

A Whole of Community' Approach: Sustainable management for Aboriginal organisations

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Background to the paper

This paper draws on the work and experience of the presenters over several years, and reflects the comments and views that have been given by a range of Aboriginal people and communities when talking about their relationships with funding bodies, and the management of their own, community based organisations.

The presentation will focus on the factors that have impacted on Aboriginal organisations and their communities, and explore options for future development of sustainable Aboriginal community organisations.

The context

Community based organisations both reflect and contribute to the communities they are located in. Where communities are under stress, local organisations will find it difficult to survive and thrive.

Building up the capacity of local organisations, however, can nurture an infrastructure within a community, which in turn provides services, skill development and employment. Sustainable community organisations support the sustainability of communities.

Increasingly, many local organisations face unnecessary pressure and stress due to ineffective structures and management practices, and these can drain community resources rather than making a positive contribution to community building.

The difficulties any community based organisation experiences in managing and maintaining itself occur for several reasons, including the:

- appropriateness of the community management model
- levels of skills required in the committee roles
- level of support and resourcing available in the organisation's environment.

Problems in managing local organisations are exacerbated in rural and remote communities, where the pool of available skilled people is limited, and there are fewer resources to draw on.

For Aboriginal organisations and communities, the context is also formed by a history of:

- dispossession and colonisation
- imposition of an alien set of 'rules' and ways of working
- the devaluing of Aboriginal 'rules' and ways of working

The current situation from the perspective of most Aboriginal organisations is affected by:

- Contestable funding processes, which are highly divisive within communities where groups within communities compete with one another for funds.
- Lack of a whole of government approach to funding provision, where funding is provided through program or project allocations ('silo' funding) and does not reflect the way most Aboriginal communities operate and address their service needs.
- Consultation and negotiation processes which ignore the diversity and complexity of Aboriginal communities, and where there is an expectation that Aboriginal communities should be singular and cohesive (this assumption is not made for non-Indigenous communities).
- Operating under a higher degree of public scrutiny than non-Aboriginal organisations, which often seen as inequitable and controlling.
- For some, being subject to rigid and conservative structures and processes, and intense accountability, under the Aboriginal Corporations legislation (originally designed to provide a more 'culturally appropriate' form of incorporation).

Issues for Aboriginal organisations

Often, the problems experienced by Aboriginal community based organisations tend to receive a greater degree of attention than those of non-Indigenous organisations, although many of the difficulties they face are common.

However, there are several factors that are specific to Aboriginal community management, including:

Drawing from smaller pools of people with specific management related skills.

Working with organisational structures and practices that do not recognise or value Aboriginal ways of working and relating, particularly

- composition of committees and the concept of 'representation'
 - impact of cultural obligations and commitments to family and community and how conflicts of interest are identified and managed
 - expected degree of formality of governance and management processes
 - tension between organisational regulatory requirements and the usual ways some communities conduct their business.
- Operating without any coherent and sustained resourcing or support, such as the equivalent of an 'industry' development plan.

Considerable time and resources of both funding departments and Aboriginal communities are devoted to maintaining or re establishing Aboriginal organisations that are struggling to meet the current governance and operational practices required to provide quality service and fulfill accountability requirements.

Developing new approaches

There are several approaches to governance and management that may be more suitable and sustainable for Aboriginal communities, but there is not one 'model' that will 'work'. Structures for governance and management need to work hand in hand with processes that are developed by Aboriginal communities, and resource allocation that is also managed by Aboriginal communities.

- **Principles underpinning alternative approaches**

For Aboriginal communities to sustain, and be sustained by, their organisations, the following principles need to be adopted:

- government needs to take a long term, strategic and planned 'whole of government' approach to building and maintaining the capacity of Aboriginal communities.

a recognition of the diverse views and differing interest groups that exist within any Aboriginal 'community' - Aboriginal communities are no more or less cohesive than non Indigenous communities.

- government needs to be a resource provider to Aboriginal communities rather than a service provider.
- in providing resources to Aboriginal communities, the traditional and cultural status of community members needs to be acknowledged.

- rather than imposed, organisational design and development needs to be discussed, negotiated and tailored to the needs of differing communities.
- management and organisational structures and processes need to reflect the traditional and cultural structures of the community.

Three levels of development

1. Community or area level planning and governance:

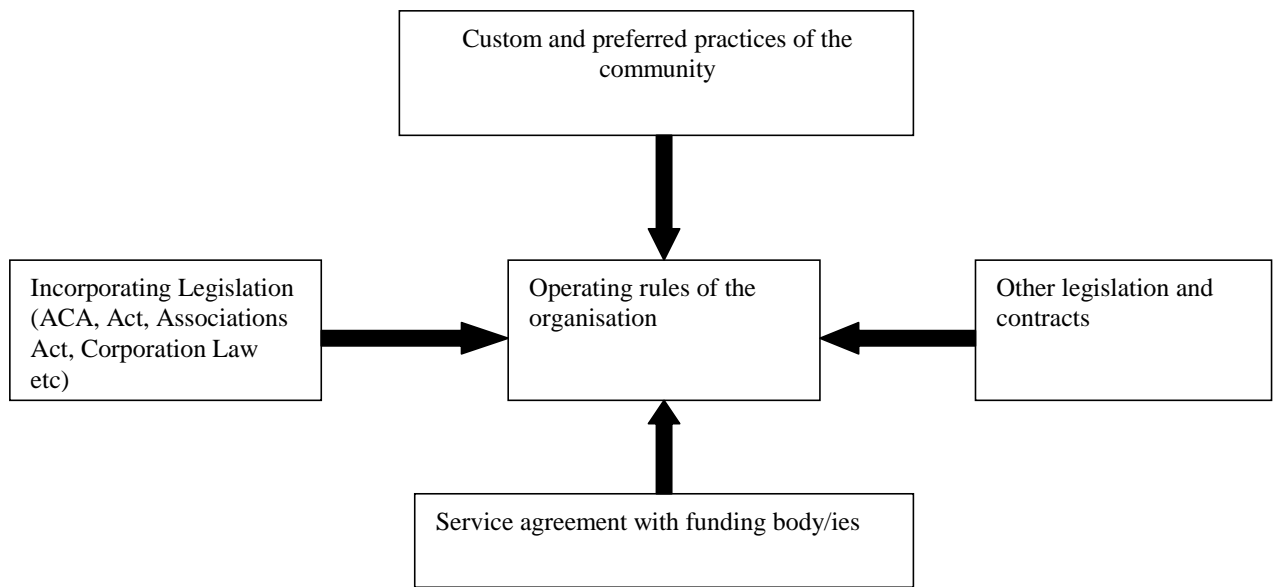
- **Streamlining resource provision:** Ideally, government funding needs to be organised in a 'whole of government' package, to allow for a 'whole of community' approach to the planning of resource use and meeting of needs. Streamlining and rationalising funding mechanisms, planning, and accountabilities at a cross portfolio level, prior to reaching communities, would assist in making the administration of government funds more efficient and manageable.
- **Community ownership and control:** A regional level planning structure for Aboriginal governance is being discussed in a number of communities, and operates elsewhere ('Congress' or 'Council' model). Such a structure enables elders and prominent members of a community or group of communities to make the decisions concerning the priorities for services and resources. Differences between community members are debated and negotiated in this forum.

2. Organisational design: Designing to suit the needs of the community or group

There are two aspects to designing and developing an organisation:

- **Designing organisational structures:** Selecting management models that address the issues of appropriate participation and representation.
- **Developing appropriate ways of working:** Developing practices and procedures that meet governance and accountability requirements, and cultural obligations and practices. These include decision making, authority and responsibility (accountability), and acknowledging family ties.

The needs, expectations and practices of Aboriginal communities are diverse, and there is no single 'model' that provides a 'solution' for Aboriginal organisations. The following model illustrates the elements that should inform the process of organisational design.



(Adapted from Nettheim,1998: 16)

There are several principles which will also assist the development of effective management within organisations:

- The provision of information on incorporation and options for designing organisations.
- The development of rules for an organisation that take into account the preferred practices of the community involved.
- The design of an organisation that locates where, and who, the people with governance skills will be in the structure.
- The design of an organisation that locates who should have a say in how the organisation runs and what it does, and the design of a structure and processes that enables them to do this.
- The development of clear rules and procedures for dealing with all of the problems that might occur.
- The development of clear rules about how decisions will be made on the various aspects of business.
- A plan for how skills will be developed and maintained within the organisation.

3. Community or area development strategies: Resourcing and skill development to support the development of structures and processes

A comprehensive development strategy is needed for any community or area that is wanting to redevelop its governance and management. A planned community resourcing and skill development strategy is required to support the development of structures and processes for community level planning and governance and to develop appropriate organisational designs to suit that particular community or group of communities.

These strategies need to be designed, developed and implemented by Aboriginal people.

The following components should be part of such a strategy:

- a) **Mapping communities: Resourcing** and facilitation are needed to assist communities to map themselves in terms of who lives there, length of association with the area, status in the community, ways of thinking about different groups and the role they might play in Aboriginal community services. This process is also essential for designing representative processes and structures for community based organisations.
- b) **Negotiating options for governance of Aboriginal community services:** Each community needs a clear agreement with government funding agencies that are providing resources about the process and structures to be used for the planning of community services and the funding allocation models to be used.
- c) **Organisational design:** Following the negotiation of planning and funding allocation processes, Aboriginal communities need to be assisted to designing the organisations that will deliver community services. This design process should draw on the work done in mapping the communities.
- d) **Capacity building strategy:** As part of the initial mapping exercise, the skills of people in the communities could also be mapped. A community wide plan for management skill development, with an associated leadership development program, would be the ideal way to build up capacity. On a smaller scale, a regionally based management development program could conduct skill analysis and identification, including literacy and other community skills, develop a training plan and support plan, and deliver the program over a fixed period.

From sustainability to enterprise

Capacity building needs to occur at the 'whole of community' level, using community organisations as resources to develop skills, confidence, and foundations for enterprise. Through the provision of a coherent, long term, well planned capacity building strategy, it should be possible for organisations and communities to look beyond merely sustaining themselves, and to growing and thriving.