

A FRESH APPROACH TO CLOSING THE GAP

We must learn from the failings of the decade-old strategy to improve Indigenous outcomes, argues **Charles Jacobs**

In 2008 the Federal government introduced a range of key national targets addressing Indigenous health, education and employment. The targets, part of the Closing the Gap strategy, were a response to growing calls to address the severe disparity between the outcomes of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. They marked a watershed moment in Indigenous affairs, and gave genuine hope that this seemingly perpetual issue might finally have an endpoint by setting expiry dates for the targets to be reached.

Ten years on, however, it appears that the Closing the Gap strategy is itself facing an important turning point. Four of the seven targets have a 2018 expiry date yet, as Table 1 opposite shows, only one of these—halving the gap in child mortality rates—is set to be met. Overall, only three targets are reported to be on track.

While frustrating, the lack of improvement is not unexpected. Annual Prime Ministers' Closing the Gap speeches have repeatedly highlighted the ongoing failings of the strategy. In 2014 Tony Abbott acknowledged that 'while progress has been made in some objectives, it is clear that we are still failing in too many'.¹ Similarly, in 2017 Malcolm Turnbull re-enforced the 'stark reality that we are not seeing sufficient national progress on the Closing the Gap targets'.² The tenth anniversary in 2018 has thus served as cause for a 'refresh' of the Closing the Gap objectives. Public consultations on a reworking of the strategy have been held, and the Commonwealth has already dedicated a raft of new funding measures to the project.

It is therefore important to look at the functioning of the strategy from a policy perspective. Why hasn't it worked? What could be improved? What strengths can be built on?

Evaluation before spending

The Closing the Gap strategy is based on the measurement of key indicators such as life expectancy, high school completion and employment rates. While these overall indicators are the bottom line, the programs and services dedicated to achieving these targets are at the forefront of the approach. Consequently, ensuring that they are effectively achieving desired outcomes is essential to closing the gap.

Unfortunately, CIS research has revealed that the impacts of an overwhelming number of Indigenous programs are not being evaluated.³ Of 1082 programs surveyed, only 88 (8%) of these had been evaluated. Evaluations are essential to the ongoing success of any policy or program⁴ and provide evidence that a particular intervention works.⁵ They can reveal inefficiencies that must be addressed, and provide accountability to program managers and providers.⁶ Without evaluation, a program may suffer



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Table 1

Target:	NSW	VIC	QLD	SA	WA	TAS	NT	ACT	Australia
Halving the gap in child mortality by 2018									✓
95% of Indigenous 4 years olds enrolled in early childhood education by 2025	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓
Closing the gap in school attendance by 2018	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
Halve the gap in reading, writing and literacy for Indigenous children by 2018	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗
Halve the gap in year 12 attainment by 2020	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓
Halve the gap in employment outcomes by 2018	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
Close the gap in life expectancy by 2031	✗		✗	✗			✗		✗

Note: Blank cells denote no data

from one or both of these issues, limiting its effectiveness. For example, a 2017 Queensland Productivity Commission report identified a lack of evaluation and weak lines of accountability as a key cause of the limited success of service delivery to remote Indigenous communities in that state.⁷

Moreover, a lack of evaluation and assessment of need can lead to duplication and waste. Programs applied on the basis of Indigeneity rather than local need will have little impact if they do not address the specific problems experienced by a community. For example, in 2009 CIS identified the provision of suicide prevention training to a Northern Territory community which had no experience of suicide and had already undergone previous training.⁸ Similar examples could be found across the Indigenous program ecosystem.

The federal government recently committed to improving its evaluation of Indigenous programs, although this process is in the early stages of development. Meanwhile, in February, the Prime Minister announced billions of dollars in increased funding for a range of issues where targets are not on track to be met. This includes \$184 million to reduce Indigenous smoking rates, a \$4.4 billion education loading increase for Indigenous students, and a 30% increase in funding for program providers under the Indigenous Advancement Strategy.

Funding effective programs undoubtedly plays a role in closing the gap. However, it seems premature to be pledging more money to a strategy that the government has publicly acknowledged needs to be refreshed. Before any additional funding is committed, some key questions need to be answered. Why are some targets succeeding and can this success be replicated in other areas? Why are other areas failing and what pitfalls can be avoided in future programs?

Including effective evaluation of program outcomes in a refreshed Closing the Gap strategy will allow for better tracking and understanding of targets at a grassroots level. Meanwhile, evaluating the past decade will also serve as an important reflection process that should stop money being thrown at problems and see funding directed in a more strategic manner.

Reassessing the nature of the 'gap'

The intention of the Closing the Gap strategy is a noble one. Bringing Indigenous Australians on par with the rest of the population is, and should be, the ultimate objective of the policy. However, the fluid nature of the gap metric means that targets are often difficult to achieve and may not reflect genuine progress on the ground.

The indicators of the wider population may change concurrently with those of Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islanders. A similar improvement in outcomes by both groups would mean that little progress had been made on reducing the gap, but this could mask the fact that tangible progress may still have been made on Indigenous outcomes. For instance, between 2005 and 2012 Indigenous life expectancy at birth increased 1.6 years for males and 0.6 years for females.⁹ However, due to increases in the life expectancy for non-Indigenous Australians, the gap only narrowed by 0.8 years for Indigenous males and 0.1 years for females. Despite achieving only a minor reduction in the gap, this is still a notable improvement. Yet the fluctuating nature of the gap can see it framed as a relative failure.

Rather than aiming to close the gap in life expectancy by 2031, a hard target of increasing Indigenous expectancy to 80 years would bring clarity and not leave program delivery subject to the inconsistency caused by using the metric of the gap.

The fluid nature of the gap can also make it difficult to set and achieve incremental targets in given areas. If the standard a program provider measures itself against is constantly changing it can be difficult to strategise and budget over a certain period. Providers need certainty in the outcomes they are trying to meet.

Whilst they are not as idealistically desirable, hard targets would bring clarity and consistency to program and service providers seeking to improve outcomes. For example, rather than aiming to close the gap in life expectancy by 2031, a hard target of increasing Indigenous expectancy to 80 years would bring clarity and not leave program delivery subject to the inconsistency caused by using the metric of the gap.

Reconsidering targets: economic development

Only one of the seven current Closing the Gap indicators is directly related to economic development. This target, to halve the gap in employment outcomes by 2018, is not on track to

succeed. Between the introduction of the Closing the Gap strategy in 2008 and 2015, the Indigenous employment rate declined by 5.4%.¹⁰ The overall Australian employment rate also declined by 2.4% during this period. However, the larger drop in Indigenous employment means that the gap actually increased by 3% to 24.2%. Given that over 80% of non-Indigenous Australians and 91% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers are employees,¹¹ employment remains an essential element of the strategy. However, it is important for a refreshed strategy to integrate a focus on wider principles of wealth creation and economic development.

Business and self-employment targets

In 2015 the Commonwealth government introduced the Indigenous Procurement Policy (IPP). The IPP has ‘changed the conversation’ about Indigenous economic development.¹² While the wider footprint of government procurement will always be limited, the policy has created a greater awareness of the potential benefits that business ownership has for Indigenous people.¹³ Decades of exclusion from the economy, low levels of education and stigmas surrounding capability may all affect Indigenous people from accessing employment.

Entrepreneurship and business ownership can empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians to overcome these difficulties and actively participate in the economy.¹⁴ However, only 6.6% of Indigenous people are currently self-employed, a third of the rate of the remainder of the population (16-17%).¹⁵ There are an estimated 12,000-16,000 Indigenous businesses.¹⁶ If the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous self-employment was closed that figure could be in excess of 40,000 businesses. By embracing business ownership the government and Indigenous people could build on the progress of the IPP and ensure a variety of means are pursued to enhance Indigenous economic participation.

The opportunities of culture

Culture can undoubtedly provide a competitive advantage for Indigenous communities and businesses. It is a resource that should be leveraged

to increase the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the mainstream economy, and it can benefit remote communities where economic exclusion is most acute.

There are multiple elements of Indigenous cultural capital that can be utilised in promoting economic development. Tourism is the most obvious sector. Research in Western Australia has shown significant demand from tourists for genuine Indigenous cultural experiences, but the market is underdeveloped.¹⁷ The Australian tourism sector has experienced substantial growth in recent years, with a record 8.26 million international visitors arriving in 2016. Indigenous art and cultural products form a key component of this market. Aboriginal art is world famous and the demand for Indigenous products, such as traditional recipes, is growing.

Indigenous Australians should capitalise on the unique brand offered by their culture and meet the market demand for genuine Indigenous experiences. The primary vehicle for this should be Indigenous-owned cultural enterprises. This would bring a range of social and economic benefits to Indigenous communities,¹⁸ contributing to an improvement in outcomes that will help close the gap. Such enterprises could be particularly effective by building business and employment opportunities in remote communities. The global export of hand-painted crosses by Indigenous women in the Ltyentye Apurte Community (Santa Teresa, Northern Territory) is a good example of this.¹⁹

Ensuring the intellectual property rights of Indigenous products and experiences is an important element of building this market. The misappropriation of Indigenous intellectual property has been an issue for decades. Numerous examples of fake Indigenous art can be found in tourist shops and airports across the country.²⁰ While initiatives such as the Indigenous Art Code have encouraged respect for products and artists, there is no specific legal protection for Indigenous intellectual property. Enshrining the property rights of Indigenous people over their intellectual capital will enable them to fully exploit the economic opportunities offered by their unique cultural brand.

Other target markets

Indigenous culture and knowledge can be used to exploit a range of economic opportunities outside of the tourism industry. The Indigenous estate represents one of the most important assets of remote communities, and local populations must be encouraged to utilise this resource for financial gain. In many locations the structure for achieving this already exists. Over 100 Indigenous ranger programs are currently running across Australia. They are primarily undertaking land management and environmental conservation projects. While most of these programs rely on government funding, there is the potential to target certain market opportunities and leverage them for economic gain.²¹

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Back burning of bush and grasslands is one of the most common practices of Indigenous ranger groups. However, only a limited number of communities have sought to utilise the business potential of this practice through carbon farming. As the carbon market evolves, companies across the world are looking to offset emissions in order to meet government or corporate social responsibility targets. Some ranger groups are already selling carbon units to companies such as Qantas and Allens.²² With the Australian carbon farming industry expected to be worth up to \$24 billion by 2030,²³ Indigenous communities should be encouraged to target such business opportunities.

In the Northern Territory the economic potential of rampant feral buffalo populations offers another opportunity. There are up to 100,000 buffalo in Arnhem Land alone.²⁴ Indigenous rangers are already working to control buffalo and reduce their impact on the native vegetation. However, culling and population control should be harnessed for greater financial gain. Ranger-led buffalo hunting safaris could generate income and act as a disincentive to

illegal killings and trespassing on Indigenous land. Similar ventures could be run with wild pigs in Queensland and northern New South Wales.

Conclusion

The importance of the Closing the Gap strategy cannot be overstated. Improving Indigenous outcomes will serve not only to bring Indigenous Australians level with the rest of the population, it will ultimately lead to a vast reduction in the billions of dollars currently dedicated annually to solving the problem. As the next phase of a refreshed Closing the Gap strategy comes into being it is essential that policymakers assess the nature of this

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approach in order to prevent a recurrence of the past decade's failings. Integrating evaluation and targeting the strengths of Indigenous people provide a starting point for building a new strategy. Concurrently, re-assessing the design of targets to ensure they are realistic and provide a consistent environment for program providers will bring stability and clarity. The last ten years have demonstrated that closing the gap is a task far greater than ticking the boxes of glossy Prime Ministers' reports. However, with a few key adjustments there can be hope that genuine progress will be made.

Endnotes

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