

CENTRE FOR ABORIGINAL ECONOMIC POLICY RESEARCH  
Hanna Neumann Building 021  
ACT Australia 0200  
Admin.caep@anu.edu.au

T: +61 2 6125 0587  
F: +61 2 6125 9730  
E:

10 June 2008

Committee Secretary  
Senate Select Committee on Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities  
Department of the Senate  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am writing to draw the attention of your Committee to research undertaken by the Indigenous Community Governance Project which is relevant to your terms of reference.

The ICGP is a landmark applied research initiative between CAEPR at The Australian National University and Reconciliation Australia. It has received significant funding support from the Australian Research Council and the Australian, Western Australian and Northern Territory Governments. The Project is national in coverage and community/regional in focus – including remote, rural and urban locations. It is investigating Indigenous community governance—what’s working, what’s not, and why—across a cross-section of rural, remote, and urban settings. It aims to ‘make the research count’ on the ground and in government policy.

The Project has completed four years of research with Indigenous communities, including at five remote and rural sites in the Northern Territory. It is clear that getting community governance working well is critical to the effectiveness of any government programs which are put in place to address the health, well-being, education, law and order and employment situation of Indigenous communities. Our comparative research analysis across 11 community research sites has collated important evidence about the key factors, practices and conditions which contribute to successful community governance. These have been summarised in the documents I am attaching to this letter, so I will not repeat them here.

As a result of our research it is our contention that it is critically important to place a high priority on strengthening Indigenous community governance and improving the governance of governments in relation to Indigenous communities if gains in Indigenous well-being are to be made *and sustained*. It has been reported that the basics of community governance and organisational management require

individuals to have at least a year 10 high school education.<sup>1</sup> However, the residents of many communities are poorly educated and under-skilled in governance. Despite the documented governance successes identified by the Indigenous Community Governance Research Project and the Indigenous Governance Awards, it remains the case that many communities lack credible decision-making, are unable to enforce local law and order, unable to sustain economic development initiatives, and are facing entrenched dysfunction and disadvantage. At the same time, the Indigenous population is growing rapidly and is youthful. Governments, organisations and their leaders will be increasingly challenged to meet the accelerating needs of these communities.

Our concerns are that at present government policies are not giving capacity development for community governance priority, and we fear that public resources intended to ameliorate the situation of Indigenous people may not be used to greatest effect as a result. If improvements are to be sustained, our research indicates that communities need to have legitimate and effective governance systems in place. Such legitimacy must be two-way: decision-making and authority must reflect contemporary Indigenous views of what are the 'proper' relationships, forms of authority and cultural geographies in their region; at the same time, the community governance arrangements must be seen as legitimate in the eyes of governments. Getting the right balance between these often conflicting views of governance is the key to success. But it is exceptionally difficult within current government approaches.

Importantly, our research has revealed that a community development approach to building governance skills can work, despite the current constraints of government frameworks. Accordingly we encourage governments to reinvest in community developmental approaches within their relevant departments and to re-engage on the ground with Indigenous organisations and leaders who are attempting to rebuild and strengthen their governance. We also propose the establishment of an Australian Indigenous Governance Institute to work nationally to implement a governance training and capacity development strategy and develop materials and resources to support Indigenous governance-building needs.

Furthermore, our research has found that there are major institutional and implementation failings within government that exacerbate the problems of poor Indigenous community governance. The laudable intention of developing whole-of-government approaches to working with Indigenous communities invariably evaporates by the time the policy is implemented on the ground. Community organisations delivering services are finding that the new policy approach, rather than helping them to streamline their programs, has often increased the complexity of the administrative demands placed upon them. This matter needs urgent attention since government policy, program and funding frameworks largely shape the environment in which Indigenous community organisations operate. Government funding and policy frameworks could be much more facilitative of good Indigenous community governance.

I am attaching for your information the following documents as exhibits which summarise our overall findings and elaborate the points I have made more fully:

*Ten Key Messages from the Indigenous Community Governance Project (2006)*

---

<sup>1</sup> NT Department of Education. 1999. *Learning Lessons: An Independent Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory*, by Senator Bob Collins.

*Further Key Insights from the Indigenous Community Governance Project (2007)*

*Summary of Preliminary Research Findings from the Indigenous Community Governance Research Project (2006)*

*Summary of Year Two Research Findings: Indigenous Community Governance Project (2007).*

I also attach:

- Diane Smith's paper presented to the Australia and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG) conference 'Governing Through Collaboration: Managing Better Through Others', held on 28–29 June 2007 in Canberra:

*'From COAG to coercion: A story of governance failure, success and opportunity in Australian Indigenous Affairs'.*

This important paper will give you some deeper insight into what does and does not work in Indigenous Affairs.

- *Community Governance News* Vol 3, No 3, November 2007, which examined the implications of the NT Intervention at two of our research sites – Yirrkala and Maningrida.

You will also find the full version of our *2007 Research Report* provides more detail about some of the points I have made in this letter.

There are many other papers specific to the case study sites on our Project's webpages: [www.anu.edu.au/caepr/ICGP\\_home.php](http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/ICGP_home.php)

Leaders of the research team, including Chief Investigators, Professor Jon Altman, Diane Smith, Dr Will Sanders, and myself as Research Manager, would also be available to provide expert witness input to the Inquiry.

Yours sincerely

Janet E Hunt

Senior Research Manager,

Indigenous Community Governance Project