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Jacqueline Dewar
The Committee Secretary
House of Representatives
Standing Committee on
Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Affairs
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Jacqueline

Re: *Capacity Building in Indigenous Communities*

With reference to our previous conversations and correspondence dated 30th October 2002 I would like to take this opportunity to answer the questions raised in the terms of reference.

1. What do you think makes a well-run community?

This is a complex question which will no doubt vary from community to community. In general I would say that good leadership, strong management, financial accountability and appropriate long term strategic planning is of utmost importance.

Secondly it is extremely important to establish the goals of the people and the outcomes required by them and the agencies supporting the community so as to achieve maximum benefits.

A community that has identified their needs and wants will progress only if the funding agencies offer support and assistance in a flexible but appropriate manner.

2. How important is it for communities to have good leaders, what makes a good community leader?

This is extremely important. If the community has no leaders there will be extreme difficulties in progressing the community. At times leaders are reluctant to come forth due to the perception that

being a leader or involved in management is an extremely difficult task and they will become a target in these positions of leadership.

Each community will have their own individual concepts of what a good leader is. Attributes, that may be required when identifying a leader, include;

- Respect from the community both as a whole and on an individual basis.
- Ability to converse with community members to determine their needs and wants.
- A person who leads by example and doesn't do one thing and say another.
- Ability to make hard decisions about all members of the community as well as his/her own family.
- Someone who is willing to learn.
- Ability to utilise the skills of others to achieve the desired outcomes.
- Good motivational and negotiation skills.
- Ability to convince mainstream and government of the needs of the community and where support is needed most.

Many other attributes will make up that individual leader which will be different depending upon the environment they live in and their history.

3. How can communities make themselves stronger?

The best way is to unite with others that have common interests or similar goals. By working together for the purpose of improving their situation and goals they can be jointly working towards the same issue.

This will be an extremely difficult process particularly when these communities have existed in a 'survival' mode over many generations.

The paternalistic and bureaucratic systems that they have been exposed to for the past 30 years and even longer (200 years) has not been conducive to advancement but that of survival and conflict.

Self determination would be the most appropriate strategy but in many cases this has not happened. This could be seen as being caused by religious and bureaucratic bungling and/or inappropriate strategies that have only looked at short-term objectives.

In this day and age education and training to keep up with mainstream would also be a priority for increasing communities strength.

Also the ability to develop opportunities appropriate for the particular community will also assist in strengthening the community.

4. What can governments do to help more community councils and organisations run better.

This is an area that requires extensive redevelopment.

It is of my opinion that a whole of government approach to specific communities is required.

The ability for those government agencies to work together as their charter states and not as it is in reality. – They do not talk to one another.

Designing flexible funding guidelines and outcomes that are achievable for all parties involve.

Flexible funding that is geared specifically to a community and not a program area would also improve outcomes and value for money.

Support for projects the community wants and not what is the flavour of the month in the political arenas.

Assistance from government does not only mean injecting the dollar but can be in resources and follow up on behalf of the community including inter-agency negotiation.

I believe that government agencies staff involved in Indigenous programs and services should, as part of their employment contract, spend a large percentage of their time in community organisations so that they can experience first hand the issues they are faced with on the ground.

In particular the people who develop policy and programs etc, I believe, have little or no idea of the real issues faced by communities and management endeavoring to deliver services and programs. Time out with the masses will create people with better knowledge of the problems and issues and therefore the development of more appropriate flexible programs.

5. What skills do people and organisations need for a good community?

A diverse skills base is required to achieve a safe, happy and productive community. Leadership is of high priority, but numerous types of skills are required to achieve the best results for the people.

These include;

- People skills
- Mediation and negotiation
- Management and supervisory
- Financial and planning
- A grasp of cultural and mainstream issues
- Lateral thinking management team
- Ability to make government think about new ways of delivering programs and services
- Honesty and integrity
- And many others

6. How well do government departments work with communities, what more do they need to do?

My initial answer to this is that they work very poorly with communities but I speak only of my experience with the Lake Tyers Aboriginal Trust and other similar community organisations in the State of Victoria. After five years in this industry I believe that a lot of the problem issues within communities are complicated by the inability of government to deliver relevant programs and services in a format that is appropriate for the particular community.

A prime example is ATSIC. The staff turnover inconsistency with management decisions and the lack of lateral thinkers impede the process of improving communities.

A longer term approach is needed i.e. five, ten and twenty year plans that do not change mid-stream are needed to successfully develop these communities.

In particular communities such as Lake Tyers Aboriginal Trust who was originally established some two hundred years ago as a Mission, need individual program funding geared to its uniqueness.

The difficulties for this community is changing from a Mission mentality to the new era of capacity building and economic development.

Unless serious changes are made to the current system I envisage things getting worse before they get better.

Government needs to look at individual communities and gear assistance packages to suit their needs and objectives.

This information has been supplied to identify briefly some of the issues from the trenches so to speak because it is becoming more and more difficult to achieve the outcomes stipulated by the bureaucratic system, and improve the plight of Indigenous people.

I hope this information meets your requirements and look forward to possibly discussion these issues at length with the Committee.

It is hoped that out of this parliamentary enquiry positives are actually implemented.

Yours faithfully

Tony Lotton
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Training Co-Ordinator
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