

CHAPTER 31

The Assembly Gets Down to Business

The Shared Responsibility Agreement set the agenda for the Regional Assembly. Among the Assembly's first tasks were to participate in the COAG trial, frame regional priorities within the context of a regional plan, establish working relationships with the three regional organisations which had been established on the Council's initiative - Murdi Paaki Housing, Murdi Paaki Regional Enterprise Corporation and Marrima Health Corporation, negotiate a regional partnership agreement, and complete a charter of governance which had been started under the auspices of the Regional Council.

The overarching agreement between the Commonwealth and New South Wales Governments provided that the collaborative arrangements initiated under the Murdi Paaki COAG Trial would come under the auspices of the agreement. This meant Community Working Parties continuing to work with government agencies on the planning and delivery of services.

Throughout the development of the Assembly, the governance arrangements for the delivery of Commonwealth services in the Murdi Paaki region came within the framework of the COAG trial.

With the abolition of the Murdi Paaki Regional Council and the establishment of the Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly a significant new dimension was added to the on-going arrangements.

The evaluation of the COAG trial identified the key features of the Murdi Paaki COAG trial as including:¹

- Broadening the membership and the role of the Community Working Parties (CWPs) to enable them to function as the key point of contact between government and the local Indigenous community;
- Providing administrative/secretarial assistance to assist the Community Working Parties;
- Developed a Community Action Plan (CAP) in each community to identify local service needs and priorities and assist in ensuring a better coordinated approach to service planning and delivery by both State and Australian Government agencies;
- The Regional Council, and subsequently the new Murdi Paaki

We have heard about Murdi Paaki because of the work being done in the communities and a lot of people think that you are the leading edge in the 'new look' Aboriginal Affairs. You are a hope that the failures (of the past) will not be repeated. That is the focus of public servants in the past to do things **for** Aboriginal people will be replaced by the need to do things **with** Aboriginal people." – *The Hon. Fred Chaney, AO, former Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, keynote address to Murdi Paaki Region Community Working Party Community Governance Workshop, Cobar, NSW, 2-4 May, 2006.*

¹ Urbis Keys Young, *Evaluation of the Murdi Paaki COAG trial, Final Report*, 25 October 2006.

Regional Assembly, provided a regional voice for the Indigenous community; and

- Establishing government structures to engage directly with each Community Working Party; serve as a new channel of communication between communities and government and provide overall direction for the Trial, with particular responsibility for strategic planning, communication strategies, and monitoring and evaluation.

The evaluation found that the Regional Assembly was a crucial source of community input into service delivery across the region, including the allocation of government funds.²

A key feature of the governance arrangements was the preparation of a Community Action Plan (CAP) by each of the 16 communities to identify key local priorities. Community Working Parties oversaw the development of the CAPs in consultation with community members and Aboriginal community organisations.

The Community Action Plans provided the basis to identify priorities for government action from a region-wide perspective. These priorities were:

- Education;
- Culture and wellbeing;
- Health;
- Employment and enterprise development;
- Economic development;
- Children and young people;
- Families;
- Law and Justice;
- Housing and Infrastructure; and
- Community Governance.

Indigenous communities in the Murdi Paaki region identified the lack of suitable locally-based technical and professional support as a significant barrier to their ability to interact and liaise with governments and negotiate agreements to improve services.

This resulted in the Murdi Paaki Partnership Project (MPPP) to strengthen the operation of Community Working Parties through the provision of support by eight Community Facilitators, one for every two CWPs in the region, to be employed by local host organisations. Employment of facilitators was triggered once communities had completed a Community Action Plan, and was subject to the approval of the CWP.

The Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly's Regional Action Plan 2006 was developed from the Community Action Plans and previous plans developed by the Murdi Paaki Regional Council. The plan incorporated the Murdi Paaki

² Urbis Keys Young, *Evaluation of the Murdi Paaki COAG trial, Final Report*, 25 October 2006.

Regional Assembly's vision which was stated to be:

That the Murdi Paaki people are respected and recognised for their culture, and their social and political ambitions.

The Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly aimed to deliver this vision through:

- Establishing Aboriginal jurisdiction in all of our activities;
- Maintaining good governance principles of Community Working Parties and the Regional Assembly;
- Strengthening relationships with Local, State and Commonwealth government;
- Strengthening and preserving our culture and our lifestyles;
- Enhance and increase the living standards of our people; and
- Increase the access of our people to mainstream service provision.

The Regional Assembly identified four core goals in realising the vision for the region. These core goals were:

- **Governance and rights** - To promote the right and proper governance of the Murdi Paaki region for the benefit of Indigenous people;
- **Economic** - To maximise community input to, and ownership of, economic development in the Murdi Paaki region;
- **Social** - To maintain and improve the social, emotional and physical wellbeing of the people in the Murdi Paaki region; and
- **Cultural** - To preserve and promote cultural heritage and environment in the Murdi Paaki region.

The Plan identified ten key areas where the Regional Assembly could enable initiatives, through its influence and representation of the Murdi Paaki region. They were:

- Community Governance;
- Economic Development;
- Employment and Enterprise Development;
- Housing and Infrastructure;
- Young People;
- Health;
- Law and Justice;
- Families;
- Education; and
- Culture and Wellbeing.

Each goal was supported by a list of key action areas.

The Regional Assembly declared it would continue to work with government and non-government agencies to develop initiatives to assist the region as a whole, and provide governance, leadership and engagement for Indigenous communities.³

As part of a continuing process of consolidating the work of Community Working Parties a three-day Community Governance Workshop was held at Cobar, New South Wales, on 2-4 May, 2006. The aim of the workshop was 'to promote and enhance a relationship of understanding and agreement involving social, cultural and economic issues impacting the various Aboriginal communities located in the Murdi Paaki region.'⁴ The workshop heard presentations on the operations of community working parties and a report on the activities of each working party.

Support mechanisms for the Regional Assembly's operations included the provision of Secretariat services appointed from among the Aboriginal community, primarily trainees under the Community Development Employment Program, and facilitators who assisted in establishing linkages with government, business and the wider community. The Regional Enterprise Corporation and the Barwon Darling Alliance became partners in resourcing the Assembly.

I still have the \$50 question. What are we doing? What have we done that improves the well-being and life of an Aboriginal person or an Aboriginal community in the Murdi Paaki Region? I will point to governance and leadership. From an Aboriginal perspective that is the most important element that we bring to the partnership of the COAG trial. It is essential that we continue to participate consistently. I think that is the most critical factor in our ongoing progress and development whether we are in partnership with government or not. – *Sam Jeffries, Chair, Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly, Community Governance Workshop, Cobar, 2 May 2006.*

³ Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly, Regional Action Plan, November 2006 (Draft).

⁴ Murdi Paaki Region Community Working Party Community Governance Workshop, Cobar, NSW, 2-4 May, 2006, *Summary of Proceedings*.

Community Working Party Initiatives

Bourke

- Focus on education; and
- Reduction in the number of kids sent home.

Brewarrina

- An accord to stop drinking in the streets; and
- Thirty homes built and eight apprentices qualified.

Cobar

- Working alliances with key service providers; and
- Investigated manufacturing and nursery enterprise.

Collarenebri

- Repairs and maintenance program for housing;
- Improved women's issues program; and
- Signed SRA for air-conditioning.

Enngonia

- Information day to help the community know what services are available; and
- Regular weekly visits by health workers and a GP.

Goodooga

- Working relationship with all government agencies and local organisations.

Gulargambone

- Community Action Plan developed; and
- Working with all health service providers to negotiate partnership agreements to identify and respond to the health needs of the community.

Menindee

- Focus on health-related studies.

Walgett

- Developed draft charter for community governance principles, including code of conduct, model rules and the role of the community working party.

Weilmoringle

- Education is most important in the achievement of community goals.

Wilcannia

- Need to research what other communities are doing before introducing community strategies to make sure the same mistakes are not repeated.

- Source, Murdi Paaki Region Community Working Party Community Governance Workshop, May 2-4, Summary of Proceedings, Cobar, NSW.