CLOSING THE GAP RETROSPECTIVE REVIEW

MARCH 2018

Closing the Gap Retrospective Review

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The graphic design elements are derived from this artwork by Aboriginal artist Dennis Pitt. The work depicts Indigenous men, women and children sitting. Joining together in yarning circles and talking. Sharing stories and Songlines, weaving culture from one generation to the next, all the while building strong healthy families and communities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We acknowledge all the people who contributed to this report. We especially acknowledge all the Indigenous people who spoke their stories and experiences, for themselves, their community and their futures. We also acknowledge the many non-Indigenous people who contributed.

We would like to thank our colleagues who worked on this project over the major national holiday period when workplaces and communities shut down for the year. We are fortunate for their connections to Indigenous communities across the country and thank them for obtaining the stories that feed into this report. In writing this report we have gathered those stories into themes for re-telling. We provide these findings and key messages as part of this report. We believe they are an accurate reflection and valuable insight from a sample of Indigenous Australians about a review and ultimately a refresh of the Closing the Gap Agenda.

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INTRODUCTION

This report informs a retrospective review of the last 10 years of Closing the Gap.

The project examines and reports on the effectiveness and appropriateness of the overarching Closing the Gap policy framework, with specific attention to critical components of the NIRA (CtG) in achieving its objectives.

In line with the statement of requirement for this project, it is anticipated that this project will also contribute to an evidence base to support relationships that demonstrate cultural respect towards Indigenous Australians, as well as build on strengths that make a positive contribution to re- set a shared agenda for all policy areas under a Closing the Gap Refresh.

As part of this project we have reviewed literature, consulted with a broad range of Indigenous stakeholders and undertaken an analysis of this data to inform the report.



SCOPE OF THE PROJECT

This project was commissioned by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet to gather qualitative evidence relating to the efforts undertaken in the last 10 years of Closing the Gap.

The project was asked to consider five Review Questions:

1. What were the initial expectations from Closing the Gap, including benchmarks for success?
2. How appropriate was the design of the policy framework to achieve the objective of Closing the Gap?
3. To what extent did the policy framework and components of NIRA assist in meeting objectives?
4. What were the major factors influencing the achievement or non-achievement of the objectives?
5. To what extent has Closing the Gap built on strengths, demonstrated cultural respect and involved collaboration in such a way as to make a positive contribution to the lives of current and future generations of Indigenous Australians?

The first three of those questions focus more on the formal components of Closing the Gap. What did people see and then expect when it was introduced? Was it appropriately designed, and did its design help achieve the Objectives?

Our analysis of data through consultations and the literature review informs us that there has been a lot of support for Closing the Gap as a framework. But clearly a framework alone does not lead to the lessening of disadvantage.

The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet extend the scope in the last two questions, asking us to examine the actual factors influencing outcomes. In particular, the last question requires an examination of those factors important to a human rights approach, and which are also found in the NIRA itself: working in partnership with Indigenous Australians and putting culture at the centre of the work.

To answer these questions, we were asked to take into account the following factors:

- the degree and appropriateness of Indigenous engagement throughout the process
- relationships between governments, Indigenous Australians and other stakeholders
- the changing roles and responsibilities of the Commonwealth and the States, and level of co-ordination between programs or strategies
- the changing social attitudes of people and public awareness of issues
- the impact of the initiative on policy development
- any gaps in accountability mechanisms
- the take up and effectiveness of former, existing and new models including Regional Partnership Agreements and Empowered Communities
- the effectiveness of national partnership agreements and lessons learned; and
- identify and investigate examples of success and failures at local, state and national levels.

As a retrospective qualitative study focusing on Indigenous opinion we were not asked to provide any statistical details on meeting the Closing the Gap targets, as this information is contained in the Prime Minister's Annual Report on Closing the Gap.

METHODOLOGY

Project tasks and outputs

We were asked to:

- Review the qualitative literature from the last ten years around Closing the Gap
- Seek evidence from key stakeholders about their views
- Report.

Literature Review

The literature review was contracted to Circa (Cultural and Indigenous Research Centre Australia).

The specific methodology used for the Literature review is set out in the review, attached to this report as an Appendix.

Consultations

Stakeholders were consulted and were drawn from the following categories:

- Indigenous leaders including community and organisational leaders
- Senior Indigenous and non-Indigenous representatives from key Commonwealth, state/ territory and local government agencies
- Policy makers and policy advisors
- Indigenous led leadership groups, peak organisations, and service organisations
- Regional representatives of key service provider agencies and relevant service organisations.

Stakeholders were drawn from all over Australia. We estimated approximately 200 stakeholders were consulted throughout the project.

Murawin engaged a team of Indigenous consultants from different jurisdictions to conduct the interviews. The identification of the stakeholders was done by individual consultants, overseen by the project lead. Consultants were encouraged to draw on their cultural and professional networks to maximise engagement and participation.

Feedback was gathered by workshop, individual face to face interviews, or by telephone interview.

Questions were standardised based on the scope of the project. Consultants provided data in a standardised format to allow for identification of themes across different jurisdictions and methods of data collection.

A matrix of stakeholder types in relation to Indigeneity, occupation, locality and industry was used to classify stakeholders (e.g. CEO of an Indigenous organisation in Western Australia), allowing Murawin to identify the origin of data. We spoke to men and women with approximately 90% of stakeholders we spoke to being Indigenous Australians.

We ensured that we received a balance of rural, remote and urban voices, although the majority of those consulted were in urban settings - mainly because most peak Indigenous national and state bodies are based in metropolitan locations.

States and territories were all represented with approximately equal numbers of stakeholders, with the exception of Western Australia, which was slightly less represented.

We strove to achieve a gender balance with an approximately 40% male and 60% female rate. in the stakeholder discussions. We spoke with stakeholders from a range of policy areas, i.e. health, education, Indigenous affairs, local government, justice, the arts and housing, government, non-government and community-controlled bodies.

Reporting

The data from stakeholders was analysed for overarching themes by using NVivo software and team discussions.

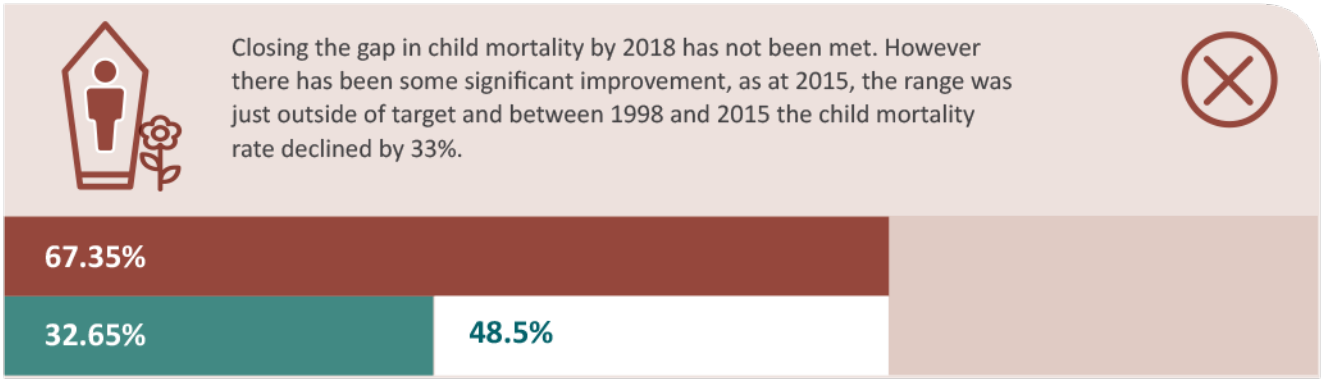
The literature was then considered with respect to each theme.

Final write up for each theme is therefore based on both the literature and stakeholder feedback and our analysis of data emerging from these two collection points.

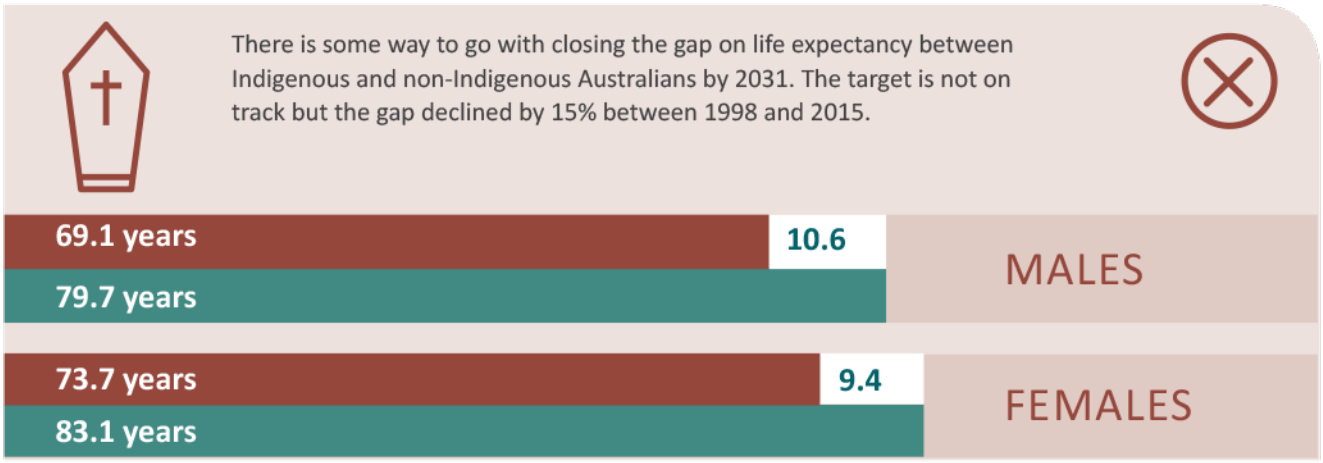
SNAPSHOT OF THE TARGETS[1]



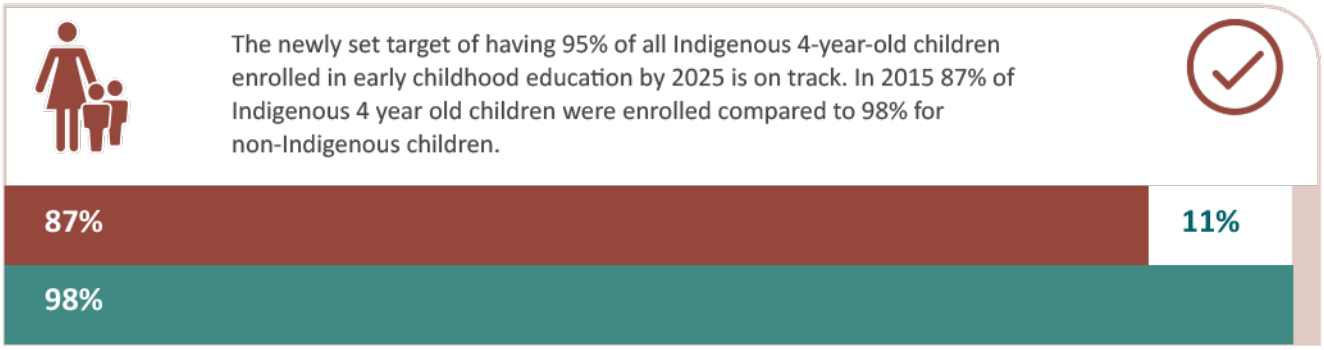
1. CHILD MORTALITY



2. LIFE EXPECTANCY



3. EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION



1. As noted in the Prime Minister's Annual Closing the Gap Report.

4. SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

The newly set target to close the gap on school attendance is on track. In 2016 there was 83.4% Indigenous attendance, whereas non-Indigenous attendance is 93.1.



5. READING AND NUMERACY

Halving the gap in reading and numeracy for Indigenous students by 2018 has not been met. However, there have been significant improvements in years 3 and 5 reading and Year 9 numeracy.



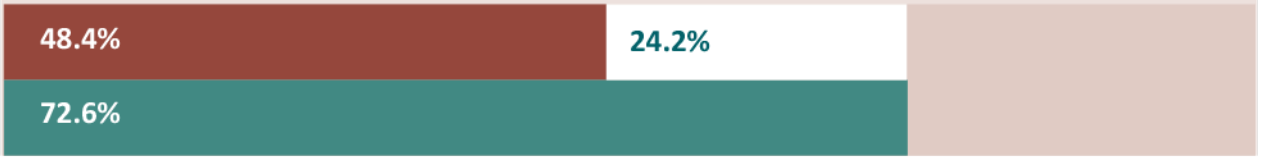
6. YEAR 12 COMPLETION

The number of Indigenous young people between 20-24 years of age who had completed year 12 had increased from 45.4% in 2008 to 61.5% in 2014-15. Non-Indigenous attainment in that same period did not change significantly, so the target to halve the gap by 2020 is on track.



7. EMPLOYMENT

The target to halve the gap in employment by 2018 has not been met. In 2014-15 the Indigenous employment rate was 48.4%, compared with 72.6% for non-Indigenous Australians.



HISTORY OF CLOSING THE GAP

The story of Closing the Gap is an ongoing story of dispossession and its effects, and a movement for equality and recognition for Indigenous people.

The genesis of Closing the Gap as a discrete initiative within the wider movement for equality can be traced to the former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Tom Calma's Social Justice Report (2005), in which he called on governments to commit to a campaign for achieving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health equality within a generation. The Commissioner went on to note that there was significant capacity in the health sector which could be built on and that the new arrangements for Indigenous affairs at the federal level and associated commitments of COAG also provided unprecedented leverage for coordinating health programs with other departments and agencies (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2005).

This gave rise to the National Indigenous Health Equality Campaign in March 2006, whose aim was to achieve health equality within a generation through a human rights-based approach. The coalition consisted of:

- The Australian Human Rights Commission
- National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO)
- Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association (AIDA)
- Congress of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nurses and Midwives (CATSINaM)
- Indigenous Dentists' Association of Australia (IDAA)
- Oxfam Australia
- Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTAR).

At the end of 2007 this campaigning resulted in the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) committing to "Closing the Gap". A formal statement of intent was adopted in March 2008 whereby the Australian government and key Indigenous health peak bodies and the Australian Human Rights Commission agreed to work together to close the gap.

The National Indigenous Reform Agreement (NIRA) was agreed to by COAG in 2008 and incorporated six 'closing the gap' targets. It prioritised seven inter-related 'building blocks' within its overall approach. Of the specific targets that were set out in the NIRA it included Objective 18 that: through this agreement the parties committed to working together with Indigenous Australians to Close the Gap on Indigenous disadvantage and work together to achieve equality in health status and life expectancy between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians by 2030.

It was a key message from our analysis that at the beginning of Closing the Gap, it was seen as a pathway that set out how to move toward equality. It was a blueprint for how, particularly within the Closing the Gap initiative because was a solid recognition that achieving equality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians would only be made possible by working in partnership with Indigenous people.

INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVES ON CLOSING THE GAP



(Findings from consultations and literature)

Themes and questions

In gathering data for this project under the Review questions outlined in the scope, the data clearly gathered into three main themes: the framework itself generally, the targets specifically, and the implementation of the framework.

The rest of this report is the analysis of feedback from stakeholders and the literature review drawn into those themes, and how they relate to the Review questions in the project scope.

Theme 1: CLOSING THE GAP AS A FRAMEWORK

This theme responds to Questions:

- What were the initial expectations from Closing the Gap?
- How appropriate was the design of the policy framework to achieve the objectives of closing the gap?
- To what extent did the policy framework and components of the NIRA assist in meeting objectives?

THEME 2: TARGETS

This theme responds to Questions:

- How appropriate was the design of the policy framework to achieve the objectives of closing the gap?
- To what extent did the policy framework and components of the NIRA assist in meeting objectives?

THEME 3: IMPLEMENTATION

This theme responds to Questions:

- What were the major factors influencing the achievement or non- achievement of the objectives?
- To what extent has Closing the Gap built on strengths, demonstrated cultural respect, and involved collaboration in such a way as to make a positive contribution to the lives of current and future generations of Indigenous Australians?

For clarity and for ease of reference throughout this report the following is provided:

THE CLOSING THE GAP OBJECTIVES SPECIFIC TO THIS PROJECT:
Objective 18. Through this Agreement, the Parties commit to working together with Indigenous Australians to Close the Gap in Indigenous disadvantage.

Objective 19. COAG has agreed to the following targets:

a) Closing the life expectancy gap within a generation;

b) halving the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five within a decade;

c) ensuring all Indigenous four years olds in remote communities have access to early childhood education within five years;

d) halving the gap for Indigenous students in reading, writing and numeracy within a decade;

e) halving the gap for Indigenous people aged 20-24 in Year 12 attainment or equivalent attainment rates by 2020; and

f) halving the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a decade.

THE CLOSING THE GAP BUILDING BLOCKS ARE:

- **E**arly childhood
- **S**chooling
- Health
- **E**conomic participation
- Healthy homes
- **S**afe communities
- **G**overnance and leadership

NATIONAL INTEGRATED STRATEGY FOR CLOSING THE GAP IN INDIGENOUS DISADVANTAGE
The National Integrated Strategy for Closing the Gap in Indigenous Disadvantage is the key coordinating and direction guiding part of the NIRA.

It includes an understanding of the importance of culture.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURE

Connection to culture is critical for emotional, physical and spiritual wellbeing. Culture pervades the lives of Indigenous people and is a key factor in their wellbeing – culture must be recognised in actions intended to overcome Indigenous disadvantage. Pride in culture plays a vital role in shaping people's aspirations and choices. Efforts to Close the Gap in Indigenous disadvantage must recognise and build on the strength of Indigenous cultures and identities.

Assuming, promoting and supporting a strong and positive view of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity and culture are important ways to reduce social exclusion for Indigenous Australians and to support them in their endeavours and aspirations for a positive future. Cultural awareness and competency on the part of policy makers and people implementing government programs, the elimination of overt and systemic discrimination, and the development of programs that meet the cultural needs of Indigenous people will be an important part of the Closing the Gap initiatives.



The Strategy also recognises that the way to implement the Closing the Gap reforms is through engagement and partnership with Indigenous Australians

Engagement and Partnership with Indigenous Australians

COAG recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as Australia's first peoples. In his Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples on 13 February 2008, the then Prime Minister acknowledged that all governments have a special responsibility to engage with Indigenous communities in order to rebuild the trust lost through 'the laws and policies of successive Parliaments and governments that have inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss'. COAG is committed to working in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to achieve the Closing the Gap reforms, recognising that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have demonstrated leadership to create opportunities for their families and communities and are working with governments and the not-for-profit and corporate sectors to build on these opportunities. To date, engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on the development of the Closing the Gap agenda has been at a very broad level. Implementation of the National Agreements and National Partnerships, both mainstream and Indigenous specific, agreed by COAG across the health, education, housing, employment and service delivery spheres will require developing and maintaining strengthened partnership arrangements. This is in line with the National Framework of Principles for Government Service Delivery to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians agreed by COAG in 2008.



THEME 1: CLOSING THE GAP AS A FRAMEWORK

This theme brings together all the responses and literature that address the formal parts of Closing the Gap as a policy initiative: the NIRA, National Partnership Agreements, state and territory frameworks and other formal policy responses.

This theme responds to the questions:

What were the initial expectations from Closing the Gap?

How appropriate was the design of the policy framework to achieve the objectives of Closing the Gap?

To what extent did the policy framework and components of the NIRA assist in meeting the objectives?

Introduction

Our analysis of responses suggests a communication strategy was lacking or insufficient as many people did not know of the NIRA as an instrument, or the formal parts of the agreement. In fact, more than sixty percent of respondents did not know what the NIRA was.

They understood that Closing the Gap represented a new way of working with Indigenous Australia but did not necessarily distinguish it as a framework separate from other social policy.

People did know of overall targets and that Closing the Gap was an initiative of COAG. There was hope that the policy would lead to coordination of activities at all levels of government and with and between organisations, leading to better outcomes for Indigenous people.

Coming after the National Apology to the Stolen Generation in 2008, the Closing the Gap initiative gave people a real sense of hope that this signalled the start of a new way of working with Indigenous people, working in partnership.

From our analysis of data emerging from the literature and consultations, now, ten years on, outcomes have not been what people hoped for. Despite this, Closing the Gap is still accepted as a potentially sound framework. It has acted as a focal point that has assisted with coordination across sectors, governments and organisations. Many stakeholders consulted spoke of this point and the need to have a national focus on addressing Indigenous disadvantage.

Where Closing the Gap has failed has been in the implementation: there has been little improvement in the partnerships with Indigenous people, or in putting culture at the centre of initiatives. Overall the consultation responses and literature suggest that Closing the Gap is still often seen as a 'top down' approach, and not one of partnership.

A key message is that where Closing the Gap has been successful is where initiatives have enabled Indigenous communities to lead, and where true partnerships have been formed with Indigenous communities. This enabled solutions to problems impacting on the community to be designed and the process for implementation agreed upon between Indigenous communities and service providers and funders.

The Literature

The literature was mostly cautious of Closing the Gap as a policy initiative.

The literature suggests that Closing the Gap is based on a specific ideological heritage that builds on previous public policy that focuses on biomedical and socioeconomic indicators and reflects current trends in social policy and public health more broadly. The literature argues that the framework does not necessarily come to terms with how to meet the complex needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander peoples (Pholi, et al., 2009; Altman, et al., 2008).

While this literature is ten years old, its criticisms suggest the need for a person and community/culture centred approach that measures actual outcomes, rather than indicators. These criticisms are still at the core of much of the feedback today.

The 2017 Close the Gap Progress and Priorities Report suggests that 'the constantly changing approaches to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs has undermined efforts to forge a nationally coordinated solution' (Wright & Lewis, 2017, p. 7).

Complexity of the challenge

Much of the literature describes the complexity of the challenge to Close the Gap given the interconnectedness of the issues faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the shortcomings of tackling specific issues or targets in isolation:

- While Closing the Gap has had broad support across the government and in some community sectors, there has been discussion in the academic literature about the complexity of the task given the significant gaps across a range of indicators and the fact that the approach is not overly different from those previously adopted (Altman, et al., 2008; Pholi, et al., 2009).
- There is general acceptance that the underlying and intergenerational causes of the gaps are not easily addressed. For example, life expectancy will be impacted by factors related to early childhood and health outcomes are dependent on social, cultural and community contexts, along with broader forces, such as macroeconomic growth (Altman, et al., 2008; Pholi, et al., 2009).
- The interconnectedness of the indicators and outcomes and the shortcomings of considering these overarching targets in isolation from other factors which may be influencing their progress is noted as a challenge across the literature. For example, the Productivity Commission presents analysis to show how the COAG targets of employment, year 12 or equivalent attainment, school attendance and reading, writing and numeracy are influenced by outcomes across the framework (SCRGSP, 2016). Social and environmental factors, such as those in the 'Home environment' and 'Safe and Supportive communities' strategic areas affect all outcomes, as do the inter-generational effects of parental income, employment and education levels (SCRGSP, 2016).

While the literature notes these challenges with the framework, it does not suggest that the concept of a coordinated approach is not a good one. By pointing out that the task is complex, the literature really underpins the concept of tailoring initiatives for communities and individuals, which in turn requires working with communities in a person-centred way. This is a key message.

For example:

- There is significant support in the literature for more flexible and tailored approaches to more effectively meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, particularly for those who live in remote and regional Indigenous communities across the country (Altman, et al., 2008; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2013; Cox, 2014).
- One critic notes that there has been an over-emphasis in the Closing the Gap approach on equality between Indigenous and other Australians and too little emphasis on diversity and difference. Hiding behind the term 'Closing the Gap' and its statistical orientation is the complexity of diverse, Indigenous, culturally-distinct ways of being that are not incorporated into planning or in setting outcomes (Altman, et al., 2008).

According to the literature and the consultations, the issues impacting on Indigenous Australians are complex. It becomes evident that applying a response that can deal with the deep-rooted issues as well as those on the surface is needed. This aligns with a trauma-informed approach to policy development and implementation.

Due to the enormity of issues facing Indigenous Australians, many of the efforts implemented as part of Closing the Gap for the past 10 years may not have been trauma-informed for a range of reasons, including inconsistent political leadership, insufficient resources and mistrust of Indigenous communities towards service providers and governments. Embedding this insight into the approaches as part of Closing the Gap Refresh could lead to change that is sustainable, owned and driven by Indigenous Australians.

A key message from the project is that in light of the complexities of the challenge to Close the Gap, adoption of systems thinking approaches (merged with cultural insights of Indigenous Australians as individuals, communities and as a population group) are required.

REVIEW QUESTION:

What were the initial expectations from Closing the Gap, including benchmarks for success?

A clear theme from the consultations was that initial expectations for Closing the Gap were high, despite those difficulties raised in the literature above.

The language seemed to be different, there seemed to be a sense of inclusion and consultation and I just remembered there being a lot of hope.

ACT Stakeholder

The Closing the Gap framework, coming out of COAG in 2007 (formalised 2008), was the first agreement where all governments would work with Indigenous communities toward specific goals to lessen Indigenous disadvantage. It followed the National Apology to Indigenous Australians and gave hope to Indigenous communities, particularly because it seemed to move toward a new way of doing business with Indigenous people; acknowledging the centrality of culture and aiming to work in partnership.

Those consulted as part of this project and working in the sector with Indigenous communities discussed the potential that the national Closing the Gap framework had to bring together people, community, government and services to work toward common goals, with a common language and understanding.

They argued that the introduction of Closing the Gap enabled government to collapse a range of ideas into succinct targets to set goals, which:

'gave clear methodology and a way to frame conversations between community and government. The Closing the Gap targets gave parameters and boundaries and the opportunity to talk the same language' .

Tasmania Stakeholder

Analysis of comments from stakeholders clearly demonstrate that there was a cautious expectation that the objectives would be achieved in partnership with Indigenous communities. Benchmarks for success were ambitious, but there was hope that steady progress would be made.

Were the initial expectations of Closing the Gap met?

Key messages coming from consultations and emerging from the literature highlight that while expectations and hopes were high, they were not met.

Analysis of the literature and consultations significantly note that central to the success of Closing the Gap is culture and partnerships with Indigenous people and communities. These principles formed part of the NIRA, and the literature supports them as being important to the success of initiatives. The new way of working with Indigenous communities didn't, in the main, materialise (there were some exceptions, such as Empowered Communities, which are discussed below).

A key message from consultations is that to work in partnership under the Closing the Gap framework requires trust between government, service providers, communities and individuals, yet relationships have not improved.

In fact, the initial hope lessened significantly about three to four years from inception due to a number of actions taken by the Commonwealth government, including redirection of funding from the Aboriginal community-controlled sector and the introduction of the Indigenous Advancement Strategy. Most stakeholders consulted noted their concern that anecdotal evidence seemed to suggest that a significant amount of the IAS funding was allocated to non-Indigenous organisations to deliver services to Indigenous people.

The relationships between government and Indigenous Australia is affected by many influences, and some of them are arguably beyond the scope of this project because they are not directly about the Closing the Gap framework. Nonetheless due to our analysis of the literature and comments coming from the consultations, we conclude that they have a profound impact on the ability of government to achieve the objectives and ignoring them would be to do a disservice to efforts to Close the Gap.

A current prominent example is the current political debate about the Uluru Statement from the Heart, which was mentioned by approximately 95% of stakeholders consulted as being significant in contributing to improving outcomes for Indigenous Australians, and as being an opportunity to embed cultural respect into the machinations of the Closing the Gap framework and Refresh.

REVIEW QUESTION:

How appropriate was the design of the policy framework to achieve the objective of Closing the Gap?

REVIEW QUESTION:

To what extent did the policy framework and components of the NIRA assist in meeting objectives?

These two questions considerably overlap, and they are answered together.

Among other provisions the NIRA contains objectives, targets, and building blocks for Closing the Gap and the National Integrated Strategy for Closing the Gap in Indigenous Disadvantage. It has a strategic component setting out the principles to enable the policy framework to work, including creating partnerships, and placing culture at the centre of initiatives. Inclusion of these principles was seen as highly appropriate if Closing the Gap was to be successful.

Overall the literature review for this project found that there was very limited published literature on the effectiveness of the overarching policy framework, including acknowledging and reporting on lessons learned. There has been limited progress against the Closing the Gap targets with three of the targets on track to be met. Progress varied significantly by jurisdiction and by remoteness, with progress being made in some locations against some of the targets. The literature also identifies some specific programs and initiatives that positively contributed towards progress.

In the policy framework, COAG recognises that overcoming Indigenous disadvantage requires long-term, generational commitment across a range of strategic platforms. In the context of the Building Blocks framework, COAG commenced the task of addressing Indigenous disadvantage across each of the strategic platforms through National Partnership Agreements.

While engagement and collaboration is happening in some settings, it is made clear by many commentators that Closing the Gap requires sustained effort and time to make those collaborations work (Altman, et al., 2008; Calma, 2007; Collins, 2016). This view is further corroborated by the consultations.

In relation to partnerships, it was raised during the consultations that some National Partnership Agreements did have an Indigenous-specific focus, addressing one or more of the building blocks. It was also highlighted by stakeholders that the inclusion of the National Partnership Agreements and various State and Territory Bilateral Agreements were to be used to provide guide posts for how governments would work collaboratively across portfolios and with Indigenous Australians in Closing the Gap.

These components of the framework for Closing the Gap are predominantly seen as appropriate.

THE NATIONAL PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENTS

National Partnership Agreements were a good mechanism for securing equality and commitment but what we don't see is the will to invest. Hardly any new resources flowing in here, particularly into the Aboriginal controlled sector. Need level of investment commensurate with need."

Consultation Stakeholder

A key message in our analysis of the literature and views coming from the consultations is that the National Partnership Agreements and the National Urban and Regional Service Delivery Strategy were key to the Closing the Gap initiative. They provided visible lines of sight for policy development and service delivery.

During the consultations stakeholders from both government and non-government agencies spoke of the potential that the National Partnership Agreements had in bringing people together and providing a focus for service delivery, funding allocation and effort. Stakeholders noted that having a collaborative approach across the country focussing in on specific areas gave rise to the hope that the concentrated efforts would accelerate change and improve outcomes.

The multiple layers of policy and agreements have resulted in complexity. It is noted elsewhere that communication around the framework has been an issue.

The key message is that communication is needed that breaks down the complex response into realistically achievable pieces of work.

STATE AND REGIONAL RESPONSES

We worked on establishing and maintaining Interagency coordination between local organisations and with Commonwealth and state and local government agencies to better coordinate services delivery to maximise government support and program outcomes. It was really hard, but we set up these coordination groups and it is still working now.

Consultation Stakeholder

There was support for the idea that all states and territories implement the Closing the Gap framework.

From our analysis of data available to the project, clearly, some jurisdictional responses worked better and were better received than others. For example, Victoria's Aboriginal Affairs Framework 2013-2018 represented a framework for how government and the Aboriginal community would work together to Close the Gap on Aboriginal disadvantage. The Framework draws on NIRA and the Closing the Gap framework to put in place strategic action areas, each with their own headline indicator and specific targets and measures. It is clearly articulated how those targets lead back to the NIRA objectives. This is achieved through a series of inclusion plans which sought to improve access to and monitoring of services across all areas of government and the basis for their annual report card on Aboriginal Affairs to the Victorian Parliament.

NSW's Opportunities, Choice, Healing, Responsibility and Empowerment (OCHRE) Aboriginal Affairs plan established in 2011 sought to improve education and employment outcomes for Aboriginal people and to enhance service accountability. The structure of the OCHRE plan included local and regional Aboriginal governance and decision-making capabilities and the opportunity for Aboriginal communities to actively influence government's efforts for supporting social, economic and cultural outcomes. In relation to addressing trauma, NSW government partnered with the Healing Foundation and ran a series of Healing Forums across the state to gain community input into areas of priority and solutions to close the gap and enable healing.

In our analysis of successful collaboration between governments and Indigenous communities, those state and territory frameworks that were able to demonstrate success had two key elements to them which would have contributed to their success in achieving increased Indigenous engagement and more appropriate service delivery. They have goals that were clearly articulated and tied back to the national Closing the Gap framework, and they embedded processes, both formal and informal, in the framework for working in genuine partnership with Indigenous people.

STATE/COMMONWEALTH INTER-AGENCIES

State and Commonwealth inter-agencies were mostly a good model that evolved out of the framework. The sharing of information and understanding what others in the system were doing led to clarity, contributed to the sense of a shared responsibility, and enabled sharing of good practices.

Where they didn't work as well, it was because culture and partnerships with Indigenous people were not central to the efforts, often leading to the perception of non-Aboriginal people dominating the efforts.

"I believe that with any program aimed at closing the gap it has to be delivered in partnership with the people receiving and the people delivering it. It has to be this way otherwise it won't work."

South Australia Stakeholder

EXAMPLES OF WHAT HAS WORKED WELL AND CAN BE BUILT ON IN THE REFRESH

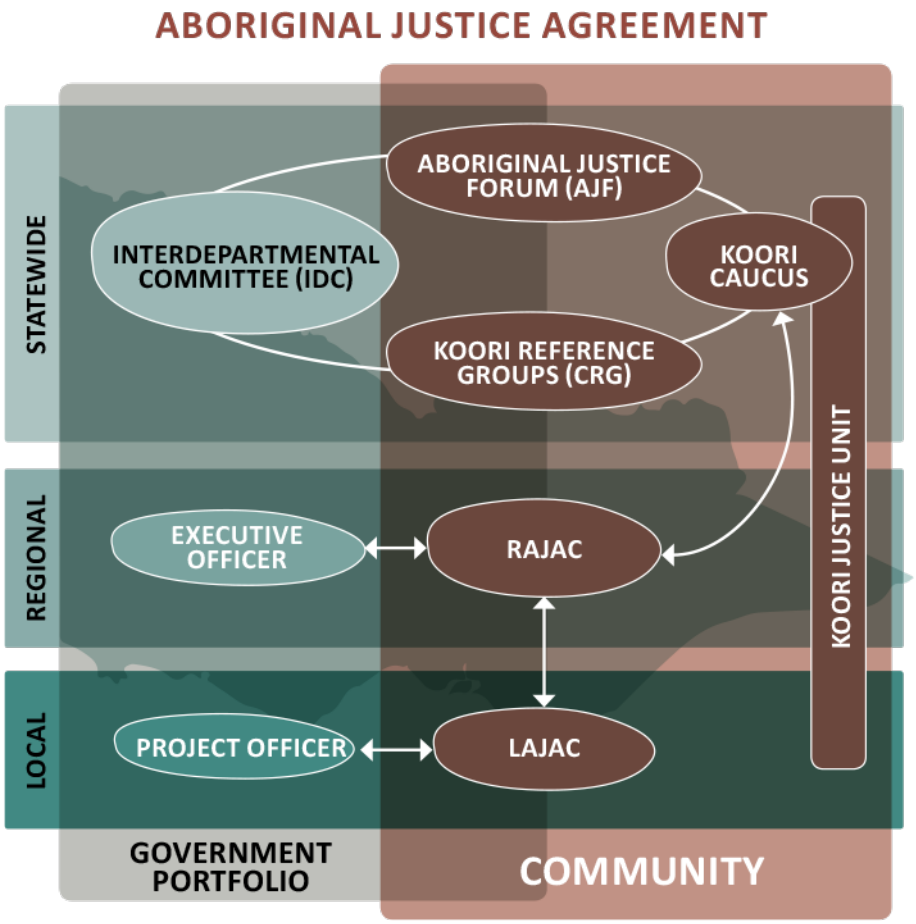
An example of a collaborative model that is working well for governments and Aboriginal communities is the Aboriginal Justice Forum (AJF) in Victoria. The AJF has responsibility for implementing the Aboriginal Justice Agreement (AJA) which has been operational for 18 years. The AJA is a response to the disadvantage impacting on Aboriginal people across Victoria.

The governance structures put in place to support the implementation of the Agreement comprised three levels as shown in the figure below:

At the highest level are two structures, the Aboriginal Justice Forum (AJF), comprising of senior representatives of government, and members of the Koori Caucus and Aboriginal community organisations and peak bodies. The Aboriginal Justice Forum has state-wide responsibility for the development and implementation of the Agreement, including a monitoring function, and provides strategic guidance on justice issues affecting Aboriginal communities in Victoria.

Regional Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committees (RAJACs) bring together key Aboriginal community members and government agencies in each region.

The RAJACs are crucial to the delivery of the AJA on the ground through the development of regional justice plans. An elected Aboriginal Chairperson leads each of the RAJACs and represents it on the Koori Caucus and AJF.



At a town or city level in some regions are Local Aboriginal Justice Action Committees (LAJACs). The LAJACs bring together local Aboriginal community members and justice representatives to develop and guide responses to local justice issues, with representation at the AJF through the RAJACs.

From our observation, we note that this is one of many models that are operating successfully across the country to address Indigenous disadvantage. The underpinning reasons these models continue to succeed can be attributed to the following:

- They involve Indigenous people at the highest level of decision-making, therefore decisions and allocation of resources are agreed upon by Indigenous stakeholders and government;
- Collegial ways of working are paramount and collaboration is openly-practiced;
- They are holistic in their approach to addressing issues;
- They contain monitoring and reporting responsibilities at Indigenous community, bureaucracy and ministerial levels;
- They are accessible, in that forums are held in different locations and sessions are made
- available specifically for Indigenous community participation;
- Young people have a formal seat at the table.

OMISSIONS

Both the literature and data from the consultations to support the notion that while the inclusions in the Closing the Gap framework are generally supported, it is the omissions that may be blocking the ability to achieve the objectives.

The issue of trans-generational trauma and the impacts this has on Indigenous communities is well documented in the literature. Experience pointed to the direct correlation of trauma-informed policies and initiatives to progress against achieving the objectives of Closing the Gap. The policy framework does not raise this issue and is void of any understanding of the impacts of trauma individually and collectively.

The negative impact of racism on health and wellbeing is well documented and was raised in consultations. In fact, the majority of those consulted spoke of the impacts of racism in the context of policy and service delivery. The perceived paternalistic approaches to service delivery by mainstream organisations and the increasing, seemingly publicly accepted, intolerance for cultural difference does and has impacted on achieving equality for Indigenous Australians.

The omission of certain targets that are needed to Close the Gap is covered in the next section.

In 2009, the Commonwealth Productivity Commission's Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage annual reporting measures were aligned with the COAG targets. The OID report measures the wellbeing of Australia's Indigenous peoples. It provides detailed analysis of the progress of indicators against the seven Closing the Gap targets but also presents analysis of data against a broader range of indicators of health and wellbeing such as early child development, education and training, healthy lives, economic participation, home environment, and safe and supportive communities. Progress is discussed in the next section.

The report also includes case studies of policies and programs that have been demonstrated to have made a difference to the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (SCRGSP, 2016).

A key message is the evidence pointing to the interconnected nature of the targets in Closing the Gap to other indicators of Indigenous social and emotional wellbeing and that a more holistic view would be beneficial in targeting need and Closing the Gap.

THEME 2: TARGETS

Introduction

We have taken the approach of addressing targets as an overarching theme. While targets are, of course, a part of the Closing the Gap framework and therefore could be included in Theme 1 they are the most referred to part of Closing the Gap and a strong focus of this project, and the subject of much reflection and opinion from stakeholders, as well as being covered extensively in the literature. Indeed the "Gap" is what is measured by the targets and meeting the targets (or not) is the most scrutinized component of Closing the Gap.

THIS THEME RESPONDS TO QUESTIONS:

How appropriate was the design of the policy framework to achieve the objective of Closing the Gap?

To what extent did the policy framework and components of the NIRA assist in meeting objectives?

Background: Progress to date on Closing the Gap targets

The annual Prime Minister's Closing the Gap Report and the Productivity Commission's Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage reports are the key public sources of evidence of progress of the Closing the Gap initiative and specifically progress against the seven targets.

The Prime Minister's report is produced annually and provides detailed analysis of progress against the seven targets as well as commentary on key policy initiatives implemented to address these targets and case studies of programs or initiatives that have contributed to progress against the targets.

While the report presents evidence of improvements over time, for the most part progress towards each of the targets has not occurred and is discussed in greater context in the Prime Minister's annual reports.

The Productivity Commission's Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage (OID) reports have been published every 2-3 years since 2003. These reports commenced prior to the NIRA when in April 2002, COAG commissioned a Steering Committee to produce a regular report against key indicators of Indigenous disadvantage. (SCRGSP, 2016). As discussed in the previous section the OID report was aligned to the COAG Closing the Gap targets in 2009.

Wider Measures of Wellbeing

A prevailing theme and key message from literature and our research is the concept of putting culture at the centre of Closing the Gap.

It is presumed that this is what including a recognition of culture within the framework was trying to achieve. This issue was discussed by a significant proportion of stakeholders consulted as well as discussed in the literature in the context of cultural determinants of health and wellbeing. Leaders from Indigenous-led organisations spoke of the inclusion of cultural determinants in the Closing the Gap framework and argued that efforts being put forward to improve outcomes needed to include these determinants alongside of the social determinants. Much of this additional data also shows limited progress and, in some cases, worsening of outcomes over the past decade. For example:

- Rates of family and community violence were unchanged between 2002 and 2014-15 (around 22 per cent) and high risk long-term alcohol use in 2014-15 was similar to 2002 (although lower than 2008)
- The proportions of people learning and speaking Indigenous languages remained unchanged from 2008 to 2014-15
- The proportion of adults reporting high-levels of psychological distress increased from 27 per cent in 2004-05 to 33 per cent in 2014-15, and hospitalisations for self-harm increased by 56 per cent over this period (SCRGSP, 2016).

The data from the literature and viewpoints from the consultations highlighted the intergenerational impacts that the loss of culture has on the health and economic wellbeing of Indigenous Australians. As noted in the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2013-2023, culture must be differentiated from the excessive behaviours that contribute to ill-health and harm. Rather, culture is about the life-giving values from which individuals, families and communities can draw strength, resilience and empowerment, thus contributing to health and wellbeing.

The evidence suggests that culture is a resource rather than a barrier across all portfolio areas…

A key message emanating from the data and consultations is that the inclusion of cultural determinants alongside social determinants is necessary to addressing inequality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. The evidence suggests that culture is a resource rather than a barrier across all portfolio areas, and the fact that it is not positioned strategically and centrally in policies and initiatives aimed at Closing the Gap reflects the typically deficit model of inquiry applied to Indigenous Australians.

Challenges in measurement and planning

The literature has highlighted numerous challenges:

Pholi (2009) argues that Closing the Gap is devoid of theory and lacks a historical and social context, relying on statistical gaps to define targets for policy action and then using changes in the size of gaps as evidence for what is or is not working.

The Closing the Gap approach to monitoring has also been criticised because it focuses on the needs of government rather than the aspirations of Indigenous Australians, highlighting problems and deficits rather than strengths and opportunities (Altman, 2013; Biddle & Markham, 2017b).

The ability to measure, predict and plan has been challenged with reference to the variability in impacts of Closing the Gap on Indigenous life expectancy rates geographically and over time deriving from variable starting conditions and unequal shifts in age specific mortality rates (Taylor & Barnes, 2013).

Regional variation is also important for understanding impacts where differences in remote, non-remote and regional Australia requires a differentiated policy response and measurement (Altman, et al., 2008; Taylor & Barnes, 2013). For example, while there has been no improvement in the Closing the Gap target around halving the gap in employment outcomes, there is also considerable geographic variation with some remote areas seeing employment to population ratios falling by more than 15% while in NSW employment growth has been rapid (Biddle & Markham, 2017a).

Despite these overall trends in disparity of progress relating to remoteness, the Productivity Commission's OID report highlights that there are some important cultural indicators, such as connection to country and language maintenance and revitalisation where outcomes are better in remote areas (SCRGSP, 2016).

Nonetheless the perception is that the framework provides for opportunities to work in partnership with Indigenous people and communities and put culture at the centre of initiatives. These components of the NIRA had the potential to result in realistic and achievable goals. However, again the issue of implementation has resulted in lack of progress towards Closing the Gap on Indigenous disadvantage.

Working in partnership with Indigenous communities

Long-standing Close the Gap Campaign leader and CEO of The Lowitja Institute, Mr Romlie Mokak, said at the 2016 Medicine & Society Oration that:

Power in the policy world
sits with others, not with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It resides outside of the domain of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We must redress the power imbalance…
…we are outsiders to the intimate internal discussions about our very own health and wellbeing.

In line with analysis of key messages coming from the consultations and the literature, as researchers, we would assert that this is as true of targets as any other piece of policy making.

In analysing data for this project, it is evident that for Closing the Gap targets to be met they need to be the right measurements of the right targets, set by Indigenous leaders and community. Targets need to be Indigenous led in design to ensure applicability and appropriateness. The Indigenous communities need to have confidence that the targets will make a difference in their lives and therefore need to be specific to the community.

Our analysis of the literature is that there is significant criticism of the Closing the Gap initiative and its targets as having too strong a focus on individual responsibility and agency and that more attention needs to be paid to the context within which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities live.

More emphasis needs to be placed on genuine engagement with, and empowerment of, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to implement this and other initiatives in the future.

This viewpoint is supported with clear messages coming from the consultations about the need to genuinely partner with Indigenous communities to find solutions. Instead of always having a top-down approach, to facilitate a new approach that centres on collaboration and allows for the very people who were being adversely impacted by government policy to help identify and prioritise issues and to devise solutions.

There are numerous examples of partnership models in the literature. In 2013 the Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat (absec NSW) and the NSW Department of Family and Community Services jointly developed a new approach which aimed to build the capacity of new and existing NSW Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) to deliver out-of-home care services. The ultimate objective being that all Aboriginal children in out-of-home care will be supported by an Aboriginal agency with a culturally tailored service. The model involves a partnership between an unaccredited ACCO and an accredited service with the aim of supporting the accreditation of the unaccredited ACCO and the transfer of all of the clients to the ACCO once it is accredited. The model involves a 4-stage process of transitioning (establishment, governance, service development and agency support) and was supported by an external Aboriginal partnerships facilitator. This approach has been strongly supported in the literature and viewpoints coming from the consultations.

Strength-based approach to target setting and measurement

Because the objectives of NIRA are stretch goals, they generally have not been achieved for a range of reasons which have been discussed elsewhere in this report. Failure to achieve goals has the effect of drawing attention to the deficit, and this occurs very publicly every year. Taking a strength based approach to target setting and measurements that are co-designed between government and communities will assist Indigenous Australians to have greater capacity in supporting actions aimed at addressing the failings.

The key message from approximately 80% of those consulted is that the achievement or non-achievement of targets is viewed as coming from a deficit-based approach and needs to move to a strength-based approach.

Stakeholders asserted that a move to a strength-based approach will lead to a focus on the many positive achievements and outcomes that some initiatives of Closing the Gap produce. Having a strength-based approach will mean advocating for a positive sense of cultural identity that acknowledges and builds upon individual, family and communal strengths and strong leadership.

The literature also discusses the fact that the evidence for success of Closing the Gap is based on individual statistical indicators which do not account for the dynamics within a society: structural imbalances; economics; racism; and discrimination (Pholi, et al., 2009). Pholi et al. (2009) argues that Closing the Gap positions Indigenous Australians as deficits to be "measured, monitored and rectified" and that this view reflects the gap in power between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia and the lack of control Indigenous Australians have over the Indigenous affairs agenda.

Success is defined by how much Indigenous Australians change by conforming to pre-determined measures where sickness=Indigenous and whiteness=health and which ignore what may be positive about being an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander as this is not relevant to the evidence base (Biddle & Markham, 2017b; Pholi, et al., 2009).

…. I get excited when we help a client who graduates from our program. … anyway, bottom line is he's got permanentemployment now, he's working for a scaffolding business, provided him a car, he's got a stable relationship… things are just going great … he's never worked before in his life, and he's now got a job and he now has self-pride… you see the pride in him. You look in his eyes and he's just proud of what he's achieving. And he should be.

NSW Stakeholder

Other key themes with respect to targets:

IMPACT TARGETS

Targets lose sight of outcomes by counting output. A human rights approach can mean significant progress is made on an individual or community level without ticking the output box. There was a call throughout the consultations to measure outcomes and celebrate those successes.

REALISTIC TARGETS

Stakeholders wanted achievable targets, and some suggested having several 'touch-points' in the targets which could be measured at interim points, allowing for the target to be reassessed.

I think it's important to have targets and goals and they need to be based on really solid data, not too out of reach that you set people up to fail and feel like failures this is too ambitious. However, can't be so low that you're not putting natural stress and pressure to try and push for better outcomes.

Andrea Mason
Co-chair IAC and CEO APY Lands Women's Council

The suggestion is for having realistic targets that have the potential for cumulative impacts and complement a generational approach to targets.

ACTION LEARNING

Action learning, reflective practice and continuous improvement were all issues spoken of during the consultations in relation to learning from previous efforts to close the gap. Stakeholders spoke of the need to look to the evidence of what's worked and why, as well as gaining insights from initiatives that have not been successful.

Ensuring a greater emphasis of interrogation of the success or failure to achieve targets through applying an action learning approach was suggested as a way of better understanding the outcome and incorporating learnings. This approach aligns with the concept of place-based responses to tackling problems.

CONTEXTUALISING TARGETS

Numerous stakeholders spoke of contextualising targets – that they thought the programs they were involved in did not have realistic targets for the communities in which they were being delivered. Some went on to suggest that targets should be set by local communities, who know the social, cultural and economic context and can set realistic targets.

It was a core theme of the literature and the consultations that projects be Indigenous led. This means allowing communities to analyse the issues and set their own targets.

OMISSIONS

As with the general discussion about the framework, while there was general agreement that the concept of targets was sound, there was also discussion on what was omitted from the framework that needed to be included to assist in Closing the Gap. There was significant discussion about the absence of a focus on justice as a part of the framework, given the interconnectedness of issues facing Indigenous Australia is well documented.

There is an enormous amount of evidence to support the call for justice targets. Reconciliation Australia has urged all Australian governments – both federal and state – to renew and lift their action on the Closing the Gap targets and framework. This must include strategic targets that speak directly to reducing rates of incarceration in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, community-led strategies and funding that can effectively achieve the Closing the Gap targets.

Reconciliation Australia, 2016

THEME 3: IMPLEMENTATION

Introduction

Despite considerable policy intervention and substantial financial investment in trying to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, problems in successfully implementing Indigenous policy have been persistent over time.

This literature review has identified that, apart from the 2012 review by the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, there have been limited attempts to bring together and synthesise findings from research and evaluation across the various Closing the Gap initiatives to identify what has worked and what lessons have been learned from the implementation of the overarching Closing the Gap policy framework.

The previous two themes focus on the structure and components of the Closing the Gap framework. As discussed, despite all of the issues raised in the preceding sections, there has still been overall support for the framework and to a lesser extent the targets. And yet, a regular question being asked during the consultations is 'Why, with such general support overall for the initiative, has there been limited success?'

Literature

Literature argues that government failures in program delivery related to red tape, poor coordination, inadequate resources, lack of continuity of programs, and a failure to work in genuine partnership with Indigenous Australians have created a challenging context for Closing the Gap (Calma, 2007; Hunt, 2008).

Closing the Gap has been criticised in the literature for focussing on the results and failing to consider the imbalanced distribution of power and the limited degree of control that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians have over their own circumstances (Behrendt, 2008; Davies, 2012; Pholi, et al., 2009).

Cowlishaw (2003) notes that the 'help' offered to Indigenous Australians is often an imposition of authoritarian solutions, where benefactors become frustrated and impatient when recipients stubbornly 'refuse to improve'. For example, Prime Minister Abbott was noted as calling on Aboriginal people "to have high expectations for themselves and especially their children in the effort to make greater progress" (Grattan, 2017) and was widely criticised by Aboriginal leaders for comments about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in remote communities as a "lifestyle choice".

THIS THEME RESPONDS TO THE QUESTIONS:

What were the major factors influencing the achievement or non-achievement of the objectives?

To what extent has Closing the Gap built on strengths, demonstrated cultural respect, and involved collaboration in such a way as to make a positive contribution to the lives of current and future generations of Indigenous Australians?

In effect these are questions of implementation and the effect of the surrounding context.

When considering these questions, we have specifically noted the following factors as set out in the scope:

- the degree and appropriateness of Indigenous engagement throughout the process
- relationships between governments, Indigenous Australians and other stakeholders
- the changing roles and responsibilities of the Commonwealth and the States, and level of co-ordination between programs or strategies
- the changing social attitudes of people and public awareness of issues
- the impact of the initiative on policy development
- any gaps in accountability mechanisms
- the take up and effectiveness of former, existing and new models including Regional Partnership Agreements and Empowered Communities
- the effectiveness of national partnership agreements and lessons learned; and
- identify and investigate examples of success and failures at local, state and national levels.

In addition, we have added to the list:

- the inclusion of culture at the centre of programs.

The Degree and Appropriateness of Indigenous Engagement throughout the Process

Despite the explicit requirement to work in partnership with Indigenous Australians within the framework, Indigenous engagement has not been extensive or appropriate.

Both the literature and the personal experiences of those in the system support the contention that outcomes are better where there are Indigenous, and community designed and led programs. There is also ample evidence about what constitutes engagement.

The importance of engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is noted throughout the literature, particularly in relation to empowering services and communities through active decision making, Indigenous ownership throughout all stages of projects and programs, the development of Indigenous-led policies and the evaluation of outcomes (Empowered Communities, 2015; Hunt, 2013) (National Congress of Australia's First Peoples, 2016; Thorpe, et al., 2016; Wright & Lewis, 2017).

Critical elements of engagement

The importance of engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is noted throughout the literature, particularly in relation to services and communities through active decision making, Indigenous ownership throughout all stages of projects and programs, the development of Indigenous-led policies and the evaluation of outcomes (Empowered Communities, 2015; Hunt, 2013; National Congress of Australia's First Peoples, 2016; Thorpe, et al., 2016; Wright & Lewis, 2017).

Throughout both the literature and supported by our discussions, in which it was a regular reflection: without genuine engagement of Indigenous Australians it will be difficult to meet the Closing the Gap targets.

Factors noted as critical to engagement include:

- Pursuing relationships built on trust
- Maintenance of professional and cultural integrity Common goals, and
- Ensuring high levels of participation by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Degree and appropriateness of Indigenous engagement

The literature and consultations affirm that co-design of Closing the Gap and initiatives is rarely happening as a true partnership. The evidence is there to suggest that it is one of the key factors that will lead to engagement by Indigenous Australians, whether it be as a consumer, service provider or policy maker. Outcomes would be improved if Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were front and centre in policy design, implementation, review and evaluation.

Aboriginal community-controlled agencies have the intrinsic cultural knowledge to deliver holistic, targeted services. This is precisely what we mean as Aboriginal people when we talk about self-determination – access to decision making, access to being effective agents of change for our Aboriginal Communities.

Muriel Bamblett, CEO VACCA

It is also noted that consultation has often taken the place of genuine engagement limiting the input of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples and putting collaboration and successful health outcomes at risk (Hunt, 2013; Thorpe, et al., 2016).

It is important for the likelihood of success of the refresh that Indigenous leaders are not only consulted, but equal partners in every level of review and decision making.

Relationships between governments, Indigenous Australians and other stakeholders

Government/Indigenous relations are crucial to Closing the Gap. Unless government is prepared to simply be an enabler of initiatives and get out of the way in favour of Indigenous control, there is a need for a shared partnership approach. Partnerships require a high level of trust. Even absolute goodwill with respect to the elements of Closing the Gap is not sufficient if confidence in the government is undermined elsewhere, such as in the reaction to the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

While engagement and collaboration is happening in some settings, it is made clear by many commentators that Closing the Gap requires sustained effort and time to make those collaborations work (Altman, et al., 2008; Calma, 2007; Collins, 2016).

The Redfern Statement, the outcome of collaborative discussions between Indigenous-led organisations, called on the Government to take action around a range of strategies linked to better engagement and empowerment, including resourcing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led solutions, committing to better engagement through representative peaks, and working with Aboriginal and Torres strait Islander leaders (National Congress of Australia's First Peoples, 2016).

Many Indigenous people consulted spoke of their lack of confidence that government can do what is required to close the gap. They spoke of targets not being met, and the continued failure by government to take up Indigenous-led solutions, whether they be political or operational. They argued that this is a critical issue that is continually impacting on genuine engagement and relationships.

Often where relationships are at their best is when governments have enabled initiatives but haven't led them.

Supporting the community and giving responsibility to local managers results in different relationships developing – more a partnership. Rather than 'black fellas being passive recipients of Government largesse'. Governments haven't been prepared to go down this path of empowerment. Communities need to have access to their own data. So that they can make their own decisions and priorities.

Richard Weston, CEO Healing Foundation

Bipartisanship has been an important feature of Closing the Gap and unlike many policy positions has not been used as a point of differentiation between political parties until now. Altman et al note that this has meant that the delivery of Closing the Gap has been able to occur over a long period of time but, nevertheless it is always subject to being used as a point of difference between political parties when necessary (Altman, et al., 2008).

Where there has not been an appropriate degree of engagement of Indigenous Australians is in dealing with the relationship between Indigenous and non- Indigenous Australians and government. Closing the Gap in the main is understood by Indigenous Australia to require community and individual empowerment to meet the objectives.

There is a need for government to broker better relationships been Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia. For example, there are funds set aside in the NDIS initiative to tackle community attitudes to disability.

The Changing Roles and Responsibilities of the Commonwealth and the States, and Level of Co-ordination between Programs or Strategies

- Providing clear, consistent and ongoing communication about purpose and expectations of program intentions, input and outcomes;
- State and Territories' reluctance to sign up to a national program and not take responsibility for their programs
- What was really needed was one plan for each state for supplementary funding. There would have been one point of program logic and accountability. (Stakeholder consultations)

The Changing Social Attitudes of People and Public Awareness of Issues

Closing the gap within the broader context of Indigenous affairs.

When Indigenous interviewees spoke of Closing the Gap it was in conjunction with human rights, community empowerment and the right to self-determination; and initiatives such as the Redfern Statement and the Uluru Statement from the Heart. In other words, "Closing the Gap" as a concept was thought to be wider than just the Closing the Gap framework, which is really the focus of this project.

Ignoring this broader focus however denies the impact of social and structural factors on closing the gaps in education, health, and employment and the importance of an understanding of the social determinants and cultural determinants of health (National Congress of Australia's First Peoples, 2016; Pholi, et al., 2009;Thorpe, et al., 2016).

It always struck me that Closing the Gap was a deficit mindset. Instead of talking about cultural prosperity, community action we talked about Closing the Gap and the deficit. The focus needed to be on strengths, community willingness and capacity to develop and deliver solutions. The focus should've been on these are original people, the original inhabitants and we have a national obligation to bring about identity and prosperity for our first nation's people.

Qld Stakeholder

Professor Ngiare Brown describes cultural determinants of health as follows:

"Cultural Determinants originate from and promote a strength-based perspective, acknowledging that stronger connections to culture and country build stronger individual and collective identities, a sense of self esteem, resilience, and improved outcomes across the other determinants of health including education, economic stability and community safety".

The 2017 Close the Gap Progress and Priorities Report stresses the need to adopt a social and cultural determinants approach to Closing the Gap if targets are to be achieved and that targets should be broadened to include areas relating to some of the wider social and cultural determinants of health and other policy areas, identifying racism and institutional racism in health care settings as an important factor influencing health inequalities (Wright & Lewis, 2017).

The implication for Closing the Gap is that all the things that are barriers to reaching targets need to be addressed – all of the social determinants and the cultural determinants of health, including connection to family, community, Country, language and culture (positively correlated) and racism (negatively correlated).

Aboriginal communities are different, our connection doesn't go away. We may not be in

those communities, but those communities are in us.

The Impact of the Initiative on Policy Development

It has been discussed elsewhere the impact the broader Closing the Gap policy framework has had on mobilising the national effort to close the gap on Indigenous disadvantage. The introduction of the Commonwealth Government's Indigenous Procurement Policy leverages the government's annual procurement spend, ensuring there is demand for competitive Indigenous goods and services. This has resulted in a burgeoning Indigenous business sector that is contributing to Closing the Gap in a range of ways, including employment and economic development.

It is evident in the literature and consultations that Indigenous business owners are using their businesses to create positive futures for themselves, their families and their communities. The Closing the Gap framework focuses on employment and training as elements of economic development which could be furtherdeveloped to better represent business.

(Owning my own business) means that I have the ability to determine my own future. It means to me, that through example, that I can make a difference in my community. Aboriginal communities are different, our connection doesn't go away. We may not be in those communities, but those communities are in us'.

Victoria Stakeholder

Any Gaps in Accountability Mechanisms

Having targets provide a structured framework for governments and those they fund to be held accountable for meeting or rather failing to meet, their policy goals.

NSW Stakeholder

Stakeholders spoke of gaps in accountability in relation to government service delivery and reporting on outcomes of programs. There was general consensus that the Commonwealth Government has to report annually on progress against the Closing the Gap targets, whereas the state and territories are not required to provide the same publicly response to their efforts to close the gap on Indigenous disadvantage.

The literature argues that the Closing the Gap approach to monitoring and accountability focuses on the needs of government rather than the aspirations of Indigenous Australians, highlighting problems and deficits rather than strengths and opportunities (Altman, 2013; Biddle & Markham, 2017b).

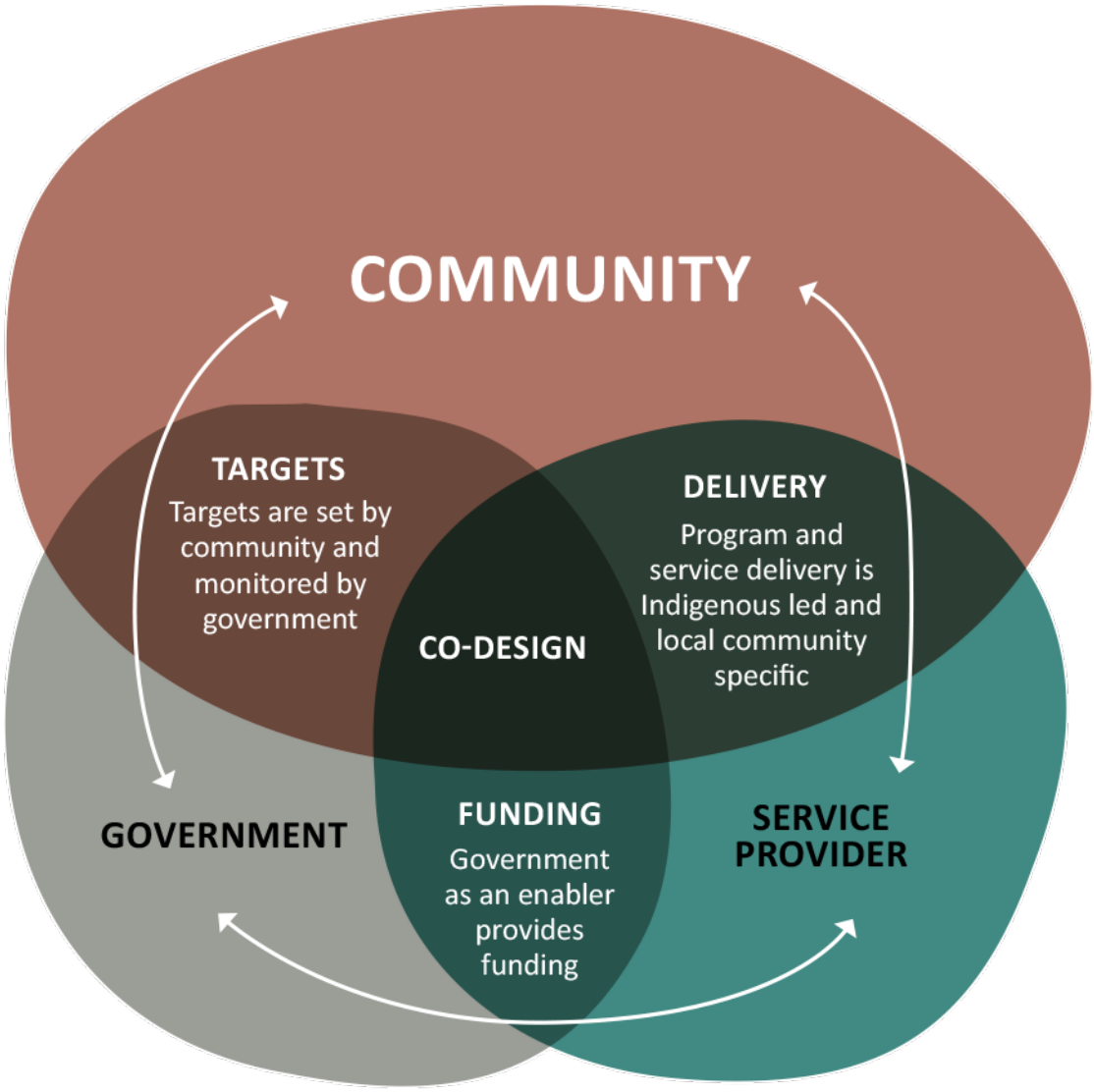
Having transparent governance structures whereby everyone's role and responsibilities are understood in relation to service delivery and resource allocation is a key component of any accountability framework. A key message emerging from the literature and consultations is the need to provide accountability mechanisms in the Closing the Gap policy framework that addresses the significant structural inequalities that are impacting on Indigenous Australians. Stakeholders spoke of the need for measuring "success" or "progress" and that in relation to ensuring accountability that Indigenous Australians were provided the opportunity to define what the measures should be and what success looks like for them in the context of their families and communities.

Funding Models

There was overwhelming feedback that funding models need change. That challenges impacting on Indigenous communities are becoming more and more complex. The complexity brings with it the opportunity to stretch the creativity of stakeholders to imagine and rethink existing approaches to service delivery to ensure it is matched to realities of these communities, and then co-design new and innovative ways of working to address disadvantage. It is about sharing insights and resources to meet current and future needs of Indigenous communities. There needs to be a focus on productivity growth and creation of industries that will contribute to income generating opportunities that will in turn lead to closing the gap on disadvantage.

Closing the Gap targets will only be reached over long periods of time, in some cases through generational change and a paradigm shift in thinking which has been discussed earlier in this report.

Funding of programs should be for a minimum period that will actually have an effect on outcomes and governments should be positioning themselves as enablers of change, rather than trying to lead it. Change itself should come through community. Bringing together many of these points allows us to put up a model for debate:



Self-determination and Community Empowerment Models

'Authorising a mandated environment to be innovative that is factored into the public service model that deals with the lack of know- how lifts the game of agencies and builds capacity of our mobs'.

Danny Lester

NSW Deputy Ombudsman (Aboriginal Programs)

Empowerment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services and communities is a consistent theme in the literature and has been explicated in detail in the Empowered Communities: Empowered Peoples strategy with a headline policy agenda of Indigenous empowerment, and a paradigm shift away from the traditional social policy framework in which Indigenous affairs initiatives have been developed and delivered (Empowered Communities, 2015). The approach aims to link closing the gap goals with cultural recognition and determination, less duplication and red tape and a focus on investing in things that work (Empowered Communities, 2015).

Models of Indigenous-led decision-making such as Empowered Communities, the Regional Alliance structures in NSW, Local Aboriginal Networks in Victoria and South Australia's Treaty have all been well received. The Empowered Communities Model is an Indigenous initiative, seeking to have local needs and aspirations that are identified by communities, led and solved by Indigenous people. Government, corporates and business sectors partner with Indigenous people in these communities to drive economic and social change.

Self-determination and community empowerment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is a consistent theme in the literature and has been explicated in detail in the Empowered Communities: Empowered Peoples strategy with a headline policy agenda of Indigenous empowerment, and a paradigm shift away from the traditional social policy framework in which Indigenous affairs initiatives have been developed and delivered (Empowered Communities, 2015).

The Effectiveness of National Partnership Agreements and Lessons Learned

There have been some evaluations and formal reviews of some of the cross-cutting, Indigenous-specific National Partnership Agreements and other initiatives which shed some light on what has worked. For example, an evaluation of the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Service Delivery published in 2013 showed mixed results, with positive results around increases in service provision in target communities and improved service coordination. However, local service providers also reported that there had been limited achievements against Closing the Gap targets. The evaluation also found that there had been challenges in realising community engagement aspirations with the implementation of the Agreement and that greater devolution of decision-making responsibility to regional and local levels would improve the ability of Government to be responsive to community needs (Australian Government, 2014, p. 7).

Identify and Investigate Examples of Success and Failures at Local, State and National Levels

Through the literature review it has been identified that, apart from the 2012 review by the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, there have been limited attempts to bring together and synthesise findings from research and evaluation across the various Closing the Gap initiatives to identify what has worked and what lessons have been learnt. This would be a useful input to the current refresh of Closing the Gap.

There is evidence both from literature and discussions from consultations that programs that are developed or implemented in line with Indigenous cultural values and perspectives are more likely to succeed than those that do not.

There is evidence both from literature and discussions from consultations that programs that are developed or implemented in-line with Indigenous cultural values and perspectives are more likely to succeed than those that do not.

Programs that show promising results for Indigenous communities are those that encourage self-determination and community governance, connection to culture and community life, and community resilience. Important program features include:

- a holistic approach
- a focus on healing from trauma
- a means of empowering people to regain a sense of control and mastery over their lives
- Indigenous-led, family focused, culturally responsive, and context specific
- interdisciplinary approaches that provide outreach services and transport
- partnerships with the Indigenous community- controlled organisations and local communities.

The 2016 OID report (SCRGSP, 2016) identifies a number of promising case studies of policies and programs that have demonstrated success in improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Some of the initiatives listed in the report which have been formally evaluated and have demonstrated success include:

- Introduction of low aromatic fuel to reduce the harmful, risky health behaviour of petrol sniffing
- A number of literacy and numeracy programs for children
- Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME) Program
- The Working on Country PrograM
- Aboriginal Midwifery Access Program
- Healthy for Life program
- Care for Kids' Ears campaign
- Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY)

Whilst anecdotally and through consultations as part of this project the following initiatives have been identified as successful and whilst not all have been funded through Closing the Gap IAS funding, they all strive to close the gap on Indigenous disadvantage:

- Family Matters initiatives and policy framework

  Justice Reinvestment and Collective Impact

  Myriad of health programs – Aunty Jean

  program
- in NSW, Deadly Choices in Qld
- Time for Grandparents being delivered by Uniting Care Qld in response to supporting children in out of home care who are being cared for by their grandparents;
- Massive Murray Paddle addressing youth disengagement in Victoria and NSW.
- Educational scholarships to private boarding schools for Indigenous children – AEIF and Yalari
- "I got your back sis" and Tackling Violence both programs focusing on addressing domestic violence being delivered across NSW
- We Ali – a program focussing on tackling transgenerational trauma nationallyand internationally
- The myriad of programs being supported nationally through the Healing Foundation
- The Yiriman project which is a partnership between four language groups in Western Australia
- Rise UP, Be Your Best, Own Your Future Program in the Northern Territory is an educational, empowerment and transformational program working with both urban and remote Indigenous people from an individual, family and community context
- Children Ground in Alice Springs
- Culture and language revitalisation programs across the country

Evaluation

It is well recognised in the literature and certainly the consultations raised the point that there has been a significant amount of evaluations and research undertaken over the years into most aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities' lives. It was noted that the significance of improving policy through evaluation lies beyond the evaluation itself; it lies in the process where governments apply the lessons to other initiatives. Stakeholders in Indigenous consultations (this one being no different) often remark that their feedback has no effect, and they never know what happens to the information. Stakeholders spoke of their fatigue at continually giving feedback that is not listened to.

An overarching evaluation framework could assist with the different levels of outcomes expected over the life of the program and the various indicators needed at each level to measure whether the program is meeting its objectives. Feedback loops and a process to escalate any concerns will help to ensure government and program providers monitor one another and program learnings are shared.

SUGGESTIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS AND PROGRAM FUNDERS INCLUDE:

Embedding evaluation into program design and practice — evaluation should not be viewed as an 'add on' but built into a program's design and presented as part of a continuous quality improvement process with funding for self-evaluation provided to organisations.

Developing an evidence base through an accountability framework with regular feedback loops via an online data management system — to ensure data being collected is used to inform practice and improve program outcomes and there is a process for escalating concerns.

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROGRAM PROVIDERS INCL

Embedding evaluation into program practice — evaluation should not be viewed as a negative process, but as an opportunity to learn.

Developing an evidence base through the regular collection of data via an online data management system to not only provide a stronger evidence base for recurrent funding, but also to improve service delivery and ensure client satisfaction with the program. (Hudson, 2017)

Stakeholders spoke of their fatigue at continually giving feedback that is not listened to.

The Inclusion of Culture at the Centre of Programs

As discussed elsewhere in the report, culture at the centre of programs and having a respect for culture in all aspects of service delivery and program/policy design is critical to Closing the Gap:

- Skilling up a culturally competent workforce that understands the generational impacts of history and how this is manifested in the cultural and social dynamics of Indigenous communities;
- Providing cultural and professional learning opportunities that facilitates capacity building for both Indigenous communities and governments.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

In Summary we answer the final question:

To what extent has Closing the Gap built on strengths, demonstrated cultural respect, and involved collaboration in such a way as to make a positive contribution to the lives of current and future generations of Indigenous Australians?

In analysing the key messages from the consultations and literature there were conflicting assertions about this question that was put forward by stakeholders. Almost every stakeholder consulted spoke of the negative limitations of the framework, particularly in relation to the absence of culture in the context of the NIRA, which to them demonstrated cultural disrespect. However, they did acknowledge that the Closing the Gap framework, depending on which initiative and program it referred to, did make a positive contribution to the lives of current and potentially future generations of Indigenous Australians. The provision of medication free or at reduced rates was seen as just one very positive contribution to closing the gap.

It is evident that whilst there are significant challenges impacting on Indigenous Australians that the Closing the Gap policy framework attempted to address, there were just as many positive stories expressed in the literature and discussions that speak of the resilience of Indigenous Australians.
It has been repeated in the various sections of this report the potential that the Closing the Gap framework has to make a positive contribution to the lives of current and future generations of Indigenous Australians.

Overall we would have to conclude that the framework was not well implemented, and so there has been a great deal of lost opportunity. The fact that cultural determinants are not captured in the policy framework makes it difficult to fully demonstrate cultural respect and collaboration with Indigenous Australians but there is plenty of potential to shift the way government and Indigenous Australian communities work together to Close the Gap.

Below are some key messages and findings obtained from both stakeholder interviews, focus groups and the literature review

From our analysis that at the beginning of Closing the Gap, it was seen as a pathway that set out how to move toward equality. It was a blueprint for how particularly because within the Closing the Gap initiative it was a solid recognition that achieving equality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians would only be made possible by working in partnership with Indigenous people.

Where Closing the Gap has been successful is where initiatives have enabled Indigenous communities to lead, and where true partnerships have been formed with Indigenous communities. This enabled solutions to problems impacting on the community to be designed and the process for implementation agreed upon between Indigenous communities and service providers and funders.

While the literature notes these challenges with the framework, it does not suggest that the concept of a coordinated approach is not a good one. By pointing out that the task is complex, the literature really underpins the concept of tailoring initiatives for communities and individuals, which in turn requires working with communities in a person-centred way.

In light of the complexities of the challenge to Close the Gap, adoption of systems thinking approaches (merged with cultural insights of Indigenous Australians as individuals, communities and as a population group) are required.

The message coming from consultations and emerging from the literature highlight that while expectations and hopes were high, they were not met. Consultations revealed that working in partnership under the Closing the Gap framework requires trust between government, service providers, communities and individuals, yet relationships have not improved.

Analysis of the literature and views coming from the consultations revelled that the National Partnership Agreements and the National Urban and Regional Service Delivery Strategy were key to the Closing the Gap initiative. That they provided visible lines of sight for policy development and service delivery.

Greater communication is needed about the complexity of working holistically with Indigenous communities and that initiatives being implemented are realistic and achievable.

There was support for the idea that all states and territories implement the Closing the Gap framework.

Evidence pointing to the interconnected nature of the targets in Closing the Gap to other indicators of Indigenous social and emotional wellbeing and that a more holistic view would be beneficial in targeting need and Closing the Gap.

A prevailing theme from literature and our research is the concept of putting culture at the centre of Closing the Gap.

The inclusion of cultural determinants alongside social determinants is necessary to address inequality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. The evidence suggests that culture is a resource rather than a barrier across all portfolio areas and the fact that it is not positioned strategically and centrally in policies and initiatives aimed

at Closing the Gap reflects the typically deficit model of inquiry applied to Indigenous Australians.

Key Messages and Findings Continued…

In analysing data for this project, it is evident that for Closing the Gap targets to be met they need to be the right measurements of the right targets, set by Indigenous leaders and community. Targets need to be Indigenous-led in design to ensure applicability and appropriateness. Indigenous communities need to have confidence that the targets will make a difference in their lives and therefore need to be specific to the community.

Achievement or non-achievement of targets was viewed as coming from a deficit-based approach and needs to move to a strength-based approach.

Targets lose sight of outcomes by counting output. A human rights approach can mean significant progress is made on an individual or community level without ticking the output box. There was a call throughout the consultations to measure outcomes and celebrate those successes.

Stakeholders wanted achievable targets, and some suggested having several 'touch-points' in the targets which could be measured at interim points, allowing for the target to be reassessed.

Ensuring a greater emphasis on interrogation of the success or failure to achieve targets through applying an action learning approach was suggested as a way of better understanding the outcome and incorporating learnings. This approach aligns with the concept of place-based responses to tackling problems.

It was a core theme of the literature and the consultations that projects be Indigenous-led. This means allowing communities to analyse the issues and set their own targets.

Both the literature and the personal experiences of those in the system support the contention that outcomes are better where there are Indigenous, and community designed and led programs. There is also ample evidence about what constitutes engagement.

Where there has not been an appropriate degree of engagement of Indigenous Australians is in dealing with the relationship between Indigenous and non- Indigenous Australians and government. Closing the Gap in the main is understood by Indigenous Australia to require community and individual empowerment to meet the objectives. There is a need for government to broker better relationships been Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia. For example, there are funds set aside in the NDIS initiative to tackle community attitudes to disability.

The implication for Closing the Gap is that all the things that are barriers to reaching targets need to be addressed – all of the social determinants and the cultural determinants of health, including connection to family, community, Country, language and culture (positively correlated) and racism (negatively correlated).

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Literature Review for Closing the Gap 10 Year Review

For Murawin Consulting

10 January 2018

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Context and methodology

Murawin Consulting commissioned CIRCA to undertake a literature review as part of a project for the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet to inform the 10-year review of Closing the Gap. The overall purpose of this project, of which the literature review is a component, is to provide evidence to assess the effectiveness and appropriateness of the overarching Closing the Gap policy framework including reflecting, acknowledging and reporting on lessons learned. The project is to provide a qualitative analysis of attitudes and reflections on 10 years of the Closing the Gap initiative, including analysis on learning from past success and failure drawing on stakeholder consultations and evidence-based literature.

It was not possible to undertake a systematic review of the literature within the resources available and so a narrative literature review was undertaken during late December 2017 and early January 2018. It involved a review of publicly available literature over the last ten years (including grey and academic literature and high- quality media commentary) about the overall success, progress and appropriateness of the overarching Closing the Gap policy framework. It included literature with a high-level focus on the framework and excluded literature that focused solely on specific elements or targets of the overarching Closing the Gap framework.

The literature search included the following elements:

- A broad internet search using key search terms
- A search of relevant websites including, but not limited to:
  - the websites of relevant government departments,
  - the Closing the Gap clearinghouse
  - Healthinfonet
  - the Lowitja Institute
  - the Australian Human Rights Commission
  - the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research
  - Australian Policy Online
  - National Congress of Australia's First Peoples
  - The Conversation
- A search across the University of Sydney Library collections (print, audiovisual and electronic collections) using CrossSearch
- A search of specific academic databases including Informit Online, JSTOR, Proquest Central, Scopus, PubMed, PsychINFO, and Web of Science

- Additional articles were identified through hand searching reference lists of relevant publications

Key search terms for the review included “Closing the Gap” “Indigenous” “progress” “appropriateness” “success” “engagement” “facilitators” and “barriers”

The search generated a limited number of relevant articles and publications and only a very small number of academic journal articles. The search identified a much larger body of literature which focused on progress of specific elements and targets of the overarching Closing the Gap policy framework which was outside the scope of this review. The literature search did not identify any recent, systematic reviews of this broader body of literature apart from the 2012 article from the Closing the Gap clearinghouse titled *What works to overcome Indigenous disadvantage*.

Findings

Background

In December 2007, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed to a partnership between all levels of government to work with Indigenous communities to achieve the target of Closing the Gap in Indigenous disadvantage.

The National Indigenous Reform Agreement (Closing the Gap) (NIRA) was established to frame the task of Closing the Gap in Indigenous disadvantage and outlined the objectives, outcomes, outputs, performance indicators, performance benchmarks, roles and responsibilities agreed by COAG.

To Close the Gap in Indigenous disadvantage under the NIRA, COAG committed to making significant reforms in order to address six specific targets (objectives):

- close the life expectancy gap within a generation
- halve the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five within a decade
- ensure all Indigenous four years olds in remote communities have access to early childhood education within five years. In December 2015, COAG revised this target, aiming for 95 per cent of all Indigenous four-year-olds to be enrolled in early childhood education by 2025.
- halve the gap for Indigenous students in reading, writing and numeracy within a decade
- halving the gap for Indigenous people aged 20-24 in Year 12 attainment or equivalent attainment rates by 2020; and
- halve the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a decade (COAG, 2009).

In May 2014, COAG agreed to a seventh target to close the gap in school attendance by the end of 2018.

To support the targets, COAG recognised the need for long-term, generational commitment across a range of strategic and integrated policy platforms (called 'Building Blocks'), outlined below:

- Early Childhood
- Schooling
- Health
- Economic Participation
- Healthy Homes
- Safe Communities; and

- Governance and Leadership (COAG, 2009).

In the context of the Building Blocks framework, COAG then agreed to commence the task of addressing Indigenous disadvantage across a number of components including:

- National Partnership agreements including Remote Indigenous Service Delivery, Indigenous Economic Participation, Indigenous Early Childhood Development, Indigenous Health, Remote Indigenous Housing, Remote Indigenous Public Internet Access
- a National Urban and Regional Service Delivery Strategy
- a focus on achievement of outcomes – including Indigenous outcomes – through the renegotiated National Agreements, and mainstream National Partnership agreements
- enhanced reporting arrangements that included indicators disaggregated by Indigenous and non-Indigenous status, objectives, outcomes, outputs, performance indicators, and performance benchmarks to assess progress in Closing the Gap in Indigenous disadvantage
- A National Framework for Reporting Expenditure on Services to Indigenous Australians (COAG, 2009).

Progress to date on Closing the Gap targets

The annual Prime Minister's Closing the Gap report and the Productivity Commission's Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage reports are the key, public sources of evidence of progress of the Closing the Gap initiative and specifically progress against the seven targets.

The Prime Minister's report is produced annually and provides detailed analysis of progress against the seven targets as well as commentary on key policy initiatives implemented to address these targets and case studies of programs or initiatives that have contributed to progress against the targets. In his introduction to the 2017 report, the Prime Minister concluded that "while many successes are being achieved locally, as a nation, we are only on track to meet one of the seven Closing the Gap targets this year" (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2017, p. 4). The Prime Minister's report (2017) found that the target to halve the gap in Year 12 attainment by 2020 is on track.

While the report presents evidence of improvements over time for indicators relating to the remaining six targets these improvements were not sufficient to ensure that they were on track. Furthermore, the results demonstrate substantial variations in progress for some of the indicators by jurisdiction and by remoteness. For most of the targets there was a significant disparity in progress between areas depending on remoteness. For example, in 2016 the attendance rate for Indigenous students was 86.9 percent in inner regional areas compared to 66.4 per cent in very remote areas and 84 per cent of all Indigenous students in major city areas met or exceeded the national minimum standards for Year 5 numeracy, double the 42 per cent of students in very remote areas (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2017).

The Prime Minister's report presents examples of policies and programs which have demonstrated success in working to improve progress against the targets. Some of these include:

- The National Framework for Health Services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Families
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnership forums in each State and Territory
- The Remote School Attendance Strategy which has shown improvements in the schools selected for the program
- The Indigenous Procurement Policy with $284.2 million in contracts reported to have been awarded to 493 Indigenous businesses in the first year
- The Empowered Communities initiative (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2017).

The Productivity Commission's Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage (OID) reports have been published every 2-3 years since 2003. These reports commenced prior to the NIRA when In April 2002, COAG commissioned a Steering Committee to produce a regular report against key indicators of Indigenous disadvantage. The Steering Committee is advised by a working group made up of representatives from all Australian governments, the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples, the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. For the 2009 report, the Steering Committee worked with jurisdictions and COAG committees to align the OID report with the COAG targets and NIRA and has been amended to reflect any subsequent changes to the targets (SCRGSP, 2016).

The OID report measures the wellbeing of Australia's Indigenous peoples. It provides detailed analysis of the progress of indicators against the seven Closing the Gap targets but also presents analysis of data against a broader range of indicators of health and wellbeing such as early child development, education and training, healthy lives, economic participation, home environment, and safe and supportive communities. The report also includes case studies of policies and programs that have been demonstrated to have made a difference to the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (SCRGSP, 2016).

These reports provide the basis of the data analysis presented in the Prime Minister's reports but also present data on a range of indicators which are not covered in these reports. Much of this additional data also shows limited progress and in some cases worsening of outcomes over the past decade for example:

- Rates of family and community violence were unchanged between 2002 and 2014-15 (around 22 per cent) and high risk long-term alcohol use in 2014-15 was similar to 2002 (although lower than 2008)
- The proportions of people learning and speaking Indigenous languages remained unchanged from 2008 to 2014-15
- The proportion of adults reporting high-levels of psychological distress increased from 27 per cent in 2004-05 to 33 per cent in 2014-15, and hospitalisations for self-harm increased by 56 per cent over this period (SCRGSP, 2016).

The 2016 OID report (SCRGSP, 2016) identifies a number of promising case studies of policies and programs that have demonstrated success in improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Some

of the initiatives listed in the report which have been formally evaluated and have demonstrated success include:

- Introduction of low aromatic fuel to reduce the harmful, risky health behaviour of petrol sniffing
- A number of literacy and numeracy programs for children
- Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME) Program
- The Working on Country Program
- Aboriginal Midwifery Access Program
- Healthy for Life program
- Care for Kids' Ears campaign
- Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY)

Close the Gap Campaign and the Redfern Statement

Since 2006, a group of key organisations and peak bodies have been working together on the Close the Gap social justice campaign that aims to achieve health equality (measured as life expectancy equality) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by 2030. The campaign began as the National Indigenous Health Equality Campaign, which was formed in March 2006 by these organisations:

- Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission
- National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO)
- Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association (AIDA)
- Congress of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nurses and Midwives (CATSINaM)
- Indigenous Dentists' Association of Australia (IDAA)
- Oxfam Australia
- Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR).

A Steering Committee was established to help guide the development of the campaign. A coalition of more than 40 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous health organisations and human rights organisations became involved in the campaign (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2008). Since 2010 the Steering Committee has produced an annual 'Shadow' report (more recently called Progress and Priorities report) which provides the Committee's own analysis of progress against the COAG targets and sets out future priorities for the Government and other stakeholders.

The latest report reflects on 10 years of the COAG targets and sets out a number of recommendations that the Committee believes would be required to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the future. The report very much reflects the sentiments and proposals that were set out in the Redfern Statement released in June 2016 by a group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak organisations. Specifically, the Redfern Statement urges the Government to:

- commit to resourcing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led solutions
- commit to better engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through their representative national peak organisations
- recommit to Closing the Gap in this generation by and in partnership with COAG and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- commit to working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders to establish a Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs in the future
- commit to addressing the unfinished business of reconciliation (National Congress of Australia's First Peoples, 2016).

In terms of the Closing the Gap framework, the Redfern Statement recommended setting additional targets and developing evidence-based prevention and early intervention oriented national strategies to drive activity and outcomes addressing:

- family violence (with a focus on women and children)
- incarceration and access to justice
- child safety and wellbeing, and the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care
- increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access to disability services
- secure national funding agreements between the Commonwealth and States and Territories (like the former National Partnership Agreements), which emphasise accountability to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and drive the implementation of national strategies (National Congress of Australia's First Peoples, 2016).

Other recommendations around governance and reporting of relevance to the Closing the Gap initiative are:

- Reforming the Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS) with greater emphasis on service/need mapping and local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations as preferred providers. A 2017 National Audit Office report on the development and implementation of the IAS presented findings that were critical about the implementation of the strategy and presented a number of recommendations for future reform (The Auditor-General, 2017).

- Creating national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representative bodies for education, employment and housing
- Adequately resource the Implementation Plan for the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2013-2023 (Department of Health, 2015).
- Fund an implementation plan for the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Strategy
- Develop a long-term National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Determinants of Health Strategy which takes a broader, holistic look at the elements to health and wellbeing for Australia's First Peoples (National Congress of Australia's First Peoples, 2016).

The 2017 Close the Gap Progress and Priorities Report very much echoes the sentiments and recommendations set out in the Redfern Statement. Its overall conclusion is "after 10 years, and despite closing the gap being a national bipartisan priority, it is clear that Australian governments at all levels are, in key respects, failing Australia's First peoples" (Wright & Lewis, 2017, p. 1).

The report raises concern about the lack of progress against the COAG targets and other indicators reported in the Productivity Commission report. It also emphasises the need for more rigorous evaluations of programs and services but also a need for much greater emphasis on identifying and addressing service gaps (Wright & Lewis, 2017).

The report identifies the Aboriginal and Torre Strait Islander Health Plan 2013-2023 as "a positive model of policy development collaboration between Government and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health peaks, represented by the National Health Leadership Forum" (Wright & Lewis, 2017, p. 29). It recognises the Plan as the primary mechanism for efforts to close the gap in health inequality and calls for significant investments to support the Implementation Plan. It also recommends the development of a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce Strategy to meet the vison of the Plan (Wright & Lewis, 2017).

Themes from the literature

The following sections set out themes from the broader academic and grey literature identified through the search. As mentioned above, there was a limited body of academic and grey literature (apart from the key policy documents outlined above in section 3.2) identified in the search which had a broad focus on the overarching Closing the Gap policy framework.

Complexity of the challenge

Much of the literature describes the difficulties created by the complexity of the challenge posed by the Closing the Gap initiative, particularly given the interconnectedness of the issues faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the shortcomings of tackling specific issues or targets in isolation.

The literature discusses the fact that Closing the Gap is based on a specific ideological heritage that builds on previous public policy incarnations focusing on biomedical and socioeconomic indicators and reflects current trends in social policy and public health more broadly. The literature argues that the framework does not

necessarily come to terms with how to meet the complex needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander peoples (Pholi, et al., 2009; Altman, et al., 2008)

While Closing the Gap has had broad support across the government and in some community sectors, there has been discussion in the academic literature about the complexity of the task given the significant gaps across a range of indicators and the fact that the approach is not overly different from those previously adopted (Altman, et al., 2008; Pholi, et al., 2009). Despite considerable policy intervention and substantial financial investment in trying to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, problems of successfully implementing Indigenous policy have been persistent over time. There has been limited impact on school attendance, employment, and life expectancy, demonstrating both the significant challenges in closing the gap and the use of a standard approach that over time has not yielded results (Altman, et al., 2008; Blackman, et al., 2016; Pholi, et al., 2009). There has been considerable coverage in the media in relation to the failure of Closing the Gap to meet its targets (Behrendt, 2008; Collins, 2016; Davies, 2012; Grattan, 2017; Riddle & Fogarty, 2015).

There is general acceptance that the underlying and intergenerational causes of the gaps are not easily addressed, for example, life expectancy will be impacted by factors related to early childhood and health outcomes are dependent on social, cultural and community contexts, along with broader forces, such as macroeconomic growth (Altman, et al., 2008; Pholi, et al., 2009).

The interconnectedness of the indicators and outcomes and the shortcomings of considering these overarching targets in isolation from other factors which may be influencing their progress is noted as a challenge across the literature. For example, the Productivity Commission presents analysis to show how the COAG targets of employment, year 12 or equivalent attainment, school attendance and reading, writing and numeracy are influenced by outcomes across the framework (SCRGSP, 2016).For example, social and environmental factors, such as those in the 'Home environment' and 'Safe and Supportive communities' strategic areas affect all outcomes as do the inter-generational effects of parental income, employment and education levels (SCRGSP, 2016).

The 2017 Close the Gap Progress and Priorities Report suggests that "the constantly changing approaches to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs has undermined efforts to forge a nationally coordinated solution" (Wright & Lewis, 2017, p. 7). Other literature argues that government failures in program delivery related to red tape, poor coordination, inadequate resources, lack of continuity of programs, and a failure to work in genuine partnership with Indigenous Australians have also created a challenging context for Closing the Gap (Calma, 2007; Hunt, 2008).

There is significant support in the literature for more flexible and tailored approaches to more effectively meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, particularly for those who live in remote and regional Indigenous communities across the country (Altman, et al., 2008; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2013; Cox, 2014). The Redfern Statement recommended setting additional targets and developing evidence- based prevention and early intervention oriented national strategies to drive activity and outcomes addressing key issues of concern to Indigenous Australians (National Congress of Australia's First Peoples, 2016).

Strategies and approaches identified in the literature as not having been effective include: programs implemented in isolation without consideration of local culture and the economic and social context; short-

term funding which often results in high staff turnover and insufficient project timeframes; lack of cultural safety including an understanding of local Indigenous culture and knowledge; inflexible program delivery and lack of transport (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2013).

While there have been improvements in some measures, the current rate of improvement is generally seen as too slow, with some commentators noting that it may take many generations before the gaps are closed (Altman, et al., 2008; Biddle & Markham, 2017a). Other approaches may be required to significantly alter the current predictions, suggestions include reallocation of property rights to fully acknowledge original ownership, and an increase in funding of Indigenous infrastructure (Altman, et al., 2008). Altman and colleagues have also challenged the concept of closing the gap suggesting a focus on realism in policy commitments which aims to reduce disparities rather than close gaps may be more useful (Altman, et al., 2008)

Individuals in context

Closing the Gap has been criticised in the literature for focussing on individual results and failing to consider the imbalanced distribution of power and the limited degree of control that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians have over their own circumstances (Behrendt, 2008; Davies, 2012; Pholi, et al., 2009). Cowlishaw (2003) notes that the 'help' offered to Indigenous Australians is often an imposition of authoritarian solutions, where benefactors become frustrated and impatient when recipients stubbornly 'refuse to improve'. For example, Prime Minister Abbott was noted as calling on Aboriginal people "to have high expectations for themselves and especially their children in the effort to make greater progress" (Grattan, 2017) and was widely criticised by Aboriginal leaders for comments about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in remote communities as a "lifestyle choice".

Indigenous disadvantage has been described as one of the 'wicked problems', a highly intractable problem where motivation and behaviour of individuals and communities lies at the heart of successful approaches' and while the need for government coordination is recognised, it is seen as secondary to the role of individuals (Australian Public Service Commission, 2012). This individual focus denies the impact of social and structural factors on closing the gaps in education, health, and employment and the importance of an understanding of the social determinants of health (National Congress of Australia's First Peoples, 2016; Pholi, et al., 2009; Thorpe, et al., 2016).

The literature also discusses the fact that the evidence for success of Closing the Gap is based on individual statistical indicators which do not account for the dynamics within a society, structural imbalances, economics, racism and discrimination (Pholi, et al., 2009). Pholi et al. (2009) argues that Closing the Gap positions Indigenous Australians as deficits to be "measured, monitored and rectified" (p. 11) and that this view reflects the gap in power between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia and the lack of control Indigenous Australians have over the Indigenous affairs agenda. Success is defined by how much Indigenous Australians change by conforming to pre-determined measures where sickness= Indigenous and whiteness=health and which ignore what may be positive about being an Aboriginal or Torres Strait islander as this is not relevant to the evidence base (Biddle & Markham, 2017b; Pholi, et al., 2009).

One critic notes that there has been an over-emphasis in the Closing the Gap approach on equality between Indigenous and other Australians and too little emphasis on diversity and difference, reflecting that hiding behind the term 'Closing the Gap' and its statistical orientation is the complexity of diverse, Indigenous,

culturally-distinct ways of being that are not incorporated into planning or in setting outcomes (Altman, et al., 2008).

The 2017 Close the Gap Progress and Priorities Report stresses the need to adopt a social and cultural determinants approach to Closing the Gap if targets are to be achieved and that targets should be broadened to include areas relating to some of the wider social and cultural determinants of health and other policy areas, identifying racism and institutional racism in health care settings as an important factor influencing health inequalities (Wright & Lewis, 2017)

However, others see the social and behavioural determinants of health, as well as the performance of health systems as already central to Closing the Gap recognising that good health is holistic and is also closely associated with socioeconomic, behavioural and environmental factors (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2015).

Engagement and power relations

The literature discusses that Closing the Gap can be seen as a product of neoconservatism in Australia which has led to structural reforms that have diminished Indigenous representation at the national level and significantly increased the level of obligations placed on Indigenous communities including extending a performance management approach to Indigenous affairs (Humpage, 2008).

The importance of engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is noted throughout the literature, particularly in relation to empowering services and communities through active decision making, Indigenous ownership throughout all stages of projects and programs, the development of Indigenous-led policies and the evaluation of outcomes (Empowered Communities, 2015; Hunt, 2013) (National Congress of Australia's First Peoples, 2016; Thorpe, et al., 2016; Wright & Lewis, 2017). It is also noted that consultation has often taken the place of genuine engagement limiting the input of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples and putting collaboration and successful health outcomes at risk (Hunt, 2013; Thorpe, et al., 2016).

While engagement and collaboration is happening in some settings, it is made clear by many commentators that Closing the Gap requires sustained effort and time to make those collaborations work (Altman, et al., 2008; Calma, 2007; Collins, 2016). The Redfern Statement calls on the Government to take action around a range of strategies linked to better engagement and empowerment including resourcing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led solutions, committing to better engagement through representative peaks, and working with Aboriginal and Torres strait Islander leaders (National Congress of Australia's First Peoples, 2016).

Bipartisanship has been an important feature of Closing the Gap and unlike many policy positions has not been used as a point of differentiation between political parties until now. Altman et al note that this has meant that the delivery of Closing the Gap has been able to occur over a long period of time but, nevertheless it is always subject to being used as a point of difference between political parties when necessary (Altman, et al., 2008).

Challenges in measurement and planning

Pholi (2009) argues that Closing the Gap is devoid of theory and lacks a historical and social context, relying on statistical gaps to define targets for policy action and then using changes in the size of gaps as evidence for what is or is not working.

The Closing the Gap approach to monitoring has also been criticised because it focuses on the needs of government rather than the aspirations of Indigenous Australians, highlighting problems and deficits rather than strengths and opportunities (Altman, 2013; Biddle & Markham, 2017b).

The ability to measure, predict and plan has been challenged with reference to the variability in impacts of Closing the Gap on Indigenous life expectancy rates geographically and over time deriving from variable starting conditions and unequal shifts in age specific mortality rates (Taylor & Barnes, 2013).

Regional variation is also important for understanding impacts where differences in remote, non-remote and regional Australia requires a differentiated policy response and measurement (Altman, et al., 2008; Taylor & Barnes, 2013). For example, while there has been no improvement in the Closing the Gap target around halving the gap in employment outcomes, there is also considerable geographic variation with some remote areas seeing employment to population ratios falling by more than 15% while in NSW employment growth has been rapid (Biddle & Markham, 2017a).

Despite these overall trends in disparity of progress relating to remoteness, The Productivity Commission's OID report highlights that there are some important cultural indicators, such as connection to country and language maintenance and revitalisation where outcomes are better in remote areas (SCRGSP, 2016).

There are difficulties in establishing long-term trends and in making long term predictions, particularly given the complex nature of disadvantage and how disadvantage evolves over life cycles and generations (Hunter 2007; Altman 2008). Altman notes that it is likely that the long run trends in Indigenous socioeconomic status will be positive and that the recent discourse around policy failure are likely to be overstated.

The OID report stresses that only a small number of Closing the Gap programs have been rigorously evaluated and suggests that there is a need for more and better-quality evaluations of Indigenous policies and programs nationally to gain better understanding of what works to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians (SCRGSP, 2016).

Good Practice – Priorities for Action

While most of the literature discusses Closing the Gap in relation to specific programs focused in the area of health, education, and employment, some broader themes have been identified in term of good practice and priorities for action and these are discussed below.

An extensive review of the literature undertaken by the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse in 2012 identified the following key factors in relation to what works to overcome Indigenous disadvantage:

- flexibility in design and delivery so that local needs and contexts can be taken into account
- community involvement and engagement in both the development and delivery of programs
- the importance of building trust and relationships
- a well-trained and well-resourced workforce, with an emphasis on retention of staff
- continuity and coordination of services (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2013)

This list is regularly cited in relation to 'what works' (Cox, 2014).

There have been some evaluations and formal reviews of some of the cross-cutting, Indigenous-specific National Partnership Agreements and other initiatives which shed some light on what has worked. For example, an evaluation of the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Service Delivery published in 2013 showed mixed results with positive results around increases in service provision in target communities and improved service coordination, however, local service providers also reported that there had been limited achievements against Closing the Gap targets. The evaluation also found that there had been challenges in realising community engagement aspirations with the implementation of the Agreement and that greater devolution of decision-making responsibility to regional and local levels would improve the ability of Government to be responsive to community needs (Australian Government, 2014, p. 7).

Empowerment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander services and communities is a consistent theme in the literature and has been explicated in detail in the Empowered Communities: Empowered Peoples strategy with a headline policy agenda of Indigenous empowerment, and a paradigm shift away from the traditional social policy framework in which Indigenous affairs initiatives have been developed and delivered (Empowered Communities, 2015). The approach aims to link closing the gap goals with cultural recognition and determination, less duplication and red tape and a focus on investing in things that work (Empowered Communities, 2015).

This literature review has identified that, apart from the 2012 review by the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, there has been limited attempts to bring together and synthesise findings from research and evaluation across the various Closing the Gap initiatives to identify what has worked and what lessons have been learned from the implementation of the overarching Closing the Gap Policy framework. This would be a useful input to the current refresh of Closing the Gap.

Conclusion and discussion

Overall, this review found that there was very limited, published literature on the effectiveness and appropriateness of the overarching Closing the Gap policy framework including reflecting, acknowledging and reporting on lessons learned. In particular, there was very limited academic research on this topic.

Overall, the literature concludes that there has been limited progress against the seven Closing the Gap targets with only one of the targets on track to be met. Progress varies significantly by jurisdiction and by remoteness, with progress being made in some locations against some of the targets. The literature also identifies some specific programs and initiatives that have positively contributed towards progress against the targets.

There were a number of themes that emerged from a review of the limited, academic literature available for this review. Firstly, the literature emphasises the complexity of the challenge being addressed by the Closing the Gap initiative, particularly given the long-standing, entrenched inequalities faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia and the interconnectedness of the indicators and targets which are the focus of the initiative. The literature stresses the need for a more holistic approach based on the social determinants of health that acknowledges the interconnectedness of these issues and incorporates a much broader set of indicators. Initiatives such as the Empowered Communities and National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan are cited as recent policy developments which are in line with this approach.

The literature also criticises the Closing the Gap initiative and its targets as having too strong a focus on individual responsibility and agency and that more attention needs to be paid to the context within which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities live including structural imbalances, economics, racism and discrimination. The literature stresses that more emphasis needs to be placed on genuine engagement with, and empowerment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to implement this and other initiatives in the future.

Finally, the literature criticises the approach to measurement and evaluation of the Closing the Gap initiative identifying the need for a broader set of indicators which have been developed in line with the aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. It also identifies the need for more rigorous evaluation of key programs and initiatives to demonstrate progress in the future.

Although outside the scope of this review, a substantial body of literature was identified which explored the effectiveness and progress of specific components or targets of the Closing the Gap initiative, however, there has been very limited attempts to synthesise the findings of this body of research to provide overall conclusions about the effectiveness and appropriateness of the overarching Closing the Gap policy framework. This is a key gap in the evidence base and would be a valuable input to the current refresh of the Closing the Gap initiative.

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