

Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory (APO NT)

Commissioner Romlie Mokak
Indigenous Evaluation Strategy
Productivity Commission
Lodged online

Monday 17 August, 2020

Dear Commissioner Mokak,

RE: APO NT Submission on the draft Indigenous Evaluation Strategy

The Aboriginal Peak Organisations of the Northern Territory (**APO NT**) thanks the Productivity Commission for the opportunity to make a submission on the draft Indigenous Evaluation Strategy (the Strategy).

Since its establishment in 2010, APO NT has been working to develop constructive policies on critical issues facing Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory and to influence the work of the Australian and Northern Territory Governments. As peak organisations in the Northern Territory, we share the aim of protecting and advancing the wellbeing and rights of Aboriginal people and communities. Aboriginal empowerment, local ownership and community control are critical factors underpinning our work. APO NT's footprint covers the whole of the Territory and APO NT actively engages with Traditional leaders, community leaders, and Aboriginal organisations.

APO NT welcomes the development of the Strategy. There are a myriad of policies at all levels of government designed to improve the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. We echo the Productivity Commissions' reasons for needing an Indigenous Evaluation Strategy, in particular, the need for quality evaluations of government policies and programs. This is critical to building the evidence, in evidence-based practice. We need to be able to access this evidence to understand what is and what is not working in the Territory. We support the broad aim of the Strategy to improve the evaluation of these policies, and thereby ensure they have a meaningful, positive impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's lives.

APO NT acknowledges the recent paper issued by the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (**CAEPR**), which considered the impact that evaluation has had on Indigenous policy to date.ⁱ We share CAEPR's concerns, with respect to the emerging risk that governments will appropriate new narratives of Indigenous participation and co-design to protect the extant political settlement and use them to cloak the enduring structural impact and influence of politics on Indigenous policy.ⁱⁱ Like CAEPR, APO NT believe that there is a need to ensure transparency and independence in the conduct of evaluations and emphasis must be placed on more sophisticated modes of analysis that reflect social and cultural realities.ⁱⁱⁱ

In light of these concerns, APO NT stresses that the Strategy be built on the new National Agreement on Closing the Gap, as highlighted in the Coalition of Peaks' submission. In particular, APO NT recommends that the Strategy and its implementation are grounded in the priority areas for reform agreed under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (**see Appendix 1**). The access to and use of data (priority reform 4) is particularly pertinent for the Strategy. APO NT recommends working closely

with the Coalition of Peaks to determine what should be evaluated and how evaluations should be conducted, with respect to the new National Agreement.

APO NT would also like to draw the Productivity Commission's attention to the APO NT Partnership Principles.^{iv} The Principles were developed in 2013 to address the lack of Aboriginal controlled community development and service delivery in the Northern Territory. The principles embody the spirit and substance of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and are based on the understanding that a fundamental shift, from a narrow service delivery focus to a community development based approach, is required for policies addressing Aboriginal communities.

The development of the principles was driven by the strong aspiration of Aboriginal community controlled peak organisations to work with and secure the support of non-Aboriginal organisations in putting Aboriginal people back in the driver's seat of development and service delivery programs and initiatives.

There is a lot of political willingness at the national level. Since the demise of ATSIC we have been in the passenger seat. We are in a position to swing the pendulum back to Aboriginal organisations. We need to take back control and we need to demonstrate this in our organisations, such as building capacity, capabilities and achieving compliance.^v

The principles were designed to guide the development of a partnership-centred approach for non-Aboriginal organisations engaging in the delivery of services or development initiatives in Aboriginal communities in the NT. APO NT have constantly argued that open competitive tendering processes is counter-productive to ensuring positive outcomes for Aboriginal people. The Aboriginal controlled organisations delivering these services are not only best suited for doing so, but provide the priority outcomes that the Government is seeking in terms of sustainable Aboriginal employment as well as experience and engagement in governance and management, and the development of community self-reliance and responsibility.

APO NT believes that grass roots Aboriginal organisations should always be regarded as the first priority for delivering services to Aboriginal communities. However, where there are currently insufficient Aboriginal organisations or Aboriginal capacity to deliver specific services or programs, APO NT believes that better outcomes can be achieved through an approach that seeks to leverage government investment to develop additional Aboriginal capacity and new service delivery organisations through partnership approaches, such as outlined in relation to the APO NT Partnership Principles. APO NT recommends that the Productivity Commission and Australian Government recognise and implement the principles when the opportunity arises.

Please contact the APO NT Coordinator, Brionee Noonan on (08) 8944 6672 or via email: brionee.noonan@amsant.org.au should you wish to discuss this submission further.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Paterson', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

John Paterson
On behalf of the APO NT Governing Group

Appendix 1 - National Agreement of Closing the Gap: Priority Areas for Reform

1. Developing and strengthening structures to ensure the full involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait peoples in shared decision making at the national, state and local or regional level and embedding their ownership, responsibility and expertise to close the gap.
2. Building the formal Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled service sector to deliver closing the gap services and programs in agreed priority areas.
3. Ensuring all mainstream government agencies and institutions undertake systemic and structural transformation to contribute to Closing the Gap.
4. Ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have access to, and the capability to use, locally relevant data and information to monitor the implementation of the Priority Reforms, Closing the Gap targets and drive local priorities.

ⁱ Dillon, M. (2020). Evaluation and review as drivers of reform in the Indigenous policy domain, Policy Insights paper No.2/2020, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University. Retrieved from

https://caepr.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2020/7/CAEPR_PIP_no2_2020_Dillon_0.pdf

ⁱⁱ Ibid, 29.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, 30.

^{iv} The APO NT Partnership Principles (2013) can be found here

<http://www.amsant.org.au/apont/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/21070504-APO-NT-Partnership-Principles-Updated-version.pdf>

^v Tennant Creek Close the Gap consultation, 30 October 2019.