professional support to operate effectively. While the lead agencies have taken steps to make such support available – most recently through the employment of eight Community Facilitators across Murdi Paaki – there is a need for ongoing and sustained investment in governance capacity at both community and regional levels. Although the issue of rewarding CWP Chairpersons and other members financially is a contentious one, some gesture acknowledging their contributions appears to be appropriate. At the very least, government and community organisations need to support employees who are regularly involved in CWP business (whether as full CWP members or attending CWP meetings on behalf of their organisation).
- At this stage there is limited capacity at many levels of bureaucracy to work in whole-of-government fashion to improve services for Indigenous people and communities. While some of these barriers are cultural or organisational, there is a need to properly resource *non-lead agencies* to respond adequately to their obligations under the COAG Trial and to promote better communication within and between agencies. As well, those responsible for the Trial might take note of the considerable amount of research and activity that has taken place in other contexts on the issue of achieving greater government coordination.

- There appear to have been inconsistent messages from senior Commonwealth officials about the circumstances in which Shared Responsibility Agreements are appropriate and desirable. Those working on the ground remain uncertain about the practical application of Australian Government policy on the difference between 'core' and additional government services, and how these relate to SRAs. Discussion should occur at high level with the purpose of developing and disseminating a detailed policy on where SRAs should be developed, taking into account regional and local differences.

5.3 Continuation of the Trial

Both DEST and DET have made substantial commitments to the COAG Trial in Murdi Paaki, and have developed workable mechanisms for promoting government coordination outside the lead agencies. The Action Team has established strong and valuable relationships at the community level, and have worked with CWP's in the development of SRAs and CAPs. As well, communities generally support the objectives of the Trial and the principles underlying it. For these reasons, we believe the Trial should continue in its present form at least until it lapses in 2007.

Beyond 2007, there is at present some stakeholder uncertainty concerning the likely arrangements for government involvement and community input. The Trial is an initiative of the Council of Australian Governments, and any decisions about its continuation will need to be agreed at a future meeting of COAG. While this situation complicates long-term planning, the Murdi Paaki Steering Committee should consider as a matter of priority what future arrangements are preferable and will contribute best to the long-term wellbeing of Indigenous communities in the region.

More specifically, the Steering Committee should consider the roles of the two lead agencies in Murdi Paaki and how these agencies might work collaboratively with the OIPC and ICCs beyond the Trial period. When assessing future options in Murdi Paaki, the comparative success of the current community governance arrangements and the commitments made by governments and community members to the Trial to date should be emphasised.

While government officials are very much in agreement over the need to work with existing community structures and (where possible) in the context of existing relationships, this has not necessarily been communicated effectively to CWP's and community members thus far. Government should communicate to communities (through the MPRA and CWP's) its commitment to continuing and consolidating the governance arrangements built over the course of the Trial.

5.4 Evaluation and monitoring

5.4.1 Issues affecting evaluation

A number of key elements or features of the Murdi Paaki Trial are expected to be ready for evaluation in 2007-8. In particular, community governance capacity, the extent of government coordination, the nature of any improvements in service delivery, and the replicability and sustainability of the Trial arrangements are areas likely to yield meaningful evaluation insights.

However, there may be less merit in attempting to evaluate the extent to which tangible improvements have been made in outcomes for Indigenous people in areas such as education, employment and health. While some baseline data exists for comparative purposes at the *regional* level, it is said to be equally important to examine changes at the *community* level – for which reliable and current data may be difficult to generate. The sixteen communities in the Murdi Paaki region are quite diverse – in population, services available, levels of employment, community engagement with CWP's, relationships among community members and so on. Each community has had different and distinctive experiences in relation to the Trial and in its relations with government, making region-wide assessment of indicator data problematic in the evaluation context.

5.4.2 Baseline data and performance monitoring

As reported in Section 2.2, some regional baseline data do exist that could be compared with information available to a subsequent evaluation. This data (mainly from 2002-3) has been collated by DAA and the lead agencies, and is presented in the first *Murdi Paaki Indicators Report* produced in October 2005 for the first *Two Ways Together Indicators Report*. Indicator data is available in the areas of health, education, economic development, justice, families and young people, culture and heritage, and housing and infrastructure. Additional health-related data are available in a report on *Health in the Murdi Paaki Region* produced by the Far West Area Health Service (this report was not available to the evaluation team). Since these reports are the first of their kind (presenting data from the time of the Trial's inception or before), there are no regular performance monitoring reports relating to outcomes. However, agencies involved in the Trial report regularly to the Steering Committee and Regional Group on process-based issues where appropriate.

While these reports contain some useful baseline outcome data against which the progress of the Trial in the future might be assessed, additional data that relate directly to the four principal objectives of the Trial would allow for more accurate measurement of the Trial's success. Such data would therefore relate to:

- the health and wellbeing of young people
- educational attainment and school retention
- family stability and healthy environments for young people
- community and regional governance.

Some such information – particularly data relating educational attainment – are available in the *Murdi Paaki Indicators Report*. However, additional measures might usefully be drawn from the Productivity Commission/COAG indicators for monitoring Indigenous disadvantage, which includes, *inter alia*, the following broad areas, along with specific indicators within each area:

- early child development and growth (eg infant mortality, birthweight)
- early school engagement and performance (eg preschool and school attendance)
- positive childhood and transition to adulthood (eg literacy and numeracy at Years 3,5,7 and 9, participation in organised sport, arts or community group activities, transition from school to work)
- substance use and misuse (eg alcohol-related crime and hospital statistics)
- functional and resilient families and communities (eg children on long term care and protection orders, access to the nearest health professional, proportion of Indigenous people with access to their traditional lands)
- effective environmental health systems. (eg rates of diseases associated with poor environmental health, access to clean water and functional sewerage, overcrowding in housing).

It is of course more difficult to objectively measure levels of *community governance*. Nevertheless, the Murdi Paaki Steering Committee and the Data Working Group might consider developing indicators of community governance and community cohesion (perhaps through a regular survey of CWP members). This would allow for the monitoring of improvements in governance levels over time, as well as making differences across the Murdi Paaki region and in individual communities more apparent.

5.4.3 Cost effectiveness

In the course of consultations stakeholders were asked about the availability of information to determine whether the Trial has been cost-effective. While it is beyond the scope of this evaluation to examine in detail the economic costs and benefits of the Trial – even where these can be reliably measured – stakeholder feedback suggests that little data exists to quantify the costs and benefits of the Trial, beyond government expenditure directly associated with the Trial. Many of the benefits of the Trial (including the costs of *not* addressing Indigenous disadvantage) were said to be intangible and not amenable to economic assessment. Such benefits include greater community cohesion, greater participation in healthy community activities, improved inter-agency coordination and communication, increased awareness of issues affecting Indigenous people, and greater commitment of senior government officials to addressing those issues.

6 References

A number of documents and reports were used in the preparation of this report. They include:

- *Murdi Paaki Strategic Plan*
- Outcomes of Community Working Party Governance Workshops
- Matrix of regional priorities, based on Community Action Plans
- Monitoring and Evaluation Framework for the Murdi Paaki COAG Trial
- Shared Responsibility Agreements signed in the Murdi Paaki region
- Minutes of meetings of the Murdi Paaki Steering Committee
- Minutes of meetings of the Murdi Paaki Regional Group
- A selection of endorsed Community Action Plans
- *Murdi Paaki Indicators Report*
- Bilateral Agreement between the Commonwealth of Australia and the State of New South Wales – *Overarching Agreement on Aboriginal Affairs*
- *Community Governance in the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Murdi Paaki COAG Trial* – Report by Urbis Keys Young, 2005
- *National Framework of Principles for Delivering Services to Indigenous Australians*
- *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage – Key Indicators 2003* – Report by the Productivity Commission on behalf of the Council of Australian Governments
- A range of correspondence and memoranda relating to the Murdi Paaki COAG Trial.