



Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service Co-operative Ltd.

Head Office:
6 Alexandra Parade,
P.O. Box 218
Fitzroy, Victoria 3065
Phone: (03) 9419 3888 (24 Hrs)
Fax: (03) 9419 6024
Toll Free: 1800 064 865

**VALS Submission to the Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service
Provision in response to Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators
Request for Comment (March 2006) - sent 22 June 2006**

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Key Indicators.

In this submission VALS will focus on issues relating to the justice system, however, some of the arguments made in the justice system context may be applicable to other contexts. On VALS reading of the 'Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2005 Report (Report) the Key Indicators are intended to produce a Report of a certain quality. VALS will analyse whether the Key Indicators are sufficient in contributing to the achievement of the objective and vision of the Report and suggest improvements to the objectives and ways to meet the objectives/vision. In doing so, VALS will emphasise the central role of culture and the need to further refine the inclusion of cultural indicators in the Report.

VALS will argue failure to refine the inclusion of cultural indicators in the Report means the Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (Committee) Committee is in danger of:

- Overlooking the central role of culture for Indigenous Australians.
- Not reaping the benefits of Indigenous Australian assistance on the issue of how to translate culture into a Western framework because a written submission process of engagement is prohibitive, and a consultation process is preferred.
- Emphasising outcomes and quantitative data at the expense of process and qualitative data.
- Not living up to aspirations in the Report

Central role of culture

VALS argues that as culture is of central importance to Indigenous Australians the Report should reflect this. An objective of the Report is that it is meaningful to Indigenous Australians.¹ Incorporating cultural indicators into the Report has already been expressed by Indigenous Australians (during 2003 consultations on first Report) as something that would make the Report more meaningful to Indigenous Australians. Cultural indicators should be refined in the Report in order to enable the Report to meet its aspiration of being meaningful to Indigenous Australians.

The Report could reflect the central role of culture by the Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (Committee) by doing the following:

Amending the objectives of the Report so that the report provides a balanced perspective on process, outcome, qualitative and quantitative data

- Making it an objective of the Report to not only “[i]nform Australian governments about *whether* policy programs and interventions are achieving improved outcomes for Indigenous people”.² The objective should be more balanced and also include *what* makes a policy program or intervention improve outcomes for Indigenous Australians, such as a culturally inclusive approach. Currently, there is the danger that the Report:
 - emphasises discussion of ‘outcomes’ at the expense of ‘process’.
 - emphasises quantitative data over qualitative data (ie: culture is an ingredient of successful outcomes).

Ensuring the Report is consistent in its use of case studies and goes further than simply providing case studies, but analyses data (case studies and statistics), as a way of indicating to Government best practice.

- Ensuring the Report is consistent in its use of case studies (ie: Things that Work Boxes), the case studies should be provided for each Headline and Strategic Change Indicator and not adhoc as is currently the case.³ For instance, Headline Indicator 3.12 (Imprisonment and Juvenile Detention Rates) contains Box 3.12.2 ‘Things that work - Indigenous justice practices’,⁴ but Headline Indicator 3.10 (Deaths from Homicide and Hospitalisations) does not contain a Things That Work Box. Strategic Change Indicator 9.2 (Repeat Offending) contains Box 9.2.2 ‘Things that work — reducing recidivism’, but Strategic Change Indicator 7.4 (Juvenile diversions as a proportion of all juvenile) does not. The Things that Work Boxes are positive in that they go some way to shedding light of what makes a policy program or intervention successful and expanding the cultural context of the Report as is noted in the Report.⁵

¹ Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2005*, Productivity Commission, Canberra, p.1.2 as at <http://www.pc.gov.au/gsp>

² Ibid

³ Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (2005) above n1, p.xxi.

⁴ Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (2005) above n1, p.3.79

⁵ Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (2005) above n1, p. 2.11

- Going further than simply providing case studies, but analyzing these case studies and indicating to Government best practice that flows from the case studies. On VALS reading of the case studies a common element to successful programs is a culturally inclusive approach and Indigenous involvement in and ownership of programs and interventions. Directions as to best practice are required if the Report is to live up to the following description:
 - The Report is a “...strategic document to assist governments in identifying where the focus for policy attention should be. And to measure over time whether things are changing for the better”.⁶
 - A similar analysis should be conducted in relation to statistics as well.

Further exploring and implementing ways to incorporate cultural dimensions of Indigenous wellbeing in the Report and adopting best practice, particularly involving Indigenous Australians (ie: consultation, development and implementation)

- Incorporating into a Western model of well-being and advantage or disadvantage Indigenous Australian notions of well being.
- Further expanding discussion and work on the following potential cultural indicators that emerged from 2003 consultations:
 - The practice of culture by Indigenous people;
 - Formal recognition of Indigenous culture;
 - Appreciation of Indigenous people by non-Indigenous people.
 - The proposed indicators above have the potential to capture information about the following that is not adequately reflected in the Report such as reconciliation, discrimination and racism.
- Further consulting with Indigenous Australians about how to incorporate cultural dimensions of Indigenous wellbeing in the Report (issue raised the most during 2003 consultations). It is VALS’ understanding that the Committee is engaging with the public only through a submission process, and such a Western form of engagement is prohibitive for Indigenous Australians. The Committee should conduct further consultations with the Indigenous Australian community as a follow up to the consultations in 2003.
- Paying particular attention to submissions/consultations about cultural indicators and how to capture Indigenous culture within the framework as it is a long standing issue and Indigenous Australians are experts on the topic.

⁶ Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (2005) above n1, p. 1.2

- Acting upon the indication in the Report that while there have been no changes to the framework, in terms of cultural indicators, it is an area that will need to be revisited in future reports.⁷
- Acting upon indication in the Report that the cultural indicator of language should be developed for future reports.⁸
- Following best practice as identified by J Taylor in the paper titled ‘Indigenous Peoples and Indicators of Well-being: An Australian Perspective on UNPFII Global Frameworks’:
 - “...governing bodies begin to assume some responsibility in partnership with official agencies for the compilation of measurement indicators, and then progress in stages to their interpretation, presentation, replication, and dissemination with the ultimate goal of their application for local planning. As with many aspects of indigenous life, information gathering and interpretation is all too often done for indigenous communities by non-indigenous outsiders. What the Australian experience suggests is that greater emphasis should be given to appropriate resourcing, training and skills development for local personnel, both to build internal capacity for measurement and as an essential component of community development. What this flags is.. there is a need to ensure that processes emerge to better facilitate the inclusion of indigenous peoples in the development of statistics that purport to represent them”.⁹
- Giving serious consideration to the following arguments that highlight the need for cultural indicators:
 - “where there is a breakdown of culture (for example in the loss of language), then disadvantage is likely to be greater”.¹⁰
 - “the danger is that indicators become ethnocentric and the notion that Indigenous people may have their own life projects is obscured by the pressing moral and political objective of achieving statistical equality that comes with the policies of practical reconciliation and mainstreaming (Peterson 2005)”.¹¹
 - “There is no doubt that indigenous peoples’ perceptions and understandings of well-being extend beyond, and sometimes conflict with, many of the indicators currently adopted by global reporting frameworks.”¹²

⁷ Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (2005) above n1, p. xxi

⁸ Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (2005) above n1, p. 2.15

⁹ Taylor J, ‘Indigenous Peoples and Indicators of Well-being: An Australian Perspective on UNPFII Global Frameworks’ Australian National University/Centre For Aboriginal Economic Policy Research Working Paper No. 33/2006, p13 as at <http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/Publications/WP/CAEPRWP33.pdf>

¹⁰ Taylor J (2006) above n9, p.6

¹¹ Taylor J (2006) above n9, p.8

¹² Taylor J (2006) above n9, p.12

- “data often have drawbacks in terms of providing a meaningful representation of the social and economic status and interpretations of well-being of indigenous people. In Australia, for example, there have long been concerns about the cultural relevance of information obtained from instruments principally designed to establish the characteristics of mainstream Australian life. Socioeconomic status, for example, would seem an unproblematic concept—in western society this is generally measured by indicators such as cash income and levels and ownership of assets. However, among many indigenous peoples this can also be determined by access to ritual or religious knowledge rather than to material resources. Similarly, economic status can be accrued by controlling the distribution of material resources rather than being an accumulator (or owner) of resources. In short, for indigenous peoples, materialistic considerations may be of less importance than reciprocity in economic relations (Schwab 1995)”.

Ensuring the Report reflects the vision of the Report in relation to culture, specifically cultural identity.

- Staying true to the progressive vision of the Report that acknowledges the importance of culture: that “Indigenous people will one day enjoy the same overall standard of living as other Australians. They will be as healthy, live as long, and participate as fully in the social and economic life of the nation, while maintaining their cultural identity”.¹³ It is significant that the maintenance of cultural identity is included in this vision. VALS is fearful that the Report focuses on social and economic at the expense of cultural issues. This fear is grounded in the omission of culture in the Forward by Chairman of the Committee Gary Banks: “[t]he shared goal is for Indigenous people ultimately to enjoy the same standard of living as other Australians — for them to be as healthy, as long-living and as able to participate in the social and economic life of the country.”¹⁴ Without recognition of culture in the context of improving economic and social standards, there is the danger of chartering into the territory of assimilation. Just as there are indicators of social and economic issues, there should be an indicator relating to maintenance of cultural identity.

Amending the Framework at the First Tier (Headline Indicators) and Second Tier Levels to promote consistency in relation to cultural indicators.

- Amending the Framework at the First Tier Level (Headline Indicators that provide an overview of Disadvantage) in the following manner:
 - Include rates of Indigenous Australian deaths in custody.
 - Include cultural indicators. Currently only the Strategic Change Indicators include the following cultural indicators:

¹³ Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (2005) above n1, p.1.2

¹⁴ Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (2005) above n1, p.iii

- 7.3: Indigenous cultural studies in school curriculum and involvement of Indigenous people in development and delivery of Indigenous studies.
 - 9.4: Proportion of Indigenous people with access to their traditional lands.
 - 9.5: Participation in organised sport, arts or community group activities.
 - 11.5: Indigenous owned or controlled land.
- Amending the Framework at the second tier level (Strategic Action Area and Strategic Change Indicators) in the following manner:
 - Strategic Change Indicator 7.3 (Indigenous cultural studies in school curriculum and involvement of Indigenous people in development and delivery of Indigenous studies) should not only be used in the Strategic Area for Action 3 (positive childhood and transition to adulthood) but also Strategic Area for Action 2 (early school engagement and performance – preschool to year three).¹⁵ This is in the interests of consistency.

Other suggestions:

The Report could be further improved by the Committee:

Acting upon indications in the Report to improve data collection so that it is comprehensive and comparable as possible.

- Acting upon indications in the Report to improve data collection so that it is comprehensive and comparable as possible¹⁶. VALS agrees there is a need to collect comparable national data on juvenile diversions.¹⁷ VALS agrees that “[there is a clear need for improvements in data, if COAG’s objectives in commissioning this Report are to be fully met”. The data on repeat offending is imperfect for the purposes of other statistical reports.¹⁸ There is no national data set on the extent of Indigenous juvenile diversions.

Reporting clearly on the difference and similarities in urban, regional and remote areas.

- Living up to the following description of the Report: “..the Report is cognisant of the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and experience; and that disadvantage may come in different forms for urban, regional and remote dwellers”. The Report could do this reporting clearly on the difference and similarities in urban, regional and remote areas. If the Report did this it would be a tool for urban Aborigines who

¹⁵ Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (2005) above n1, p.2.6

¹⁶ Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (2005) above n1, p.xvii

¹⁷ Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (2005) above n1, p.LI

¹⁸ Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (2005) above n1, p.1.2

often feel there is no need to go a remote area to see disadvantage, as it exists in urban areas too.

CONCLUSION

In this submission VALS made arguments about the quality of data relating to the justice system, that could fit in any context (ie: health system).

On VALS' analysis of whether the Report meets its objectives and vision VALS has identified that the Committee is in danger of:

- Overlooking the central role of culture for Indigenous Australians until cultural dimensions of Indigenous wellbeing are incorporated into the Key Indicators Framework.
- Not reaping the benefits of Indigenous Australian assistance on the issue of how to translate culture into a Western framework because a written submission process of engagement is prohibitive, and a consultation process is preferred.
- Emphasising outcomes and quantitative data at the expense of process and qualitative data.
- Not living up to aspirations in the Report.

VALS argued that the Report should reflect the central role of culture and the need to further refine the inclusion of cultural indicators in the Report for Indigenous Australians in order to make the Report meaningful to Indigenous Australians. VALS suggested ways that the Committee could do this that range from:

- Amending the objectives of the Report so that the report provides a balanced perspective on process, outcome, qualitative and quantitative data.
- Ensuring the Report is consistent in its use of case studies and goes further than simply providing case studies, but analyses case studies and statistics, as a way of indicating to Government best practice.
- Further exploring and implementing ways to incorporate cultural dimensions of Indigenous wellbeing in the Report and adopting best practice, particularly involving Indigenous Australians (ie: consultation, development and implementation).
- Ensuring the Report reflects the vision of the Report in relation to culture, specifically cultural identity.
- Amending the Framework at the First Tier Level (Headline Indicators) and Second Tier Level to promote consistency in relation to cultural indicators.

VALS also suggested:

- Acting upon indications in the Report to improve data collection so that it is comprehensive and comparable as possible.
- Reporting clearly on the difference and similarities in urban, regional and remote areas.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Key Indicators. If you have any queries please contact Greta Jubb (Research Officer) on 9419 3888 or gjubb@vals.org.au.

Bibliography

Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2005*, Productivity Commission, Canberra as at:
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