Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities

National policy direction for reducing disadvantage for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Queensland is handled through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) -agreed 'Closing the Gap' targets. Closing the Gap on Indigenous life expectancy within a generation is a key target of the COAG National Indigenous Reform Agenda.

Based on combined data for Australia for 2005-07 the estimated life expectancy at birth for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander males was 67 years compared with 79 years for non-Indigenous males. The corresponding estimates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander females were 73 years and 83 years for non-Indigenous females. The gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous life expectance at birth remains at 12 years for males and 10 years for females (OID, 2009)[1].

It remains to be seen whether the Queensland Government can achieve the necessary reforms to deliver on the ambitious Closing the Gap agenda. QCOSS hopes recent amalgamation of many government departments may go some way to achieving the integrated policies, programs and service delivery required. There continues to be a real risk that the lessons of the past will not be learnt and the approach that has characterised past failures to deliver results for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders will continue.
The evidence both nationally and internationally suggests that programs and initiatives that work well are those that build on community strengths, acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of doing things, involve shared responsibility and incorporate culture into governance.

Multiple Disadvantage

Some Queenslanders are far more likely to suffer poverty and social exclusion. And the effects are multiplied when individuals and families belong to more than one group.

QCOSS recognises the serious disadvantage faced by:

- *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities*
- *People in rural and remote communities*
- *Culturally and linguistically diverse communities*
- *People with a disability*
- *Young people*
- *Older people*
- *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender communities*

"It is important to recognise that most Indigenous people live constructive and rewarding lives, contributing to their families and communities. That said, across nearly all the indicators in the Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Report, there are wide gaps in outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians….we still have a long way to go to fulfil COAG's commitment to close the gap in Indigenous disadvantage"

(Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2009)[1]

Key Issues

The facts[2]:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are twice as likely to have a low birth weight baby as non-Indigenous women.

- In 2007-08 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were 3.3 times more likely to be notified for alleged harm or risk of harm, and 6.4 times more likely to be subject to a care and protection order.

- In 2007-08 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth were 13.1 times more likely to be on youth justice supervision orders and made up 62.7% of the children and young people in youth detention centres.

- Only 45% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people complete Year 12 as compared to 86% of non-Indigenous young people and they are less likely to attend tertiary education.

- In 2006-07 the hospitalisation rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for potentially preventable chronic conditions was 6 times the rate of non-Indigenous people.

- In 2006 the employment rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were lower than for non-Indigenous people in all age groups, states and territories, and remoteness areas.

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were 5 times as likely as non-Indigenous people to live in overcrowded housing in 2006.

"Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children do not have the same life chances as other Australian children. They experience poorer outcomes in relation to their safety, education and health than do non-Indigenous children"

(Combined Voices: Demanding better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, 2009)

Disadvantage often has multiple causes and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities this can be attributed to:

- The long term failure of governments to provide culturally appropriate services and infrastructure for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and failure to address the socio-economic disadvantage experienced by people in urban, regional, rural and remote areas.

- Severe social and economic disadvantage such as poverty, poor nutrition, poor housing, low education levels, and high unemployment, along with social marginalisation, discrimination and racism.

- Policy development, programs and service delivery to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people has been grossly under funded and based on poor principles.

The failure of government policy making processes and inadequate funding of community controlled organisations has lead to significant disadvantage for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities. Failed models of service delivery to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are a result of:

- Ad hoc, disjointed program delivery
- Pilot projects, rather than long term investment
- Limited community control and participation
- Inflexible models of design and delivery

"Much of the failure of service delivery to Indigenous people and communities, and the lack of sustainable outcomes, is a direct result of the failure to engage appropriately with Indigenous people and of the failure to support and build the capacity of indigenous communities"

(Tom Calma, Essentials for Social Justice, 2008)[3]

Recognising Progress

We acknowledge and welcome the following initiatives of the Queensland Government:

- The establishment of the Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Human Services Coalition.
- Endorsement of the development of a Queensland Urban and Regional Indigenous Strategy as part of Queensland's response to the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) National Indigenous Reform Agenda.
- The Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Council (QATSIAC) to provide Queensland Government with advice on policies, programs, services and partnerships to support Toward Q2: Tomorrow's Queensland and Closing the Gap targets.

QCOSS Recommendations

1. Queensland Government to work with the Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Human Services Coalition to support and invest in the growth and capacity building of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled human service organisations to create a strong service delivery network that reflects the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Queensland.

2. Investment in programs needs to be strategic and at an appropriate level to tangibly 'close the gap' in disadvantage between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. Commitment to the COAG National Indigenous Reform Agenda is vital to deliver real outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders.

In particular significant investment is required for programs that focus on prevention and early intervention. Priority areas include early childhood education, family support, child protection, housing, and family and community violence.

3. The Queensland government to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities to develop innovative and effective program initiatives and responses to community need that are based on sound principles of capacity building and sustainability.

4. Critical success elements of effective programs that address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage have been indentified as:

- Originating at the local level - 'bottom up' rather than 'top down'.
- Partnership between government, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, government departments and non-government organisations.
- Good governance
- Ongoing government support

"Not everything that matters can be captured in indicators, and some information is better presented in words, rather than numbers. In particular, community level change may not show up in State or national data."

(Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Report, 2009)[4]

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[1] SCRGSP (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision) 2009, *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2009*, Productivity Commission, Canberra.
[2] Combined Voices. 2009. *Stating the Case for Change*. http://www.combindvoices.org.au
[3] Essentials for Social Justice, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Tom Calma, delivered a *series of key speeches* - Between December 2007 and July 2008 setting out an agenda for change in Indigenous affairs
[4] Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner 2006 *Social Justice Report 2006* Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission.

This paper is part of QCOSS's 'policy platform' that contains over 20 policy papers.

Go to www.qcoss.org.au for other papers including – Mental Health, Violence Prevention, and Social Inclusion.

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