

OUT WITH THE OLD: ARE THE CDEP REFORMS ENOUGH?

Making Indigenous Australians in remote communities work-ready requires much more than changes to CDEP, says **Sara Hudson**

Indigenous people living in the small remote settlements called homelands or outstations are upset. The Australian and Northern Territory governments have announced policy changes that threaten to end the existence they have known for thirty years. ‘Defend our homelands,’ they cry, and ‘we need CDEP.’

What are these changes, and why are Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders so worried and so reluctant to embrace change?

The self-determination policies of the 1970s were responsible for a number of policy disasters in Indigenous affairs. High among these were the homelands movement and the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) program. The commonwealth government provided grants of \$10,000 to encourage Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders to move back to their traditional lands in Western Australia, Queensland, and the Northern Territory.

Government support for the homelands movement was based on the belief that it allowed Aboriginal people to live traditional lifestyles and manage their own affairs. Yet, from the very beginning the idea of self-sufficiency was a myth.

Most of the people living in these communities relied on income from social welfare payments.

The introduction of the CDEP program (an Aboriginal work-for-dole-scheme) was intended to address the problems of passive welfare. But, except in a few isolated cases, CDEP has failed to provide people with meaningful work and to develop the economies of remote communities. It has propped up the provision of essential services, but denied participants the benefit of full-time employment and all the responsibilities and entitlements that come with it. The availability of rent-free homes and generous welfare payments has discouraged many Indigenous people from moving to places where there are jobs.

As a result, some fourteen thousand Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders are living in squalid settlements in the Northern Territory, some without reticulated water, sewerage, or even electricity. The schools in these settlements (called homeland learning centres or community education centres) are abysmal. The schools lack basic facilities have a separate ‘Indigenous curriculum,’ and are staffed by fly-in, fly-out teachers or untrained teacher’s aides. Children are not

taught in English until they are ten. Few students in these schools achieve results beyond the level of a year 1 student. Seventeen-year-olds are leaving school with the reading age of a six or seven-year-old. This is an almost insurmountable gap to be overcome.

Marion Scrymgour, the Northern Territory’s Indigenous Policy Minister, has admitted that the cultural benefits of these outstations have come at the expense of children’s education. In a recently released discussion paper, she has stated that the NT government will no longer try and prop up failing settlements.

At the same time, the Australian government has announced changes to CDEP. From July 2009, CDEP will be axed in non-remote regions and CDEP payments will be reclassified as welfare rather than wages. New participants to the reformed CDEP program will receive their payments through Centrelink and have the same participation requirements as job-seekers in other programs. Greater emphasis will be given to

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imparting work-readiness skills and to literacy and numeracy training.

These reforms are intended to encourage more Indigenous people into real employment. The federal, state, and territory governments have signed up to an ambitious target of halving the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous employment outcomes over the next decade. But how big is the gap they are talking about? CDEP has disguised the real unemployment rate of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders because it is counted as employment.

If you take CDEP out of the equation, then the real unemployment figure for indigenous people is closer to 40%. If Indigenous employees living in mainstream society are removed from the equation, the percentage of Indigenous people aged 15–64 who are unemployed rises to more than 80%.

The high rate of unemployment and subsequent dependence on CDEP is defended by the argument that there are no jobs available for Indigenous people living in remote communities. This is not necessarily true. Employers in the township of Kununurra in the East Kimberley—home of the Argyle diamond mine—are screaming out for staff. The Nhulunbuy mine employs 1,500 miners, but few from the nearby Indigenous communities of Yirrkala or Ski Beach.

Many Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders are discouraged from looking for work because they can't read or write. A large proportion of the Indigenous employees recruited by Rio Tinto during the past six years have required substantial entry-level support for employment. Only a very few candidates meet year 8 literacy levels, let alone the year 10 levels needed to comprehend the occupational health and safety standards required for employment.

CDEP has hidden this crisis in education, because 'work' in most organisations has not required participants to know how to read and write. Even teacher's aides getting paid CDEP are often not fully literate.

Although CDEP was intended to be a 'stepping stone to employment,' very few CDEP organisations have provided proper training to make this possible.

CDEP jobs require little work; often they don't even require attendance. People are paid for doing housework, mowing their own lawns, and even attending funerals. Although there is a 'no work, no pay' rule, it is rarely enforced. A CDEP manager for the Western Desert Puntukurnuparna Aboriginal Corporation admitted that 'participants would receive 31 paid hours a fortnight irrespective of whether they were present at organized activities or not.' This translates into an hourly rate of \$16.39—more than the minimum wage and more than pay for apprentices.

On top of CDEP payments some participants are also getting family assistance and parenting payments—pushing income levels up to nearly \$2,000 a fortnight. With that level of income for hardly any work, there is very little incentive for people to move off CDEP into employment. Only around 5% of people on CDEP move into real jobs, and more than 40% have been on CDEP for five years or more.

The government's decision to have Centrelink administer CDEP will prevent 'double dipping' and hopefully end the perverse incentives that have encouraged so many Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders to spend a lifetime on CDEP. It makes it clear that CDEP is welfare, not proper work. But

convincing Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders of that will be much harder.

Perhaps the biggest problem with CDEP is that it has tricked Indigenous people into believing they have been doing real work when they haven't. Although CDEP is used to fund administrative positions in local government offices, the construction and maintenance of roads, and health and child care, many of these positions are only notional, as the workers lack the skills needed to do the job properly.

The government plans to convert some of these CDEP positions into properly paid jobs. This is a good move. Jobs in government or local councils should be properly funded, and paid for by the relevant government departments. But people who are functionally illiterate and used to working only two or three days a week will need a lot of training and support to meet real full-time job responsibilities.

It will take much more than the government's proposed 'work readiness' training and literacy and numeracy programs to convince Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders that they are capable of working in mainstream society. Thirty years of disguised welfare and separate educationalist policies have prevented them from seeing a future beyond the homelands and CDEP.

Education is the key to removing this barrier. Without improving educational standards, CDEP reforms can do no more than make a dent in the scale of unemployment. If young Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders are to imagine a better future, they need to be taught to believe in themselves.