

INTRODUCTION: LEARNING FROM THE PAST, THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE

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The 'Learning from the Past, Thinking About the Future: Partnerships between Indigenous Australia and the Philanthropic and Corporate Community' Conference, was held in Sydney, Australia, July 2002. It was jointly hosted by The Fred Hollows Foundation, Reconciliation Australia and the Whitlam Institute and was made possible by the generous support of the Gilbert and Tobin Solicitors, the Rio Tinto Aboriginal Foundation, Westpac and other donors.

The conference drew together philanthropic and corporate donors, Indigenous and non-Indigenous speakers and international experts. It aimed to link these different groups and explore ways in which philanthropic organisations could engage effectively with Indigenous communities. Gilbert & Tobin Solicitors, Westpac, the Rio Tinto Aboriginal Foundation and the Lumbu Foundation generously sponsored the conference.

The idea to hold such a conference arose in the period following the end of the formal Reconciliation process in 2000. After a decade of growing awareness of the importance of progressing issues that are fundamental to achieving a reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, the 'post-Reconciliation' period has been characterised by confusion as to future directions and a lack of leadership by governments to carry the process further.

In contrast, the private philanthropic and corporate sectors have shown increasing willingness to engage with and to support initiatives in areas such as health and economic empowerment, aimed at benefiting Australia's Indigenous peoples. This is an important development that offers many opportunities to support Indigenous Australians in practical ways and contributes to meaningful, long-term benefits and change.

The private sector has an important role to play in areas that have been traditionally dominated by Government. Indeed, Government bodies may lack flexibility, skills or capacity to tackle some of the issues that the non-Government sector is well placed to support. There is also recognition by some business interests, particularly in the resource sector, that it makes *commercial* sense to improve community relations and invest in initiatives that will address Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage in the long-term.

For Indigenous communities, there is an increasing desire to secure support independent of governments and awareness that financial assistance may be available from private sources. Prominent Indigenous spokespersons have actively

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lobbied the philanthropic and business communities with some success, and have developed alliances and strong personal relationships in these sectors.

Whilst these are very positive developments, it is crucial that those business and philanthropic organisations willing to contribute in this area develop a critical awareness of the difficulties they face and the risks of creating even greater problems if their current efforts fail.

‘Welfare Dependency’ And Economic Independence

Recent media attention has focussed on the social problems, poor health, poverty and ‘welfare dependency’ of Aboriginal communities and the apparent failure of past efforts to help communities achieve higher levels of economic development. Little attention has been directed to understanding why these efforts have failed. There is also little media attention for the positive and successful work initiated by Aboriginal people themselves, or the difficulties Indigenous communities have in sustaining successful projects that depend on continuous support over a period of years to become established.

Aboriginal people and communities have sought to establish enterprises and build economic independence over many years. The Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) Scheme (broadly equivalent to the recent ‘work for the dole’ scheme) began in 1977 as an alternative to the payment of welfare benefits and as a means of community development. More than 270 community organisations now participate in the CDEP scheme.

Similarly, many Indigenous community leaders, including the late Charles Perkins AO, have long advocated economic independence. A series of National Indigenous Business and Economic Conferences (NIBEC) were held during the early 1990s. Since the advent of land rights and native title a number of successful enterprises have begun operation and there are many examples of development agreements that aim to enhance employment opportunities and benefit local Aboriginal communities.

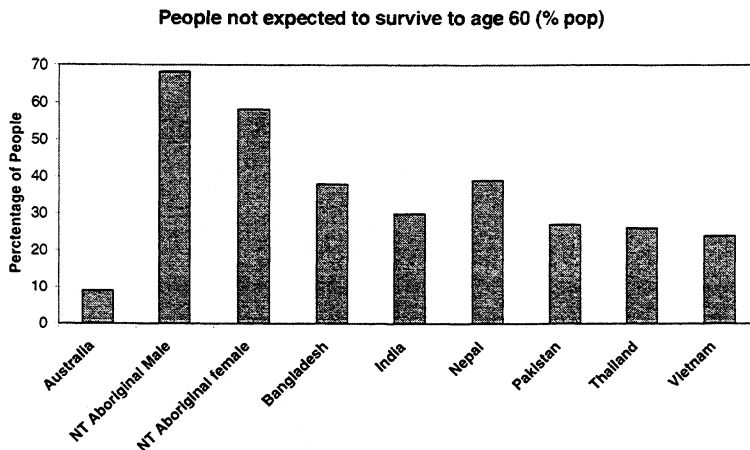
It is also important to note that Aboriginal people only gained the opportunity to incorporate and to manage their own affairs as recently as the 1970s. The concepts of ‘self-determination’ and ‘self-management’ are relatively new, and were only introduced under the Whitlam Labor Government. Rather than having been ‘tried and failed’, the reality is that Indigenous people have never had the opportunity to exercise genuine self-determination. Thirty years on, Aboriginal communities still continue to battle through an educational shortfall, lack of employment opportunities, poor community infrastructure such as housing, roads, sewerage and water, and a devastatingly poor health profile. They still have little access to private finance, and public funding can only be accessed on a piece-meal, short-term basis through a maze of Government bureaucracies and funding programs.

Learning From The Past...

Despite a myriad of interventions and programs aimed at addressing Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage, in many respects the gap between Indigenous and other Australians has widened. There are many who feel that these endeavours have failed miserably. Problems continue to proliferate, evidenced by high levels of unemployment, poor health status, declining education outcomes, domestic violence, substance misuse and so on.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a lower life expectancy than any other Indigenous minority in a first world country.¹ While the life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Australia is 15-20 years, in New Zealand, it is 5-6 years, in Canada it is 7 years, and in the USA, it is only 3.5 years. Over the past 30 years, life expectancy has improved dramatically in most countries, but life expectancy for Indigenous Australians lags well behind a number of developing countries (see chart).

Comparison Of Life Expectancy In Australia Compared With Developing Countries



Source: UN Human Development Report 1999; Mortality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, ABS 2000.

In Australia, Indigenous death rates from diabetes are 12 times higher for men and 17 times higher for women, compared with non-Indigenous people. Unemployment for Indigenous people is about 26%, compared with 8% for the non-Indigenous community; less than one-third of Aboriginal students complete secondary school, compared with a national retention rate of 70%; and the Indigenous home ownership rate is about 30% compared with 70% for the non-

¹ Australian Medical Association submission on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health, *Aboriginal Health* 1999, p2.

Indigenous community. In addition, Aboriginal people are far more likely to live in poor and overcrowded housing, without essential services.²

Why, despite good intentions, have programs for Indigenous people often failed to achieve lasting benefits? Many programs targeted at Indigenous communities have generally been intended to assist 'under-developed' communities to become 'developed'. Regrettably few people question the validity of such programs, and why they failed to achieve the desired outcomes. A number of assumptions have underpinned such initiatives, for example:

- The belief that development can be engineered. Programs and projects are designed to 'bring' development to those amongst whom it is lacking;
- Development is about delivery of resources – financial, equipment, technical skills, political clout, even a particular approach to life;
- Development projects are generally short-term, time-bound and limited in terms of resources; output is both limited and predictable;
- The belief that a successful intervention or project can be replicated; indeed, this is one criterion in judging its success. If it is not replicable elsewhere, it must be of no value;
- A project is only successful if it is sustainable. If the effects of the intervention are not sustained, the project will be deemed to have failed; and
- The belief that economic development will 'solve' a host of other problems.

The piecemeal 'development project' approach often fails to achieve the benefits expected because of ignorance of social contexts and relationships, poor cross-cultural communication, and lack of knowledge of the history, aspirations and capacity of the Indigenous community concerned. Certain projects may in effect be 'self-sabotaging' if this groundwork is not done and almost certainly will not result in beneficial change unless the community is empowered by participating.

Emerging Issues For Philanthropic And Business Donors

In comparison to countries such as the US, there is a finite pool of funds available from philanthropic and business sources in Australia. It is therefore critical that these limited funds be applied to the greatest effect.

At present, however, most organisations or individuals are operating unilaterally, with little or no reference to each other to achieve cooperation in areas of mutual interest or avoid potential overlaps and duplication. Approaches tend to be *ad hoc*, and there are signs of negative competition amongst

² As a Matter of Fact, ATSIIC 1998 (statistics drawn from The Health and Welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Peoples, 1997).

organisations and projects chasing a limited resource pool. It appears that little serious attention has been given to the possible implications of this approach for sustaining fundraising needs over the longer term.

Even more critical are the concerns that are increasingly expressed by both philanthropic and business sectors about the sheer volume, variable quality and sustainability of the proposals being put forward. Concern has been expressed about projects which have not produced tangible outcomes to justify the financial support provided and many have difficulty in differentiating between and 'reality testing' proposals for their relevance and veracity.

There is also some confusion as to the respective roles, standing and credibility of the various organisations and individuals competing for resources. The potential for cynicism and funding fatigue should not be underestimated. These difficulties are likely to generate scepticism about initiatives in the Indigenous arena and discourage current and potential donors.

These problems may resolve themselves over time as donor organisations become more experienced in the field, however in the meantime there is enormous potential to damage the existing goodwill amongst a limited pool of committed supporters and a high risk of negative publicity that could seriously impact on potential donors and the general public. The risks in leaving these issues unaddressed may be avoided if key stakeholders act now to explore options for cooperative action that meet everyone's best interests.

Thinking About The Future...

The *Learning from the Past, Thinking about the Future* Conference provided opportunities to debate these issues, identify common areas of interest and cooperation, and consider constructive action in areas such as: quality assurance; the potential for partnerships in areas of mutual interest and activity; training and technical support; and information sharing.

Indigenous community leaders from many parts of the country attended, providing perspectives from central Australia, the Kimberley, regional South Australia, New South Wales and far north Queensland. The voices of these 'unsung heroes' who are rarely in the news were as powerful as those of more high profile speakers, such as Jackie Huggins, Professor Larissa Behrendt, Dr Michael Dodson, Senator Aden Ridgeway, ATSIC Commissioner Alison Anderson, and Richie Ah Mat.

For many of the participants, the conference covered new ground and provided rewarding opportunities to link corporate and philanthropic donors with grass roots Aboriginal community members. Many spoke movingly of the endless struggle to win support for their initiatives, or having gained it, to sustain effective programs when the funding ends. Rachel Atkinson, CEO of Townsville Aboriginal and Islander Health Services (TAIHS), talked about the success of TAIHS' Mums and Babies program, which focussed on improved maternal and child health and

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had successfully achieved steadily increasing birth weights, thus reducing the risk of serious chronic disease such as diabetes and renal failure in later life. However, having established the program with funding from Rio Tinto and the Ian Potter Foundation, TAIHS had then to secure ongoing funding. At the time of the conference they had succeeded in gaining further funding, but only for one year.

The example graphically illustrates the dilemma for many Aboriginal communities and the potential for involvement of the corporate and philanthropic sectors that have the flexibility to support and model innovative new approaches initiated by communities themselves. The conference attracted a remarkable range of people from the philanthropic, corporate and public sectors.

Dr Stuart Phillpot's paper "Understanding Whitefella Secret Cattle Business" provided a depth of insight into communication difficulties and the differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal expectations, drawn from decades of personal experience in the field. Dr Xolela Mangcu and Nkosinathi Biko, of the Steve Biko Foundation, as well as young leaders of the Ginsberg Youth Council, offered perspectives of the South African experience.

Leon Davis' keynote speech on the corporate sector and social and community commitment emphasised the need for senior management involvement in and responsibility for 'corporate responsibility' programs. He stressed the need for close, 'hands on' but professional partnerships which must be 'about people and skills' as much as about money.

This pragmatic approach is surely where the future direction lies. Corporate philanthropy is not merely about good corporate citizenship nor about good publicity, nor is philanthropy only about donations to worthy causes. They are ultimately about the quality of human relationships and a genuine exchange – of people, skills, and knowledge – which bring lasting benefit to both partners.