

CAPACITY BUILDING
INQUIRY
Submission No. 61

**THE NATIONAL COALITION OF ABORIGINAL
and TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER SOCIAL
WORKERS ASSOCIATION INC**

&

**AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL
WORKERS**

**Submission to the House of Representatives
Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres
Strait Islander Affairs**

**Inquiry into Capacity Building in Indigenous
Communities**

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INTRODUCTION

Social Work is the profession committed to the pursuit of social justice, to the enhancement of the quality of life and the development of the full potential of each individual, group and community in society. Social workers pursue these goals by working to address the barriers, inequalities and injustices that exist in society and by active involvement in situations of distress and crisis for individuals and families.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have demonstrated great strength and resilience, surviving decades of government policy and injustices that have led to dispossession and social, economic and cultural disadvantage. Their survival can be attributed to their traditional customs and importance of family and community ties that they have continued despite the destabilisation that colonisation posed.

Addressing the injustices and inequalities experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is a very important aspect of the work that Social Workers undertake and needs to be progressed much further. Social workers work well within a collaborative and holistic, community development framework using skills that could assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the development of strong, healthy communities. Both the National Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Workers Association (NCATSISWA) and the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) are committed to promoting the profession of social work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities; advocating on behalf of these individuals, groups and communities with government and non-government organisations and to working towards reconciliation.

We therefore offer this joint submission in which we address the terms of reference in accordance with our shared practice experiences and professional knowledge. In addressing part A, we offer a particular focus on the development of healthy communities, the importance of community ownership and the role of social workers in facilitating these developments. We provide a partnership and community empowerment model as an example of how agencies, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and the wider Australian population and governments can work together and in partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, to build their capacity for improved social and economic outcomes. In addressing part B and C, we further discuss the importance of partnerships offering the NCATSISWA and the AASW as an example. We encourage partnerships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and external organisations, offering suggestions for building cultural competence in government agencies that will enhance the cultural security of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. We also present possible pathways for building financial capacity as well as knowledge and skills in Indigenous organisations.

BUILDING CAPACITY IN COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Over the last century, Government policy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians was based on protectionism, assimilation, integration and finally self-determination, which supported the idea that these groups should have the right to determine and control their own destiny. The concept of self-determination, while still binding in current social policy, has yet to be implemented in a way that improves social, political and economic outcomes for these groups. However, as noted by Fred Chaney, Co - Chair of Reconciliation Australia, compelling evidence has emerged in the last decade both in Australia and overseas that 'sustained and measurable improvements in the social and economic well being of Indigenous people only occurs when the real decision making power is vested in their communities, when they build effective governing institutions, and when the decision making processes of those institutions reflect the cultural values and beliefs of the people (Chaney, 2002).'

The NCATSISWA and AASW maintain that one of the reasons for lack of sustained improvements in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is a lack of ownership of many developmental initiatives undertaken within these communities. Lack of ownership combined with lack of appropriate skills, knowledge and experience in relation to what is being asked of them, how these issues can be addressed successfully and the absence of necessary support systems within the community mean that most projects are doomed to fail. In addition, if agencies and funding bodies are working in isolation from each other then each effort and contribution becomes undone through the inability of the target community to undertake the various reporting requirements and to hold onto the gains.

But foremost, we are aware that initiatives are often implemented on the assumption that a 'healthy community' exists even though the concept of community could be an illusion. Remote communities, especially the previously state/church run reserve or mission communities have a history of different groups i.e. tribes and language groups being placed in the same areas which caused great difficulty in itself and heightened disenfranchisement from decision making and control over their daily lives. The effects of this destructive and imbedded socialisation process for over 6-7 generations are still experienced in present day communities. While current Government focus is on providing health services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, recent research from Canadian Indigenous communities indicates that 'healthy communities' are at least of equal importance and should be the foundation for any program development or service delivery. The NCATSISWA and the AASW consider that building the social and cultural capital of communities is integral to the success of any service delivery and/or political and economic development. All service delivery strategies will fail unless community-based services are

preceded by a program of community development that seeks to recognize existing strengths and rebuild social and cultural systems and structures, where necessary, within a whole of community approach.

Building social and cultural capital within communities can be achieved within a community development framework that occurs within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural traditions. Such development would legitimate and strengthen Indigenous culture, through an effective empowerment strategy, enabling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to have genuine control over their own community and their own destiny. The strategy should encourage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to set the agenda for development and have complete control over processes and structures (Ife, 1997).

A well functioning community should provide its members with:

- Individual and family safety and well being,
- Equitable access to resources, and
- Community participation and the right to participate as equals in decision making, planning and implementation based on the knowledge of all available options. This should include access to skills and expertise, and acknowledgment of the strengths already found within the community.

Individual and Family Safety and Well being

A recent report in *The Australian* told of a mission on the outskirts of Mildura where emergency services refuse to go without police escort and a child recently died because of street racing in the mission. Alcohol abuse, domestic violence and poverty are significant social issues in that community. A member of the community pleaded for Government intervention to return safety to members of the community. She reported a feeling of abandonment by the police and Department of Community Services.

Clearly, the introduction of mainstream services in this community would fail without first initiating a community development program that might begin with restoring safety to the community, a need already identified by the community itself. Safety for the women and children at risk of violence for example might begin with liaising with key community elders to establish safe houses within the community that are controlled by the community, drawing on the hierarchy of that community to ensure the safety of members using the safe houses. An agreement could be developed with the police that they would immediately respond to calls from safe houses, however, the value of customary law should not be underestimated. Community consultation might highlight particular areas or times of day that pose the greatest risk and subsequent strategies could be developed by the community themselves to address these issues. Once a

feeling of safety is developed then the community is better placed to consider other issues such as access to resources.

Equitable Access to Resources

Social workers are well skilled to work in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander communities to develop their capacity in social, political and economic outcomes. We understand the danger of building dependence and the need for self-determination and will be guided by the NCATSISWA in the approach we take to this work with them. Inherent in social work training is the assessment of the dynamics and connections between the individual, the family, the local community and the broader society. Such bonds and obligations lie at the heart of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander society. Social workers are very familiar with the growing concept of social capital, which is used to measure the well being of whole communities and to recognise the skills and contributions of each individual. Working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities requires specialized knowledge such as the recognition of the central importance of family responsibility and obligations to kin and an acknowledgment that they are the experts in working with their own communities. This knowledge combined with community development skills and personal awareness and sensitivity are essential to ensuring cultural competence in working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander communities, thereby leading to cultural security. Equipped with the necessary competencies, social workers can engage with these communities to assist in identifying what resources exist, their degree of accessibility, what is lacking and processes for working towards meeting the outstanding needs of the community. This is a bottom up process not a top down approach, which overarches the current delivery of many services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Social workers can assist communities in the important process of preparing community action plans through community profiling. This can be achieved by facilitating open discussion and negotiation through the process and philosophy of empowering every member of that community, whether employed, unemployed, with a mental or physical disability, young or old, to be able and inclined to contribute towards programs that actively rebuild communities from the inside out; and by building a social network of trust and support that pervades the whole community. To achieve equitable access for community members to resources both within the community as well as outside of it, partnerships need to be developed. Such a system allows participation in decision-making, planning and implementation within the community and would facilitate more equitable access to community resources. Social workers as community development agents could also assist in the planning and lobbying for more equitable access to mainstream and other services outside of the community by developing sound working relationships with government and non-government organizations, to strengthen the whole of community response. Social workers are key players at

the interface between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the wider community, and can play a crucial role in defining relationships between the two groups. They can share their knowledge of mainstream political and economic processes and encourage a two-way exchange of information between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and external organisations including government agencies.

Below is an outline of a Partnerships and Community Empowerment Model that we believe facilitates self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and consequently builds a community's capacity for social, cultural and economic development. It is also an example of successful partnership development and therefore a major step forward in the reconciliation process.

Partnership and Community Empowerment Model (PACE) (Christine King, 2003)

The Partnership and Community Empowerment Model (PACE) would engage the social work profession in an action plan for partnership development with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities and government and non-government organisations, seeking to restore the right of self-determination to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The model would develop relationships between NCATSISWA, AASW and Schools of Social Work to enable them to work together to offer resources to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The partnership would offer final year student social workers to complete their field placement within an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, conducting a community profile with the community. The resulting information, owned by the community, could then inform the community's plans for its own social, cultural and economic development. The partnership would also offer the role of broker with government and non-government organisations to enable the community to access services and resources that they may require to put their plans into action. The model would require several stages of implementation that would possibly progress in this way:

Stage 1

- NCATSISWA engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities and identify 'ready' communities (A pilot study could include a rural, remote and urban community)
- NCATSISWA identify a Community Liaison Officer within each community
- NCATSISWA and AASW engage with schools of social work

Stage 2

- Identifying social work supervisors and training them in cultural competence and student supervision. (NCATSISWA, AASW & Schools of Social Work)
- Introducing social work supervisors to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (NCATSISWA)
- Introduce social work supervisors to Community liaison Officers (NCATSISWA)

Stage 3

- Identify appropriate students through an assessment panel comprising representatives from NCATSISWA, AASW, Schools of Social Work, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community representatives.

Stage 4

- Community Profiling undertaken by the student in partnership with the Community Liaison Officer, the social work supervisor and the community
- Community profiling would involve the following steps:
 - Educating the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities about community profiling
 - The community identifying areas of focus for the profiling
 - Information gathering by student and Community Liaison person with supervision
 - Analysis of information by student with supervision, with the understanding that the information belongs to the community
 - Information returned to the community in the form of a report but also presented orally to them
 - The student, social work supervisor and Community Liaison Officer work with the community to plan ways forward, offering the community examples of how they might use the information gathered
 - The community is given time to absorb and consider the information gathered and discuss as a community what they would like to do
 - NCATSISWA follows up with the community's decisions on areas they wish to address and assists them in planning strategies to achieve their goals
 - NCATSISWA and AASW then seek to engage other government and non-government organisations and professional bodies to address issues as appropriate

Community Participation, Decision Making, Planning and Implementation

In building the capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, they are better placed to consider economic and political issues as well as tackling bigger social issues within their community. However, all communities need a structure within which to make plans and decisions and to assist in the implementation of those plans, and so it is for this reason that the NCATSISWA and the AASW have developed a strategy for change using the *PACE* Model. This will then allow communities to decide for themselves, which issues to focus on to bring about change and should also promote accountability in service delivery and outcomes.

The second phase of the *PACE* model requires working to advocate for the utilisation of traditional governance systems, as much as is possible, given that in many areas traditional governance was systematically dismantled as communities were developed that consisted of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from different tribes with differing languages and customs. Where traditional governance has continued it should be recognized and where appropriate, encouragement to incorporate aspects of mainstream governance that the community feels might be useful, could be a process that develops a distinctly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flavour. At all stages engagement with the governance structures of wider society will occur as a natural process of being part of the Australian community. This process could be guided by practice principles for cultural competence such as those being developed by the NCATSISWA.

The Murdi Paaki Regional Council provides an excellent example of a vision where communities play a central role in developing and implementing strategies for their own improvement. This vision is consistent with the *PACE* model and they could well be an example of a community that through consultation may be interested in participating in a pilot to explore what the model offers. Their vision involves the establishment of community working parties and they propose a structure whereby the working parties elect a regional assembly that would have specific functions in relation to the operation of the Regional Council. They also call for the strengthening of the role and powers of the Regional Council to better advocate for the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in their region and to develop more effective and representative partnerships with all levels of Government (Jeffries, 2002). The AASW and NCATSISWA support such a model as a pathway to self-determination for these groups, enabling their participation in design, delivery and management of programs and consider this model to be sustainable as it draws on the knowledge and skills of members of the communities.

BUILDING CAPACITY OF INDIGENOUS AND GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

Building Financial Capacity in Indigenous Organisations

To ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are equal players in the arena of financial management, an education process needs to take place that aims to develop an understanding of funding cycles, writing funding proposals, accountability and auditing for these groups. This could occur within a partnership model such as *PACE* where a community is linked with a private business/government or non-government organisation to develop these skills within the community ensuring the skills stay with the community. Education about community banking and other financial systems and resources could also be exchanged through these partnerships including assistance in the development of business plans if relevant and requested by the community. Another strategy to build partnerships as well as build the financial capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations is to co-locate them with organisations in the wider community to share resources. This can also serve as a pathway to facilitating information sharing and encouraging joint initiatives.

In order to apply a holistic approach to financial capacity building in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, funding could be directed to whole communities through local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander councils, Land Councils, etc., and the role of organisations integrated into a broader but tightly coordinated community development plan.

Addressing the financial disadvantage experienced by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples can be done through the training of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members as financial counselors/advisors and by initiatives that encourage the sharing of information within communities about managing budgets.

Building Knowledge and Skills in Indigenous Organisations

While Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have existing skills and knowledge that serve their communities well, additional learning would be beneficial for community members and leaders to facilitate their optimum participation in decision-making, planning and implementation and their engagement with the wider community. Such learning would ensure that community members and leaders are familiar with their roles and responsibilities in regards to participating in committees and on Boards and would assist them in the development of working knowledge of the principles of governance within the wider community and the development of skills to strategically engage with mainstream services and create new networks. We also propose to offer

assistance in the development of leadership skills at the community level including organisational skills, and raising the awareness of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members of their existing strengths. This would enable them to make effective use of their authority and power as experts within their own communities when dealing with the wider community about their issues i.e., owning the problems and the solutions.

The identification of pathways to further education, such as scholarships, are essential for building skills and knowledge in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples that they can use within their communities and organizations. Sufficient funding to back fill positions when people take study leave would also be an essential support mechanism to encourage further study. It is our belief that work should be undertaken to raise the vision of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from being health workers to undertaking the professional positions and roles currently filled by non Indigenous peoples within their communities. By grasping this vision, they could offer their communities much greater skills, competence in practice and ensure cultural security. This would give them greater skills, expertise and self-confidence. Some areas they might be interested in moving into could be psychology, social work, medicine, law etc.

Building Cultural Competence in Government Agencies

The move from cultural awareness to cultural competence in government agencies has been identified by NCATSISWA as a priority to enable the beginnings of effective partnerships between government agencies and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. This could begin with the compulsory uptake of cultural awareness training. This training is currently offered as an option within many government agencies. The move to specific cultural competence training for those within government organisations and agencies who make policy, form directions and have face to face contact with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and who make decisions that affect these communities is seen as paramount.

The NCATSISWA and the AASW also advocate the promotion of structures that allow social and political processes to occur as much as possible within Aboriginal terms of reference and don't attempt to reshape them to fit structures of governance that exist in wider society.

The Government has the choice of enhancing or disabling a community's capacity to some extent. A case example was presented at the Indigenous Governance Conference (2002) of an Aboriginal community at Katherine where Territory and Federal government changed the funding model for health, which empowered and gave true decision making to the Aboriginal community. This is an example of Government acknowledging and respecting the strengths and

abilities that lie within communities rather than adopting a paternalistic view of service delivery. A review of the *Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act* is strongly supported by AASW and NATSISWA to facilitate the development of a framework that meets the cultural needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and promotes self-determination.

Partnership Development Between Indigenous Peoples and Professional Bodies

The NCATSISWA and the AASW support a number of strategies to develop partnerships between professional bodies and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, to enable capacity building in Indigenous organisations and communities. The following points are some examples of how this partnership could be forged:

- Professional bodies could offer scholarships, mentoring and support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- Professional bodies could offer associate membership to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples students to assist in the development of educational pathways to raise their education standards, thereby fulfilling requirements for full membership
- Assistance in developing their own professional body if desired for example the Australian and New Zealand Psychological Association that has an Indigenous Psychologists Group
- Professional bodies could provide recognition to qualifications of to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples professionals thereby providing credibility to those professionals' qualifications.

Partnership Development Between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Organisations

Economic development is essential for the self-determination and sustainability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Such development relies on partnerships with other organizations to embed the necessary knowledge and skills in the community's members for the project to be sustained. A positive example of a community project supported by partnerships that is enabling a community to become economically self-sufficient was reported in the *Weekend Australian* (August 24-25, 2002). This initiative, the development of an Aboriginal winery in Murrin Bridge, removed community reliance on government payments but was established with an initial grant through ATSIC and leased land from the local land council. A partnership emerged with a private consulting firm that offered business mentoring and financial advice. The project is still developing and currently employs twenty part time Aboriginal workers.

Partnership Development Between Indigenous and Government Organisations

'Experience has shown that within the framework of the ATSIC Act, Federal, State and Local government can work together through a process of service agreements, pooled funding and integration of programs and services. Experience has also shown that when Aboriginal people are put in control, the outcomes are improved.' (Jeffries, 2002) Although the NCATSISWA and AASW support this statement, we believe there is a long way to go and it requires willingness of government and Indigenous organisations to learn from each other and a willingness to embark on new journeys together to explore better systems and models. The ultimate goal is to build workable relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and the wider community in all areas, with a view to developing a holistic community approach that is informed by the communities themselves and recognizes their existing strengths.

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