
1 Introduction

In April 2002, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) commissioned the Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision to:

produce a regular report against key indicators of Indigenous disadvantage. This report will help to measure the impact of changes to policy settings and service delivery and provide a concrete way to measure the effect of the Council's commitment to reconciliation through a jointly agreed set of indicators (COAG 2002, see appendix 1).

The first Report on *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators* was released in November 2003. A second edition of the report was published in July 2005. Both editions have been widely welcomed and generally well received, and have been the subject of considerable discussion and debate amongst Indigenous organisations, governments and public sector agencies, non-government organisations, and many individuals — both Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

This is the third Report in the series. It has been greatly informed by the ongoing consultations that have taken place. While not everyone agrees with all aspects of the framework, there is widespread endorsement of its vision of 'a society where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should enjoy a similar standard of living to that of other Australians, without losing their cultural identity' (CAR 2000). The Report has led to constructive debate, based on the best available information. It has provided depth to the discussion and improved the potential for practical solutions to entrenched problems.

1.1 Not just another statistical report

This Report does more than provide information about outcomes for Indigenous Australians — although this is an important aspect of the Report. The Report was conceived as a strategic document to assist governments to identify the focus for policy attention, and to measure whether these policies are working.

A large amount of information on Indigenous Australians has been gathered by a range of people and organisations, resulting in numerous reports and academic publications. There are also substantial lists of performance indicators in a number of service areas, particularly health. It is not the aim of this Report to replicate what is being done elsewhere.

COAG nominated two core objectives for the Report. The first is to inform Australian governments about whether policy programs and interventions are achieving improved outcomes for Indigenous people. The second is to produce a Report that is meaningful to Indigenous people.

Therefore, the Report on Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage is more than a collection of data — it is both visionary and strategic. The vision, outlined in the ‘priority outcomes’, is that Indigenous people will one day enjoy the same opportunities as other Australians, together with a strong cultural identity. The rest of the Report framework underpins a strategy to achieve this vision.

The information presented in the Report provides policy makers with a broad view of the current state of Indigenous disadvantage and where things need to change if the Report’s vision is to be achieved. The headline indicators measure progress toward the priority outcomes, while the strategic areas for action and strategic change indicators identify agreed areas of focus for policy effort, and the results of that effort. Over time, editions of this Report will track where governments have had an impact on Indigenous disadvantage — and where work still needs to be done.

The Report also provides a practical tool for government agencies and Indigenous organisations. The Report’s outcome focus can encourage agencies to think beyond their existing policy frameworks, and agencies can incorporate Report indicators into monitoring and evaluation. Indigenous organisations can use the framework indicators to monitor their own outcomes, and to hold governments to account.

The Report is influencing how governments address Indigenous disadvantage. Implementation of the Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage framework by all governments is summarised in appendix 2. In July 2006, COAG agreed that a long-term, generational commitment is needed to overcome Indigenous disadvantage:

COAG agreed the importance of significantly closing the gap in outcomes between Indigenous people and other Australians in key areas for action as identified in the *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators Report ...* (COAG 2006)

COAG has established a working group to develop a detailed proposal for generational change:

The working group will consider how to build clearer links between the OID framework, the National Framework of Principles for Delivering Services to Indigenous Australians, the COAG Reconciliation Framework and the bilateral agreements between the Commonwealth and State and Territory Governments. (COAG 2006)

In order to provide a comprehensive picture of outcomes for Indigenous people, this Report uses some data that might be considered imperfect for the purposes of other reports. But the Steering Committee considers that, providing data are not misleading, imperfect information is better than no information. Moreover, publishing imperfect data (with qualifications where necessary) can lay the foundation for developing better data over time. There is a clear need for improvements in data, if COAG’s objectives in commissioning this Report are to be fully met. Data issues, including future directions in data, are summarised at the end of each chapter of the Report, and the most significant data gaps summarised at the end of the Overview. Chapter 2 explores the Report’s approach to data in more detail.

While concentrating on outcomes for Indigenous Australians at the national or jurisdictional level, the Report recognises the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and experience; and acknowledges that disadvantage may come in different forms for urban, regional and remote dwellers. Wherever possible, information has been broken down to report separately for Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people, and by remoteness. However, data limitations, and a desire to keep the Report to a manageable size, mean that much of the Report is at a high level of aggregation. Some jurisdictions, and even individual Indigenous communities, have taken up the challenge of producing more disaggregated reports to meet their specific needs.

This Report recognises that many factors bear on change — no one action is going to eradicate Indigenous disadvantage. A key message from consultations with Indigenous people was that the Report should not imply that the efforts of governments acting alone would be enough to achieve fundamental, long term change. The drivers of change must include actions on the part of the private sector, the general community and, not least, Indigenous people themselves.

1.2 Background

In its response to the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation’s Report, *National Strategies to Advance Reconciliation* (CAR 2000), COAG acknowledged the unique status of Indigenous Australians, and agreed that ‘many actions are necessary to advance reconciliation, from governments, the private sector, community organisations, Indigenous communities, and the wider community’ (COAG 2000; appendix 1). Heads of government committed to a partnership approach, which recognised the contributions that all of these elements could bring to addressing Indigenous disadvantage. Priority actions in three areas were agreed:

- Investing in community leadership initiatives.

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- Reviewing and re-engineering programmes and services to ensure they deliver practical measures that support families, children and young people. In particular, governments agreed to look at measures for tackling family violence, drug and alcohol dependence and other symptoms of community dysfunction.
 - Forging greater links between the business sector and Indigenous communities to help promote economic independence (COAG 2000; appendix 1).

In December 2000, the final report of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, called for COAG to agree on a framework for all governments (and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission) to set measurable program performance benchmarks and annually report performance against those benchmarks.

Also in December 2000, the Prime Minister wrote to the Ministerial Council for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (MCATSIA), requesting it to develop its action plan on reconciliation to include performance reporting strategies and benchmarks. A framework was developed by early 2002. It identified three priority areas for action, headline indicators and strategic change indicators. This framework formed the basis of the Steering Committee's consultations in 2002, before production of the first *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* report in 2003.

The Review

The Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision comprises representatives from all Australian governments and is chaired by the Chairman of the Productivity Commission, which also provides the secretariat.

Up until 2003, the Review's principal output had been the annual Report on Government Services (the 'Blue Book'), now in its twelfth edition. The Blue Book provides information on the efficiency and effectiveness of, and equity of access to, mainstream services in the areas of education, justice, emergency management, health, community services and housing. It brings together data that provide a national overview of government service delivery. The services covered add up to some \$100 billion (or around one-third of total government spending). Since 2003, the Review has published a separate Compendium of information relating to the delivery of mainstream services to Indigenous people, drawn from the Blue Book (SCRCSSP 2003a; SCRGSP 2004–2007a).

Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage represents a departure from the type of reporting that is in the Blue Book. In his letter to the Chairman of the Steering Committee formally requesting this Report, the Prime Minister noted that the task will be to:

Identify indicators that are of relevance to all governments and Indigenous stakeholders and that can demonstrate the impact of programme and policy interventions (p. xvi).

The Report on Government Services focuses on the efficiency and effectiveness of specific services. The Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Report focuses on outcomes for Indigenous people and does not report on specific services.

1.3 The process

This Report focuses on the underlying factors that ultimately cause disadvantage; relying on experience, evidence and logic to identify areas where targeted policies will have the greatest impact. This task has required input from governments and relevant experts, but most particularly, from Indigenous people.

The Working Group

The Report's development is guided by a Working Group. This group, established by the Steering Committee to develop the framework for the 2003 Report, has been involved in each edition of the Report. The Working Group comprises representatives from central agencies in all governments, as well as the MCATSIA.¹ The Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare also participate as observers. The Working Group was originally convened by Gary Banks, the Chairman of the Steering Committee and Productivity Commission, and since 2004 has been convened by Commissioner Robert Fitzgerald of the Productivity Commission.

The consultation process

An extensive consultation process was undertaken in developing the framework for the 2003 Report. The Australian, State and Territory governments conducted consultations within their jurisdictions, and officials representing MCATSIA and the former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services consulted within their organisations. In addition, the Chairman of the Steering Committee and the head of the Secretariat held discussions with a number of Indigenous leaders and organisations, and a range of officials and researchers across the country. The Chairman also wrote to key organisations and individuals seeking written comments

¹ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services (ATSIS) was represented on the original Working Group. Since the abolition of ATSIS, the Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination within the Australian Government has been represented on the Working Group.

on the framework. A report was produced summarising these consultations (SCRCSSP 2003b).

Following release of the 2003 Report, the consultation process continued, with a different focus. Whereas the earlier consultations had concentrated on the reporting framework, consultations in 2004 were about the Report itself. Those consultations largely fell into two categories. The first involved obtaining feedback from Indigenous people and organisations about the Report; while the second involved discussions with government agencies about how the Report was being used.

Following the release of the 2005 Report, the Steering Committee decided to review the indicator framework before preparing the 2007 Report. Once again, working group members conducted consultations within their jurisdictions, and the Convenor of the working group and the Secretariat held meetings with all Australian governments, with researchers and with Indigenous people and organisations across Australia. A number of written submissions were also made.

As far as possible, consultations with Indigenous people were held in communities not previously consulted. Meetings were held across the country, from very remote locations to regional centres and metropolitan areas. Not surprisingly, the range of issues raised during these meetings reflected the diversity of the Indigenous population. The outcomes of these consultations have been published as a separate report (SCRGSP 2007b). Feedback obtained during the consultations and a list of the changes made to the framework following the consultations are included in chapter 2 of this Report.

1.4 References

CAR (Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation) 2000, *National Strategies to Advance Reconciliation*, Sydney.

COAG (Council of Australian Governments) 2000, *Communiqué Meeting* 3 November 2000, Canberra.

— 2002, *Communiqué Meeting* 5 April 2002, Canberra.

— 2004, *Communiqué Meeting* 25 June 2004, Canberra.

— 2006, *Communiqué Meeting* 14 July 2006, Canberra.

SCRCSSP (Steering Committee for the Review of Commonwealth/State Service Provision) 2003a, *Report on Government Services Indigenous Compendium*, Productivity Commission, Canberra.

— 2003b, *Draft Framework for Reporting on Indigenous Disadvantage: Report on Consultations*, Productivity Commission, Canberra.

— 2004–2007a, *Report on Government Services Indigenous Compendium*, Productivity Commission, Canberra.

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