



---

## **Principles for Reform of the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) – to promote workforce participation among CDEP participants & Indigenous Job Seekers**

*ACOSS Info 370 – April 2005*

---

The abolition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) announced on 15 April 2004 by the Prime Minister has meant considerable change to the funding and service delivery of many of the Government's Indigenous programs. Under the measure *Indigenous Australians – Better Service Delivery*, total funding of \$109.4 million and program responsibility has been removed from ATSIC and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services (ATSIS). This decision is of particular concern for the future of Indigenous governance and the potential effectiveness of service delivery across Indigenous communities Australia wide.

The Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) performs multiple roles for Indigenous communities. It provides employment experience to improve peoples' future job prospects, funds many core services and strengthens community participation and cohesion. This diversity of CDEP is a strength. On the other hand, there are indications that in many communities CDEP has become a long term alternative to open employment. This may be inevitable in communities where no formal labour market exists in effect (especially remote communities). However, it is of particular concern in communities where open employment opportunities might otherwise be available to Indigenous people. Reform of CDEP must address this and other problems without undermining essential services and community cohesion.

ACOSS INFO 370— ISBN 085871 592 9— ISSN 1442 486 X  
Australian Council of Social Service  
Locked Bag 4777 Strawberry Hills NSW 2012  
Ph [02] 9310 4844 Fax [02] 9310 4822  
[www.acoss.org.au](http://www.acoss.org.au)

Aspects of the Shared Responsibility Agreements (SRAs) for Indigenous communities announced by Minister Vanstone in 2004 are of concern to ACOSS due to their potential to reinstate paternalistic forms of delivery of welfare and government services which were a feature of past Government and mission policies. These policies including the detailed regulation of personal behaviour and withholding of income, contributed in a small part to the present culture of dependency that exists in some communities. Access to income support and basic services are generally regarded as rights in Australia. They come with obligation attached, but, quite rightly, those obligations rarely extend to the detailed regulation of personal behaviour by Government. Indigenous communities need to be supported and given the capacity to set their own goals based on their community needs, flexible funding arrangements and an integration of available resources. The focus for future directions in CDEP policy and service delivery should remain strongly on economic and community infrastructure outcomes and not on personal behaviour, unless this undermines the outcomes directly.

Funding provision for services to Indigenous people is often contested territory – typically available funds fall short of objective levels of demand, particularly so given the high levels of Indigenous disadvantage. The need clearly exists for monitoring to ensure probity standards are met, as well as ensuring fair contestability and value-for-money factors are considered. In addition, given that Indigenous people are diverse in terms of language, culture, location and other factors, the administration of Indigenous programs requires particular sensitivity in monitoring and assessing performance from a range of perspectives.

### **ACOSS principles for reform of the CDEP program and promoting workforce participation among CDEP participants and Indigenous job seekers**

- 1. The main objective of reform of CDEP should be to open up opportunities for the full participation of CDEP participants and their Indigenous communities in Australia's economic and community life.**

Considering the unacceptable high rate of Indigenous unemployment and that approximately a quarter of the Indigenous labour force participate in CDEP, getting Indigenous people off CDEP and into mainstream employment where appropriate and practicable, is a critical point in enabling and engaging communities to achieve increased labour force participation.

- 2. Any changes to the administration of Indigenous programs and services should only be made in consultation and negotiation with Indigenous people themselves and on the basis of their informed consent.**

ACOSS welcomes DEWR's commitment to consult widely and extensively with Indigenous communities who deliver CDEP to inform the future policies around the program.

- 3. CDEP managers and leaders note that the CDEP must be recognised for having multiple objectives and that these should be recognised and properly resourced.**

Allied with this is a concern for more respectful engagement with CDEP schemes from other government agencies and other programs. This should include respect in the form of proper payment for jobs done by CDEP which are normally the responsibility of mainstream departments and programs at the commonwealth, state and local government levels in other parts of the country.

- 4. Shared Responsibility Agreements (SRAs) between Indigenous communities and all three levels of government should only be implemented as a result of consultation with individual Indigenous communities and should focus on the efficient delivery of services and improved health and welfare and employment outcomes, rather than the regulation of personal behavior. Indigenous communities must be supported to ensure that they have the capacity to set their own goals based on their community needs. Equally important is ensuring flexible and integrated funding arrangements and resources.**

This policy needs to separate receipt of income support from personal behavior issues, aside from those which directly impinge upon employment outcomes and effective service delivery. Some practical concerns of ACOSS regarding the implementation of SRAs is how will these agreements be enforced and what role does the local Indigenous Coordination Centre play in how these agreements are negotiated and enforced within local communities?

- 5. A formal and purely 'economic' focus for CDEP undermines the role that CDEPs play in Aboriginal communities particularly in rural and remote areas, in providing community cohesion, capacity building and as a conduit to maintaining cultural participation and preservation.**

This focus assumes that meaningful employment, training and enterprise development activities can take place within situations characterised by chaos, conflict, family and personal distress. It assumes that the intensity and scale of these social and personal problems, often wrongly attributed solely to welfare dependency, can be addressed through mechanisms which both enable, and ultimately compel, individuals to engage with the formal economy.

- 6. Indigenous job seekers participating in CDEP should have access to appropriate labour market assistance, education and training that assists in overcoming barriers to employment.**

Aligning CDEPs with Job Network or enabling them to take on the role of an Indigenous Employment Centre is a good, proactive first step for CDEPs in areas with employment opportunities. However, there needs to be a greater

investment in employment services and the level of assistance available to each job seeker to ensure that people can access the assistance they require. Many CDEP organisations have called for an increase in CDEP funding to match that allocated to *Work for the Dole*, to assist the many Indigenous people who take part in CDEP who have multiple barriers to overcome before they can enter into education, training and employment.

7. **Two key goals for services provided to Indigenous communities should be established, regardless of the structures through which services are funded:**
- ensuring that outcomes are delivered, particularly those that address disadvantage in terms of education, health, housing, justice and paid employment, and
  - strengthening Indigenous control of the delivery of services.

To ensure that these goals are met, CDEPs must be adequately resourced to deliver services which tackle these areas of disadvantaged and that they are determined by the community.

8. **Indigenous governance is a critical element in the effectiveness of service delivery across Indigenous communities Australia wide. Linkages between the programs and services delivered to and by CDEPs through the range of government departments (local, state and federal) and various other stakeholders, including non-government organisations must be strengthened and improved.**

Promoting better Indigenous governance and service delivery requires the following:

- consultation with individual communities to determine their needs and to maximize their access to funding and services
- a framework to provide a better integration across the delivery of funding of services and programs from different levels of government, agencies and other relevant stakeholders, and
- a system of ongoing, comprehensive management training and support.

The Commonwealth Grants Commission *Report on Indigenous Funding* released in 2001 highlighted the need for the full and effective participation in decisions affecting fundraising distribution and service delivery. This is important for all Indigenous communities but in particular for those communities where there are very few job opportunities and the focus of CDEP is on providing community development and social support.

---