

Murdi Paaki Regional Council

The Committee Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islander Affairs
Parliament House
CANBERRA, ACT, 2600

Dear Sir,

SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO CAPACITY BUILDING IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Introduction

This submission is about improving the delivery of services by government and non-government agencies to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Murdi Paaki region of New South Wales. It involves a new way of doing business between Government as the prime funder and provider of services, either directly or through non-government organisations, and Indigenous communities. Its management focus is on effective regional governance as a fundamental support mechanism for individuals, families and communities. The submission summarises the outcomes of an extensive process of discussion, consultation and negotiation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the Murdi Paaki region. That process is on-going as the council moves to implement its proposals with the cooperation and support of government and responsive to new government policies.

While the proposals outlined are specific to the circumstances of the Murdi Paaki region, the process is offered as a case study to assist the committee in examining its terms of reference. The submission describes how the Murdi Paaki Regional Council has approached the complex interaction between effective governance arrangements, capacity building and the efficient and effective management of services.

This covering letter provides the background to the Murdi Paaki Regional Council's proposals, indicates some of the principles behind their development, and relates them to the terms of reference for the committee's inquiry which require it to report on strategies to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people better manage the delivery of services within their communities. In particular, the committee will consider building individual, community, organisational and government agency capacity. The council's summary position is that management of service delivery requires, as a starting point, empowerment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at the community level. The Murdi Paaki proposal seeks to achieve this in a particular way.

The Murdi Paaki Region

The Murdi Paaki Regional Council is the peak representative Indigenous body in the North Western and Far West sectors of New South Wales. It is incorporated under the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Act 1989*. Its 11 members are democratically elected by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons who vote throughout the region in two wards.

The Region has a population of 7300 (at the 1996 census) or 14% of the total population of the area. It incorporates eight local government areas -- Coonamble, Walgett, Brewarrina, Bourke, Central Darling, Broken Hill, Cobar, and Wentworth Shires.

Since its inception under the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Act 1989* as the Wangukumara Regional Council Far West ATSIC Regional Council, the council has sought to develop regional capacity to plan, advocate, and negotiate equitable resources for communities and manage or guide developments throughout the region.

Building Capacity

The focus of the Council's proposals is building legislative, administrative, financial and community capacity. The proposals embody community participation in all decision-making.

The council believes that a structure of regional governance will support communities, individuals and families and should be seen as a valid instrument of assistance in community development in which the participants make the decisions. Any increase in capacity for the Murdi Paaki Regional Council is effectively additional capacity for communities.

The proposals also incorporate integrated service delivery arrangements under community control and influence. We believe a strong and facilitating regional interface between communities and government agencies is fundamental to a direct negotiating process which sees its ultimate outcome in the way services are delivered to communities and community well-being.

The council sees its scheme of governance as a practical application of established principles of capacity building, various models of which the council examined in the process of developing the structure with communities.

We also see our proposals as a structured response to current policies in Indigenous affairs which emphasise capacity building in all its forms. The overall aim is to meet the aspirations and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Murdi Paaki region to achieve what we have described as the "triple bottom line" – community, economic, and environmental outcomes.

Community working parties

Our proposals are built on the foundations of community working parties which have been established as a service delivery framework. We see the structure being translated into a Regional Authority or similar institution, along similar lines to the Torres Strait Regional Authority which grew out of a regional council under the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Act 1989*. The reason for this is that we believe regional institutions are better able to assist communities, individuals and families if they have greater powers of negotiation, coordination and agreement making which are recognised by all spheres of government.

The proposals we put forward do not involve sudden or drastic change. The Council believes that progress can best be achieved in an evolutionary way, building on existing strengths and developing more substantive change over time and in full consultation with all stakeholders.

Thus the initial focus of our proposals is on bringing communities together into a regional forum. Experience with the operation of a regional forum, or assembly, will involve communities in charting their own pathway towards the creation of a regional authority with direct community involvement in its decision-making. The council wishes to retain its links with ATSIC as a national representative and funding agency, and for future regional governance arrangements to continue to be provided for within the ATSIC Act.

It does not involve throwing out the old and creating something new. It is about recognising what we already have and building on it.

Empowering communities

Regardless of structure, which may vary between regions, capacity building is about shifting decision-making powers from centralised control out to where the people live. It seeks to ensure that agencies delivering services operate within a representative and accountable regional framework, rather than creating independent and separate points of negotiation based on competing agendas and competition between agencies and where initiative resides with the agencies concerned.

The starting point is what the people themselves determine is necessary to improve their livelihoods and well-being. It is about re-designing the rules of the game. It impacts on how policies are made, programs designed, and services delivered.

The proper coordination and integration of services to meet our needs on terms decided by and accountable to the people is integral to improving the effectiveness of service delivery, whether those services are provided by government or non-government agencies.

A key component of this approach is recognition of the strengths of communities. While meeting needs and overcoming disadvantage are important in providing services, communities have their own family, community and leadership networks, and assets deriving from their historical experience. Dispossession and dispersal have

strengthened the resolve of communities to maintain their Indigenous identities and build on their survival capacities.

Supporting community development

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Murdi Paaki region have a strong sense of community identity, whether they live in towns with a majority of Indigenous people or as communities within larger rural centres. Taking control of their lives is of paramount importance. Within their own community economies, they have taken a range of initiatives to promote greater participation in commercial enterprise. Of particular significance has been the way they have utilised Community Employment Development Projects.

In taking steps to achieve a more effective delivery of services and better outcomes in social, economic and community development, the council feels that it can do better with the same allocation of funds and can expand services by targeting development and priorities that have been determined by communities.

The council is determined to provide a real and sustainable opportunity for Aboriginal communities to participate in community development.

Community development will ultimately have many dimensions and take many forms as communities respond to government policy initiatives and seek to inform the development of those policies.

Active and informed participation by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are fundamental to raising the administrative and decision-making capacity of communities, organisations and individuals. A regional framework will facilitate community development.

Achieving effective and efficient service delivery requires, among other things, greater responsiveness by Government agencies to the community's vision, needs and aspirations. An enhanced Murdi Paaki Regional Council would be in a better position to lead discussion within Murdi Paaki communities and negotiate outcomes with government agencies.

Community development also requires a more appropriate governance system, a capacity to control the way services are delivered, and an authority to engage in partnerships and funding arrangements with Commonwealth, State and local government in a more participatory way.

Strengthening decision-making

The position of the Murdi Paaki Regional Council is that the powers of regional councils established under the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Act need to be strengthened. In this way, the ATSIC Act with its constituent regional councils can provide an effective and flexible framework that recognises and responds to the special circumstances of our people. We have chosen to work within the

ATSIC Act because it is what we know. Other communities may choose different directions.

Experience has shown that within the framework of the ATSIC Act, Commonwealth, State and local government can work together through a process of service agreements, pooled funding and integration of programs and services. Experience has shown that when Aboriginal people are put in control, the outcomes are improved.

Conclusion

There is, of course, no “one size fits all.” Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies are so diverse that flexibility is required to ensure that structures are appropriate to the special circumstances of individual communities and regions.

A significant element in the process is the responsiveness of service providers to the aspirations and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Any process that genuinely facilitates that process represents a net gain for both government and Indigenous people.

Indigenous communities want greater involvement in and control over service planning and delivery. Achieving it requires a genuine partnership between Government and Indigenous people, whether on a regional, community, or individual and family basis. Support mechanisms need to reflect their own aspirations and networks.

Because capacity building is multi-dimensional, it is not without its costs. The aim of Government and Indigenous communities together should be to ensure the effectiveness of such investment through measurable improvements in community well-being. When communities are in control of the process, there is a greater chance of achieving shared outcomes. Regional structures give voice to community decision-making. Strengthening regional governance is a direct contribution to capacity building.

We offer the outcome of our consultations as one way of achieving the aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to improve their situation.

I look forward to having the opportunity to discuss our submission with you.

Yours Sincerely,

Sam Jeffries
Chairman.

ATTACHMENT: “WORKING WITH GOVERNMENT”: A submission by the Murdi Paaki Regional Council to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs: Capacity Building for Indigenous Communities.