

Concept Proposal: An Indigenous Data Authority

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Background and Rationale

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lives and futures are intricately entwined with data. Realisation of the tangible value of data to wellbeing has led First Nations to increasingly seek to access or develop disaggregated/local data resources that are reflective of Indigenous perspectives, priorities and needs and the capability to use these. The 2023 Indigenous Governance Summit, where more than 130 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders agreed a set of Australian Indigenous data governance protocols to build on the Indigenous Data Sovereignty protocols established at the 2018 Summit (MnW 2018; 2023) demonstrate this growing recognition of the importance of data.

High quality, disaggregated, relevant data are also critical for government evidence-based policy development. Realisation of the 2020 National Agreement on Closing the Gap (CTG) is reliant on data. CTG explicitly recognises the centrality of data to its aims, stating: ‘*[S]hared access to location specific data and information will support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations to support of the achievement of the first three Priority reforms*’. Priority Reform Area 4, commits to: partnerships to guide the improved collection, access, management and use of data; community and organisational access to data; data disaggregation to a level to allow local decision making; the support of data capability and expertise within communities and organisations.

Since the National Agreement came into force there has been some, albeit limited, advancement of Indigenous data accountabilities. The 2023 co-designed *Framework on the Governance of Indigenous Data* being finalised under the auspices of the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) (Richardson et al. 2023) is an example. There is also a stated and growing commitment to Indigenous Data Sovereignty and governance principles across government agencies.

Despite these innovations, the collection, collation, use and access to Indigenous data in Australia is without a coherent framework. Data responsibilities and processes, where they exist, are atomized. Responsibility for existing data obligations and new data development are split across multiple working groups and organisations. More critically these responsibilities are without clear accountabilities. This piecemeal, unstructured process reduces the possibility of achieving Closing the Gap data ambitions and overall objectives. The potential benefits and the potential risks for First Peoples from data technologies such as Big Data, Open Data and Artificial Intelligence magnify the urgency of the need for an independent Indigenous data infrastructure.

An Indigenous Data Authority Model

What is required is a coherent and consistent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led infrastructure to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander data needs, to support Government in meetings its CTG data obligations; to measure progress under the Priority Reforms, and an agreed framework on which reporting can be based. To achieve these objectives, this paper proposes the establishment of an **Indigenous Data Authority**.

The proposal is informed by our own experience working in the Indigenous data space. It draws heavily on the *Productivity Commission Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap Tracking progress Information paper 6* (2023) (PC Review). This paper notes that despite the commitments made under Pillar 4, no transformational change in government Indigenous data practices or processes have eventuated. The PC Review addresses this failure through Draft Recommendation 1, calling for the appointment of an entity with dedicated resourcing and staffing to lead CTG Agreement related data development.

We are also inspired by activity in other nation states with similar data/policy nexus issues. In Canada, the First Nations Indigenous Governance Centre released their [First Nations Data Governance Strategy](#) (2020). This strategy establishes a set of Indigenous led, expert driven, Regional Information Governance Centres across the nation to share data and provide statistical services to First Nations, communities, their governments, advocacy organizations and service delivery agencies(see <https://fnigc.ca/what-we-do/first-nations-data-governance-strategy/>). In Aotearoa New Zealand the [Te Kāhui Raraunga - Māori Data Governance Model](#) (2023) provides Māori framed guidance for the system-wide governance of Māori data. This report discusses system leadership to build on the current Mana Orite relationship agreement with the Iwi (tribal) chairs https://www.kahuiraraunga.io/_files/ugd/b8e45c_803c03ffe532414183afcd8b9ced10dc.pdf. These models have salience for the Australia but are not directly translatable due to the differing Indigenous leadership models and Indigenous/Government relationships.

The proposed Indigenous led, Indigenous Data Authority (IDA) should be built around a hub and spokes model and be an independent statutory authority. Operationally, the IDA would provide Indigenous data services, support and innovation. It would also provide performance monitoring, fulfilling the urgent need identified by the PC Review to connect key CTG reform actions and outputs (See Point 6). IDA activities would be delivered from a central hub to First Nations, communities and peak bodies as well as to government entities. To ensure service access for First Nations' communities across Australia, the IDA hub would support a set of small on the ground regional/state based spokes.

Potential roles and purposes of an Indigenous Data Authority

There is a broad array of Indigenous data needs, at the First Nation and at Government level, that could be addressed by the proposed IDA. Here we outline of number of potential Indigenous data linked roles, services, and activities.

1. Data and Indicator Development

The CTG Agreement has 19 national socio-economic targets and Clause 92 requires parties to establish a data development plan for each socio-economic outcome. But, as noted in the PC Review, progress on these has been very slow. Many requisite and critical data items do not yet exist, do not provide useful or appropriate measurement of the target, are not current, or cannot be sufficiently disaggregated.

An IDA could convene and facilitate data development as a function, including:

- identify, prioritise, modify, develop and test CTG indicators;
- determine and develop data disaggregation models to monitor progress at a regional level;
- in collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and government agencies, develop and coordinate solutions for indicators without valid measures;
- provide advice to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and government agencies on data and indicator development;
- developing an Indigenous data infrastructure and data repository that responds to community needs.

2. Facilitate Data Access for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities

The CTG Agreement stipulates that First Peoples’s communities and organisations share access to Government held disaggregated data as per:

Priority 1: To participate as equal partners with government in shared decision making;

Priority 2: For evidence-based decision on policy and programs at the local level; and

Priority 3: For accountability, measuring the transformation of government organisations.

To this end, 71 b) of Priority Reform 4, states that ‘Governments agree to provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations access to the same data and information on which any decisions are made...’. Despite this commitment, there is, as yet, no process by which First Peoples communities and organisations can activate this outcome.

The IDA could operate as a central entity, liaising with the appropriate agency to facilitate access. This function would provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations with a clear process to:

- seek assistance with identifying the data that they need; and
- lodge data access requests.

3. Provide Governance of Data Support for Government Departments and Entities

Under 71c) of Priority Reform 4, governments commit to ‘collect, handle, and report data at sufficient levels of disaggregation in an accessible and timely way. Yet, there is no existing entity capable of providing the necessary monitoring and support of government organisations to meet their governance obligations. Moreover, as noted by the PC Review, data governance arrangements could be improved by consolidating responsibility for coordinating new data development.

An IDA could support the implementation of Indigenous data governance through:

- developing a national Indigenous data governance committee, with regional hubs, to oversee governance of Commonwealth and State held Indigenous data;
- providing support and expertise to government agencies on how they can meet their Indigenous data obligations;
- overseeing and monitoring government CTG Agreement data governance obligations;
- engaging with, and supporting, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations on issues related to data governance.

4. Provide Data Infrastructure for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities

Indigenous data collection is within the remit of an array of government agencies, with primary responsibility resting with the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Such collections currently are inaccessible for many Indigenous communities (see Point 2). Yet, even where access is given, many communities do not have the data infrastructure to be able to safely and securely store these data assets. The same safe storage limitations apply to data that are collected or collated by organisations and communities themselves.

An IDA could establish an Indigenous data repository, set up to receive and hold Indigenous data resources on behalf of communities under terms and conditions that uphold their Indigenous Data Sovereignty rights.

5. Provide Data Capability Support

It is recognised that public sector capabilities relating to Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Governance requires development. An IDA could provide guidance to agencies including:

- professional development including workshops on the fundamentals of Indigenous data sovereignty and governance;
- establishing Indigenous Data Governance mechanisms; and
- provide advice and assistance on data sharing and repatriation agreements.

Additionally, there is a need to ensure that Indigenous communities have the capability to engage in determining, collecting and governing their own data. An Indigenous Data Authority could provide guidance and professional services on:

- building data literacy and practice;
- supporting data asset mapping;
- establishing community based data sharing agreements;
- establishing local community data governance systems; and
- providing data analysis and interpretations skills training.

6. Provide Independent Performance Monitoring

PC Review, Draft Recommendation 1 (2023: 10) calls for the appointing of an organisation to lead data development. The first responsibility of such an organisation is listed as:

- to develop a shared understanding and explicitly articulate **a conceptual logic underpinning the performance monitoring approach** (highlight in original). This should connect key reform actions and outputs under the Priority Reforms to the resulting intermediate outcomes intended to drive improvements in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life outcomes. Intermediate outcomes should include common drivers of change across the socio-economic outcomes, where appropriate.

The IDA could fulfil this function.

References:

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