Chapter 8

STRENGTHENING THE CAPACITY OF ABORIGINAL FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

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This chapter describes the context and sets out recommendations based upon the findings from the Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey (WAACHS). These recommendations are aimed at improving the capabilities of families and communities with Aboriginal children. In doing this, we recognise that leaders, policy makers and service providers will want a clear rationale for, and guidance on, what actions to take based upon these findings. While the circumstances that they face are urgent, and the demands for change are great, there are key leverage points that if addressed would result in considerable improvement in the capacity of Aboriginal families to reduce their disadvantage.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

In order to successfully address and improve outcomes for Aboriginal children and families, leaders, policy makers and service providers must recognise the following five principles:

◆ consult and include Aboriginal people in the leadership, direction, development, implementation and accountability of strategies to improve Indigenous outcomes

◆ adjust programme content and delivery to take proper account of the capability profile of the Aboriginal population

◆ develop programmes and funding that reflect the Aboriginal population distribution in Western Australia

◆ adjust programmes for the regional and cultural diversity of the Aboriginal population

◆ test strategy and programme content for its capacity to improve the developmental opportunities to build the capabilities of children and families.

Based on the findings reported in this volume and the learnings of the previous three volumes, the following recommendations have been formulated to offer a basis of forming strategies to strengthen the capacity of Aboriginal children, families and communities.

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SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDED ACTIONS *(continued)*

Improve human development opportunities

Action 1   Reorient existing Indigenous health, education, family and community development policy frameworks and strategies to improve the human development opportunities for Aboriginal people.

Action 2   Evaluate and test health, education, family and community development policy, programme and service implementation and content for evidence of its efficacy and effectiveness in promoting the development of Aboriginal children, families and their communities.

Action 3   Ensure the ongoing measurement and reporting of key human development outcome indicators including: age of mother at first pregnancy, birthweight, life expectancy, the number of children attending formal child care, enrolment and attendance at kindergarten and pre-primary school, Year 1–12 literacy and numeracy, school retention, VET/university enrolment, training and employment status, and justice contact.

Ensure programmes build capability in families and communities with Aboriginal children

Action 4   Deliver evidence-based parent, infant and child care programmes in the family and community development sector designed to expand human capability generally and build human capital specifically in the child.

Benefit is likely to be greatest where:

◆ programmes simultaneously target both the child and the parent

◆ programmes provide specific training (parenting, educational and vocational) to the parent

◆ programmes provide language and cognitive enrichment to the child.

Action 5   Establish a clear departmental authority, leadership and accountability in the provision of enriched educational infant and early childhood care that has, as a priority, the targeting of disadvantaged children.

Action 6   Design and implement workforce and professional development programmes in the health, education, family and community sectors that allow staff to distinguish, design, select and implement developmental prevention programmes and services for Aboriginal children, families and communities.

Action 7   Develop specific developmental prevention training curricula and formulate policies to guide the content, implementation and access to workforce and professional development programmes, as well as direct measures of staff attitudes, knowledge and skills, and frequency or extent of participation in them.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDED ACTIONS *(continued)*

Addressing the effects of stress associated with cultural affiliation and participation

Action 8   All levels of government should give high priority to community development initiatives aimed at building and sustaining safer communities and neighbourhoods. Particular priority should be given to efforts in the following areas:

- leadership training for Aboriginal people

- community governance training and support

- establishing, and funding of, community patrols

- establishing neighbourhood support and places of safety

- provision of 'time out' and respite opportunities for families (e.g. school vacation programmes)

- opportunities for young people to have supported relationships with appropriate adults.

Action 9   Schools should be charged with an express responsibility to ensure that all children learn to cope well with the experience of race. Pre- and in-service training of teachers and other school personnel should ensure that new teachers understand the positive role they can play in communicating the message to all children that prejudice is potentially harmful and that discussion of such issues can help in reducing this harm.

Action 10   Practical strategies to assist parents' and carers' understanding of the benefits of positive racial socialisation for their children's educational success and behavioural adjustment should be promoted through cultural organisations, community education strategies and schools.

Action 11   The teaching and learning of traditional Aboriginal languages should be encouraged within schools and adult education as a key strategy for cultural preservation and promotion of cultural identification and intercultural understanding and respect.

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SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDED ACTIONS *(continued)*

Improving family classification

Action 12   The Australian Bureau of Statistics should be encouraged to review its existing family classification system for describing Indigenous and non-Indigenous families, with a view to the Census and other official collections being more encompassing of the variety of family structures now present within contemporary Australian society.

Addressing the effects of family financial strain

Action 13   Strategies for overcoming structural and attitudinal disincentives to proper employment need to be further developed to be applicable to the changing needs and opportunities for employment and training in remote, rural and metropolitan settings. These should include:

- Regular review of the rules for CDEP, unemployment and Abstudy benefits

- Extending the financial and other incentives to employers to provide workplace training and apprenticeship and traineeship opportunities, particularly in remote areas

- Instituting programme and funding incentives to encourage strategic partnerships between government departments and other sectors, e.g. between DEST, FaCSIA, community and business organisations, and employers.

Action 14   Current social welfare policies regarding child support, family payments and emergency family financial support should be adjusted to take account of household structural factors which appear to result in higher levels of disadvantage for some families with Aboriginal children. These include households where children are not with either of their natural parents, households where children's primary carers are aged 40 years or older, and households having three or more children.

Action 15   Practical interventions should be available to protect the income for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children in dysfunctional families, e.g. where it has been established that problems with alcohol, drugs or gambling in the household are diverting family income from meeting essential family needs. Such interventions could include the requirement that all or some of child support or family payments are made in the form of vouchers.

Action 16   Proactive 'Homemaker' type programmes should be available in a culturally appropriate manner to support parents developing home and financial management skills to reduce financial strain. Optimally, these could be developed and delivered in conjunction with the vocational and educational training sector.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDED ACTIONS *(continued)*

Improving housing

Action 17   Continue and extend the implementation of public housing policies that seek to increase the proportion of Indigenous people who own their own home.

Action 18   Monitor and report the proportion of Indigenous people owning or purchasing their own home.

Action 19   An independent body, such as the Equal Opportunity Commission, should monitor and report on rental housing availability, access, replacement, suitability and quality.

Action 20   Implement and report the results of independent audits of public housing quality.

Action 21   The federal, state and territory government housing agencies and authorities seek to establish a common occupancy standard for public housing.

Improving financial accountability and transparency

Action 22   The ongoing implementation of the Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage (OID) framework should require Australian governments to identify the dollar amounts and proportions of spending dedicated to addressing each of the OID headline indicators and their respective strategic change indicators.

Action 23   Governments should be encouraged to build OID indicators into the key performance indicators (KPIs) for departments and into the performance reporting of ICC regions and community agency funding agreements.

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INTRODUCTION

The findings in this and the previous Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey (WAACHS) volumes reflect a critical reality: unless leaders, policy makers and service providers in the family and community development sector understand the population context that defines the current Aboriginal circumstance, their approaches to adopting and implementing recommendations will fail. This context requires a fundamental change in the orientation, philosophy and rigour of family and community sector policies, programmes and services aimed at improving the lives of Australian Aboriginal people. Because of this, we commence with a description of the current conditions that confront those who seek to formulate, implement and assess programmes aimed at improving the Australian Aboriginal circumstance.

A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Globally, Australia has high levels of human development, regularly ranking among the top five countries in the world on the Human Development Index.[1]

The Human Development Index (HDI) is used to measure a country's achievements in three broad areas:

◆ longevity (life expectancy at birth)

◆ knowledge (adult literacy rate)

◆ the combined gross primary, secondary and tertiary enrolment ratio and standard of living (gross domestic product per capita).

The data used to calculate the HDI are taken from national-level collections that include census, administrative and economic sources. The HDI is a measure of achievement and is principally used to focus attention on, and advocate for, human outcomes rather than merely the economic performance of a country. Australia can boast enviably high levels of achievement in human development as measured by this index.

FIGURE 8.1: HUMAN DEVELOPMENT INDEX RANKING FOR SELECTED COUNTRIES AND SELECTED ABORIGINAL POPULATIONS, 2003

HDI Rank	Country	HDI score	HDI Rank	Country	HDI score
1	Norway	.944	30	Republic of Korea	.879
2	Iceland	.942		*Canadian Aboriginal population*	*.877*
3	Sweden	.941	32	Czech Republic	.861
4	**Australia**	**.939**	34	Argentina	.849
5	Netherlands	.938		*U.S. Aboriginal population*	*.847*
6	Belgium	.937		*New Zealand Maori*	*.842*
7	United States	.937	42	Costa Rica	.831
8	Canada	.937	43	Chile	.831
9	Japan	.932	52	Cuba	.806
10	Switzerland	.932	53	Belarus	.804
13	United Kingdom	.930		*Canadian Registered Indian*	*.802*
16	Austria	.929	54	Trinidad and Tobago	.802
17	France	.925	55	Mexico	.800
19	Spain	.925	103	Cape Verde	.727
20	New Zealand	.917		*Australian Aboriginal population*	*.723*
23	Portugal	.896	104	China	.721

Source: Cooke, Beavon and Guimond 2004.[2]

Australian Aboriginal people do not enjoy equity in their human development outcomes when compared to the total Australian population. When separately calculated and compared with 2003 HDI scores, the HDI for Australian Indigenous people ranked among countries such as Cape Verde (103rd) and China (104th), well down in the list of countries reported to have medium levels of human development. Just as importantly, when compared with four other colonised nations, the disparity between levels of human development in the total Australian population and the Australian Indigenous population specifically, are the largest measured. This is particularly so when compared to other developed countries with Indigenous populations such as Canada, United States and New Zealand. Little progress has been made over a ten year period in addressing human development in the Australian Indigenous population. While the notable progress achieved in New Zealand in closing the HDI gap could be a reflection of differences in the proportion of the total population who are Maori, as well as that country's different geographic and population dispersion circumstances, these factors alone do not account for the nature of this progress. In short, Australia has much to do in achieving greater equity in Indigenous outcomes – particularly in light of such international comparisons.

FIGURE 8.2: HUMAN DEVELOPMENT INDEX (HDI) TRENDS — 1991–2001
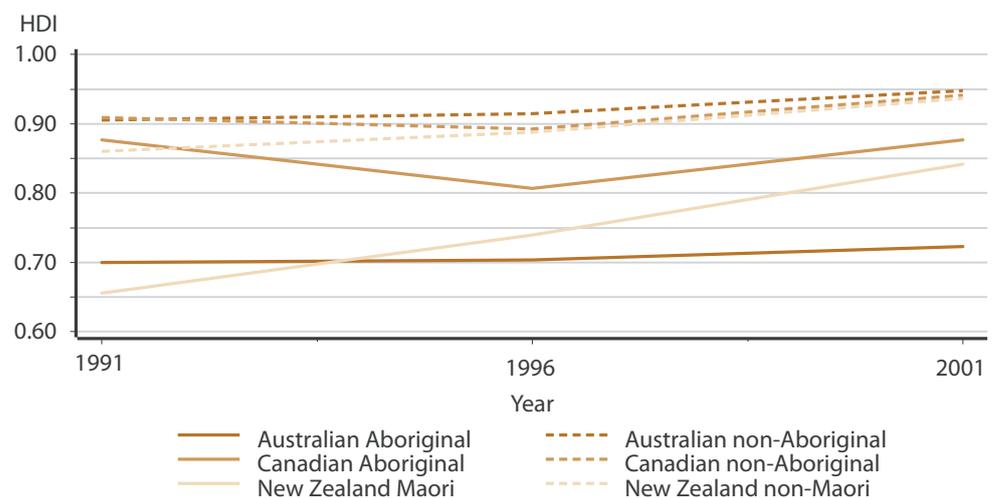
Source: Cooke, Beavon and Guimond 2004.[2]

In the face of these observations, and in the presence of the failure of successive Australian governments to appreciably advance the Australian Indigenous circumstance, it is hard not to argue that the severity of the social and health consequences now constitute a humanitarian failure as defined by Darcy and Hofmann.[3] Averting this looming crisis will require major investment in rebuilding human capital and expanding the choices available to Australian Aboriginal people. This expansion rests upon the continued responsibility of governments to achieve greater equality in human development outcomes for Aboriginal people. The current human development literature is replete with international evidence showing that improvements in childhood health, education and social development lead to population level improvements in sustainable productivity, empowerment and participation in social, civic and economic aspects of Australian society.[4]

In achieving this, five essential principles are proposed that should orient and guide policy, programmes, and service delivery for families and communities with Aboriginal children.

PRINCIPLES FOR IMPLEMENTING POLICIES AND SERVICES

In order to successfully address and improve outcomes for Aboriginal children and families, leaders, policy makers and service providers must:

♦ consult and include Aboriginal people in the leadership, direction, development, implementation and accountability of strategies to improve Indigenous outcomes

♦ adjust programme content and delivery to take proper account of the capability profile of the Aboriginal population

♦ develop programmes and funding that reflect the Aboriginal population distribution in Western Australia

♦ adjust programmes for the regional and cultural diversity of the Aboriginal population

♦ test strategy and programme content for its capacity to improve the developmental opportunities to build the capabilities of children and families.

INVOLVE ABORIGINAL PEOPLE IN IMPROVING INDIGENOUS OUTCOMES

Historical and contemporary records of efforts to improve the lives of Australian Aboriginal people indicate that Aboriginal people wish to be consulted, and participate in, decisions that affect them. It would seem remarkable that such a request would even need a rationale or justification. This repeated request is based upon far more than acknowledging and using the preferences, wisdom, learning, local knowledge and cultures of Aboriginal people. The request for participation in decisions that affect them is a request for participation in the democratic process and access to the functions and benefits of a civil society. These benefits allow for the expansion of human capabilities and choice based upon human development principles.[5]

In meeting the request of Aboriginal people to participate in decisions that affect them, governments and their departments and services are mandated with the power to establish the basis of participation for all Australian citizens through the creation of legal and social frameworks and the implementation of policies.[6] In this way, the Australian Government in concert with state and territory governments are charged with enforcing the framework that supports the expansion of human capability in populations. This is achieved by:

♦ enforcing legal frameworks that outlaw discrimination, reduce social exclusion and increase economic, social and civic participation

♦ promoting and strengthening local institutions that provide opportunities for participation and empowerment in a range of activities and services

♦ ensuring a fair distribution of opportunities through a fair distribution of income, wealth and the means of income and wealth generation

♦ setting benchmarks for, and monitoring, three internationally recognised sentinel indicators of human development: income, health and knowledge

♦ directing the creation or maintenance of data sources on which to base evidence of progress.

The participation of Aboriginal people in decisions made about them is a measure of the success with which Australian governments and their departments and agencies enforce and achieve the outcomes of this framework. Simply put, it is not possible to achieve these goals without the participation of Aboriginal people. As a result, the requirement for advancing the Australian Aboriginal circumstance rests firmly upon the involvement of Aboriginal people in the leadership, direction, development, implementation and accountability of strategies in the family and community sector to improve Indigenous outcomes.

ADJUST PROGRAMME CONTENT TO THE CAPABILITY PROFILE OF THE ABORIGINAL POPULATION

Any attempt to address the Aboriginal circumstance must take account of the diminished capability base of the Aboriginal population (for a definition of human capability, see the commentary box entitled *Population characteristics that influence human capability* in Chapter Two). In providing mainstream programmes, there is no evidence to suggest a 'level playing field' with respect to Aboriginal people's capacity to benefit. In Western Australia, the capability profile of families with Aboriginal children may be characterised as follows:

◆ Compared with the general population, carers of Aboriginal children have lower levels of education. About one-third of carers of Aboriginal children left school prior to the completion of Year 10.[7]

◆ The median age of the Aboriginal population is about 20 years of age.[7]

◆ Amid a significantly higher rate of unemployment for Aboriginal people, employment that is available and undertaken is generally at a lower level of occupational skill and qualification.[7]

◆ About 60 per cent of Aboriginal children aged 0–3 years were living with both original parents. This proportion decreased to about 40 per cent for children aged 12–17 years.[7] While the WAACHS data are cross-sectional, these observations suggest considerable transition for most Aboriginal children to either sole parent family structures or more diverse family structures before completing compulsory schooling.

◆ Nearly one in four Aboriginal children (24 per cent) were at high risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties.[6] These difficulties impact on overall academic performance.[8]

◆ At Year 1 more than 60 per cent of Aboriginal children had below average academic performance as rated by their teacher.[8] There is no evidence that this proportion is reduced among older students.

◆ The impact of the high fertility rate in the Aboriginal population, along with high rates of premature adult death, mean that there are only 1.2 Aboriginal adults for every Aboriginal child under the age of 18 years. This compares with three non-Aboriginal adults for every child in the non-Aboriginal population (see Chapter Two).

◆ In the 12 months prior to the survey, families with Aboriginal children experienced four times the number of major life stress events relative to families with non-Aboriginal children in the 1993 Western Australian Child Health Survey (1993 WA CHS) (see Chapter Five).

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As we have previously noted, this combination of circumstances not only generates impoverishment of the environments in which children are raised, but also compromises the human, psychological and social capital that forms the wider pool of resources essential for child growth and development. Impoverishment across these resource domains is accompanied by a reduction in the choice, capacity and flexibility of carers, families and communities to meet the demands and challenges of daily living. The present rate of change attributable to advances in income, education and training within the Australian Aboriginal population is simply too slow to reap the human capability benefits needed at a population level.[9] Some of this reflects the low overall population base from which gain is being measured. However, a great deal of this effect reflects the inadequate effort being spent in quality care for children, and education, training and employment. This is why there is a requirement to focus on improvements in fundamental aspects of Aboriginal human capital — care, health, education and income — as a central, strategy in improving capability.[6,7,8]

At present, family and community development policies and programmes of all agencies and departments with responsibilities for families with Aboriginal children need a greater focus on child development and on enabling the capacities of families and communities as they apply to the development of children. Improving the prospects for Aboriginal children is contingent on how all human service systems (i.e. including Department of Indigenous Affairs, Health, Department for Community Development, Education and Training, and Regional Development) respond by developing programmes, interventions and policies that can effectively address these needs. Prevention, promotion and community development programmes need to be implemented on the basis of either developmental theory or an evidence-base (preferably both) that are sufficiently designed and delivered to expand the capability of individuals (i.e. carers and the children themselves) specifically, and families more generally. All human service departments and agencies need to make clear the evidence-base and/or theoretical grounds on which their programmes and interventions are based. While this would be of benefit with respect to mainstream efforts, it is absolutely essential for efforts targeting Aboriginal families and communities. It is vital that policy makers, programme designers and service providers adjust both the programme content and the level and modes of service delivery in the family, community and other human services sectors to take account of the capability profile of the Aboriginal population.

DEVELOP PROGRAMMES THAT ACCOUNT FOR THE ABORIGINAL POPULATION DISTRIBUTION

The WAACHS findings tell an important story about the size of the Western Australian Aboriginal population relative to its geographical distribution across a third of Australia's land mass. These findings reveal a tiny Aboriginal population that is predominately based in metropolitan and regional centres with only a small proportion living in the extremely remote areas. Understanding the size and dispersion of the Western Australian Aboriginal population is essential to the success of programmes and services designed to target Aboriginal people.

For example, of the 11,400 families in Western Australia with Aboriginal children, about 4,300 of these families with 10,200 children are in Perth. This means that over one-third of all families with Aboriginal children live in the Perth metropolitan area — an area of about 1,400 square kilometres. While this is the largest concentration of Aboriginal children in Western Australia, it also means that these 10,200 Aboriginal children are living alongside 300,300 non-Aboriginal children in the same area.

In contrast, about 900 families containing 2,830 children (less than 10 per cent of the total population of Aboriginal children) are living in the extremely remote communities scattered across an area approximately 1.3 million square kilometres. Based on this knowledge, a programme intended for four-year old Aboriginal children in extremely remote areas would be directed at just 130 four year-old children scattered across more than a million square kilometres.

Leaders, policy makers, and service providers must justify their programme development in terms of population density and then measure the reach of these programmes (i.e. measure the number of Aboriginal people who receive services and for how long) in terms of actual population distribution. Without direction to do this, there is no guarantee that sufficient effort is being expended at a population level to lift developmental outcomes for children and families. This central principle is as relevant in the Perth Indigenous Coordination Centre (ICC) region as it is in ICC regions that have Aboriginal populations living in greater levels of geographic isolation.

ADJUST PROGRAMMES FOR THE DIVERSITY OF THE ABORIGINAL POPULATION

At some level, all families — including those with and those without Aboriginal children — are different. All families differ on the basis of individual biology and personal histories, and adjustments for these differences should be included in any generic or mainstream service. For Aboriginal children however, three characteristics of diversity that require particular focus in the design of programmes and services are adjustments for language and culture, for household composition, and for transitional living.

Language and culture. WAACHS data reveal striking differences in the preservation of traditional languages associated with levels of relative isolation. Both traditional language use and language preservation are important indicators (although not exclusively so) of a more general preservation of tradition, culture and custom. At present it is essential that programmes and services be designed and delivered to take into account and reflect the cultural and language diversity that is present in the Western Australian Aboriginal population. Programmes for language restoration (particularly in the metropolitan area) and programmes for language conservation (in areas where Aboriginal languages are more widely spoken) represent major opportunities for programme development in the family and community sector.

Household composition. The findings on families with Aboriginal children in Western Australia reveal significant differences in family composition with respect to the geographical location of these families. Of the 11,400 families (which account for 29,800 Aboriginal children under the age of 18):

◆ 3,500 (31 per cent) were two original parent families - nuclear type

◆ 3,900 (35 per cent) were sole mother families (either sole mothers on their own, sole mother step family, or sole mother living with extended family members)

◆ 1,850 (16 per cent) are two parent step/blended families.

These three family types comprise around 80 per cent of all families with Aboriginal children. The WAACHS data show how the proportions of these family types vary in response to relative isolation: sole parentage is a predominant household composition of Aboriginal children living in the metropolitan area, while greater variety in household composition is a characteristic of those children living in more regional and remote areas.

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Transitional living. The survey findings showing generally higher levels of poor community functioning and family problems in areas within the 10–16 range of the ARIA++ scale, highlight the special needs of these communities — particularly larger service centres in more remote areas. These communities have a relatively high proportion of Aboriginal families in 'transitional living' where traditional affiliations with land, language, kinship and culture co-exist with the demands of living and rearing children in a more 'Westernised' urban community. It is vital that this aspect of diversity is properly acknowledged and addressed. This will require differential resourcing and targeting of programmes and services to bring about more substantive equality in the developmental outcomes of Aboriginal children growing up in such settings.

TEST STRATEGIES AND PROGRAMME CONTENT AGAINST DEVELOPMENTAL EVIDENCE AND THEORY

As discussed in the commentary box entitled *The effect of community characteristics on outcomes for carers and children* in Chapter Seven, in comparison to family effects, community-level effects upon children's abilities are relatively small. However, more of the abilities and circumstances of carers are associated with community-level effects. This suggests that children are buffered, to some extent, from community effects (both positive and negative) by the experiences and opportunities afforded within their families. These findings suggest community characteristics tend to exert larger influences upon carers and then indirectly upon children.

As children mature, they participate more fully in the community and community influences have a greater impact on their developmental outcomes. For Aboriginal children particularly, this is likely to occur at younger ages and in circumstances of considerable family change. This suggests that community development policies for families and communities must be examined for their efficacy and effectiveness in:

◆   expanding the capabilities of carers

◆   expanding the capabilities of children

◆   improving those aspects of communities that are most likely to positively flow to carers and children.

With respect to the Western Australian Aboriginal population, community capacity building, as a general strategy, is too diffuse an approach to elevate the specific capabilities of carers and children within them. Without improving Aboriginal carer and child capabilities, community capacity building alone lacks focus as a strategy to impart equality, sustainability, productivity and empowerment in outcomes for Aboriginal people.

If current family and community development policies and programmes for families with Aboriginal children require more focus on the developmental drivers of change, then what should policy makers, designers of programmes, and service providers look for in more appropriately targeting policies and programmes for families and communities with Aboriginal children?

Three broad capacity tests are proposed that policy makers and human service contract managers should make in assessing the suitability of programmes and services that seek to improve outcomes for Aboriginal families and communities. In evaluating family and community development programmes, policy makers and human service contract managers should ask:

◆ How does the proposed policy or service prompt parent and child development through the provision of evidence-based opportunities, expectations and better health?

◆ How does the proposed policy or service specifically support enriched child language development, enriched cognitive development in the child, and expand emotional support for the child and carer in the face of challenge?

◆ How does the proposed policy or service promote developmental stability, social equality, social inclusion, and lower occurrences of stress?

The particular strategies that can be capitalised upon to achieve a better fit between the evidence for building capability on one hand and existing policy and programmes on the other form the basis of the recommendations that follow.

ACTIONS NEEDED TO IMPROVE FAMILY AND COMMUNITY OUTCOMES FOR ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

ACTIONS TO REORIENT FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT APPROACHES TO IMPROVE HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Earlier in this volume we defined the concept of 'human capability' as describing '... the capacity of populations to improve their health, wealth, knowledge and cultural security, and the opportunities available to facilitate those improvements.' (See comment box entitled *Population characteristics that influence human capability* in Chapter Two). The WAACHS data provide evidence for the need for health, education, family and community development policies, programme development and implementation to:

◆ adjust programme content and delivery for the capability profile of the Aboriginal population

◆ match the density, population distribution and diversity of the Aboriginal population

◆ deliberately test policy and programme content against the evidence for its efficacy and effectiveness in building human capability.

Essential for this to succeed is Aboriginal participation in the leadership, direction, development, implementation and accountability of strategies to improve Aboriginal outcomes.

Designing policy and programmes that meet these criteria requires a significant reorientation of the existing family and community development approach to families with Aboriginal children. Reorienting family and community development policy frameworks to do this will require confronting the need for resources to fulfil statutory responsibilities to protect children on one hand, with the need to address 'upstream' determinants that require designing and implementing evidence-based prevention strategies on the other. This gives rise to considerable tension where agencies or departments are expected to deliver both child protection or remedial services and concurrently deliver community development programmes ostensibly aimed at prevention. This conflict in mission can also give rise to unintended consequences.

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For example, recent suggestions to withhold family benefits in lieu of school attendance for Aboriginal children have gained some notoriety. Apart from the significant equity issues entailed in the application of such a policy, this does nothing to address the circumstances of those Aboriginal children who do not attend school, for perhaps reasons completely out of their control, and who consequently find themselves living in households where benefits are withheld resulting in additional stress and further disadvantage. One example of non-punitive measures to help improve school attendance can be found in Volume Three[8] which proposed a number of recommendations for improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal students. Similar consequences occur in the public housing sector where eviction processes often result in families moving into households with other family members leading to problems of overcrowding with consequent risks for dysfunction and distress for both families. This can lead, in turn, to complaint notifications and onward eviction processes. Such policies may be seen to serve short term pragmatic goals. However, in the main, they create unintended developmental effects for families and children, and perpetuate the cycle of disadvantage.

What can be said with certainty is that, unless departments and agencies in the family and community development sector seriously consider the evidence of efficacy and effectiveness in their prevention efforts, and refine their prevention approaches for Aboriginal children and families, there will be an increase in the burden of need that confronts these agencies and departments to protect children — Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike. Moreover, for some departments and agencies, the statutory requirement to protect children will demand budget priority over any concerted move to implement higher standards of evidence-based prevention. This tension in the mission of these departments and agencies requires serious direction and leadership to develop coherent strategic approaches and budgets. It will also require workforce development to enable better policy implementation and practice based upon more coherent developmental theory and evidence.

Action 1	Reorient existing Indigenous health, education, family and community development policy frameworks and strategies to improve the human development opportunities for Aboriginal people.

Action 2	Evaluate and test health, education, family and community development policy, programme and service implementation and content for evidence of its efficacy and effectiveness in promoting the development of Aboriginal children, families and their communities.

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Action 3	Ensure the ongoing measurement and reporting of key human development outcome indicators including age of mother at first pregnancy, birthweight, life expectancy, the number of children attending formal child care, enrolment and attendance at kindergarten and pre-primary school, Year 1–12 literacy and numeracy, school retention, VET/university enrolment, training and employment status, and justice contact.

ACTIONS TO ENRICH PROGRAMME CONTENT TO BUILD CAPABILITY IN FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES WITH ABORIGINAL CHILDREN

What type of programme content should family and community development programmes for Aboriginal children, families and communities contain (see comment box entitled *Evidence-based development content for programmes and services*)?

Broadly the WAACHS data in this and previous volumes show that family and community development programme content should seek to increase carer education and improve family functioning, improve family economic circumstances, increase cultural connectedness and reduce levels of stress.

Action 4	Deliver evidence-based parent, infant and child care programmes in the family and community development sector designed to expand human capability generally and build human capital specifically in the child. Benefit is likely to be greatest where: ◆ programmes simultaneously target both the child and the parent ◆ programmes provide specific training (parenting, educational and vocational) to the parent ◆ programmes provide language and cognitive enrichment to the child.

The child care sector is varied and includes programmes and services offered by different levels of government, some of which are Indigenous specific. In contrast to mainstream child care, Indigenous child care also entails a greater focus on primary needs, such as the provision of nutritious food, family friendly atmosphere and 'cultural safety/appropriateness'. The very low levels of satisfaction with access to child care, as demonstrated in the survey, needs to be addressed. Child care is the link between early childhood, post-natal services and starting pre-school/kindergarten. Child care also connects families to other services, e.g. health, child protection as well as other opportunities, such as training/education or employment opportunities. While there is a need to promote an understanding of the importance of early childhood learning and development within Indigenous communities, there is also a need to increase access to child care and to ensure it is culturally appropriate and welcoming for Indigenous families (both Indigenous specific and mainstream services) as well as affordable. Forms of child care, such as playgroups, may be more appropriate and non-threatening for communities/families that have little experience of child care. These need to be accompanied by an increase in the number of Aboriginal workers in the community services sector, and child care workers in particular. Indigenous

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families may be reluctant to use services if there are no Indigenous workers and the workers themselves need high and ongoing levels of support/mentoring. There remains a clear need for training all child care workers/services in cultural appropriateness/awareness, particularly in mainstream services.

There is an urgent requirement for the community services sector to enter into discussions with the education sector on the need to introduce enriched educational content in the provision of care to all infants and children aged birth to six years generally, and Aboriginal infants and children of this age specifically. From the viewpoint of children and families, current services for family and community sector departments and agencies and the education sector are failing to deliver a coherent programme of developmentally appropriate content to infants and young children. Persistent attempts to distinguish services that provide 'child care' from those that provide 'education' simply ignore the needs of children of this age and, instead, pose significant departmental barriers to the design and delivery of developmental benefits to children and families. This is particularly vital in addressing the early developmental disadvantage of Aboriginal children and the onward effects of this on their abilities in kindergarten, pre-school and early primary school.

Action 5	Establish a clear departmental authority, leadership and accountability in the provision of enriched educational infant and early childhood care that has, as a priority, the targeting of disadvantaged children.

The delivery of quality, evidence-based parent, infant and child care programmes in the family and community sector will require a workforce better trained to distinguish, select and implement developmental prevention programmes. In order to better deliver these programmes in the family and community development sector, workforce and organisational development with a specific focus on the Aboriginal population will be required along with appropriate professional development curricula.

Action 6	Design and implement workforce and professional development programmes in the health, education, family and community sectors that allow staff to distinguish, design, select and implement developmental prevention programmes and services for Aboriginal children, families and communities.

Action 7	Develop specific developmental prevention training curricula and formulate policies to guide the content, implementation and access to workforce and professional development programmes, as well as direct measures of staff attitudes, knowledge and skills and frequency or extent of participation in them.

EVIDENCE-BASED DEVELOPMENTAL CONTENT FOR PROGRAMMES AND SERVICES

What should policy makers and contract managers look for in terms of evidence-based 'developmental content' in policies and contracts for services that are specifically focused on increasing immediate and long term social, civic and economic participation of children, families and communities?

Specific programme content needs to develop and improve social functioning in Aboriginal children with respect to: regulation of emotions; engagement in exploratory behaviour; language acquisition and communication; self-direction; intellectual flexibility; some degree of introspection; and self-efficacy in meeting life's challenges.

As a result of this, for Aboriginal children and young people there is particular value in programme content that provides:

◆ development of life skills, including racial socialisation, and positive cultural identification

◆ appropriate exposures to stress and challenge that are modulated by emotional support and mentoring

◆ encouragement of exploration

◆ celebration of developmental milestones

◆ guided rehearsal and extension of new skills

◆ protection from inappropriate disapproval, teasing or punishment

◆ facilitation of emotional competence.[10]

Some priority programmes

Enriched environments for language acquisition and development (in both Standard Australian English and in Aboriginal languages where appropriate). These programmes should be structured to provide increasing language complexity and sophistication and maintain the necessary communication skills for friendships, to negotiate needs and to resolve conflicts.[8]

Stimulating activities that prompt cognitive development and improve social capacities in children. Programme content should specifically focus on talking, playing, interacting, reading and story-telling, particularly to very young children. This improves their cognitive outcomes and has onward developmental benefits to the child, both in the form of improved academic achievement and improved social capacities.[11,12]

Continued . . . .

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EVIDENCE-BASED DEVELOPMENTAL CONTENT FOR PROGRAMMES AND SERVICES *(continued)*

Mentoring in cognitive skills (i.e. labelling, sorting, sequencing, comparing and noting means-ends relationships) provides learning opportunities that change social capacities in children.[10,13] These opportunities for stimulating children's cognitive development occur in the day-to-day interactons between parents and children and other care environments.

Explaining facts, talking about expectations, encouraging skills, and soliciting information about daily activities outside the home, produces improved social capacities in older children and young adolescents.[14,15]

All of these opportunities entail social interactions that produce change in children and young people that are essential components for building family and community capability.

Programme principles for the development of children

In designing better evidence-based family and community services for Aboriginal populations there are specific programme principles that should be given priority, particularly where children are concerned.[16]

◆ Interventions that begin earlier in development and continue longer afford greater benefits to the participants.

◆ Programmes that are more intensive (as measured by number of home visits per week, number of hours per day, days per week, weeks per year) produce larger positive effects and children who receive more, benefit more.

◆ Children who receive direct educational experiences (i.e. as in educational day care, enriched home care, kindergarten and pre-primary experiences) show larger benefits than do children in programmes that rely on intermediate routes to change child competencies (i.e. parent training alone).

◆ Interventions that provide more comprehensive services and use multiple routes to enhance child development generally have larger effects than do programmes that have a narrower focus. For example, an early educational child care programme delivered in a VET setting not only provides a direct benefit to the child but also provides training (e.g. parenting and employment) opportunities for the carer. This results in a larger developmental gain relative to the use of one or the other of these strategies alone.

◆ Environmental supports, when designed, need to maintain children's positive attitudes and behaviours and encourage continued learning related to school.

◆ Interventions that are perceived as culturally relevant and welcomed are more likely to be valued, used and incorporated into participant's everyday lives.

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ACTIONS THAT ADDRESS THE EFFECTS OF STRESS

The longer term effect of chronic stress on the child's developing brain, endocrine and immune systems is now understood to be a key mechanism in the process of the 'biological embedding' of disadvantage.[17] The survey findings show that more than one in five (22 per cent) Aboriginal children were reared in households that had experienced 7–14 major life stress events in the 12 months prior to the survey. This is indicative of the extreme levels of stress experienced by many Aboriginal families and children. In comparison to the 1993 WA CHS, this level of family life stress was experienced by less than one per cent of non-Aboriginal Western Australian families with non-Aboriginal children.[18]

Social support helps the capacity of individuals and families to cope in the face of extreme levels of stress. In this respect, the WAACHS findings confirm the critical importance of family resiliency factors. These promote the family's ability to maintain its established patterns of functioning in the face of challenge and support the family's ability to recover from misfortune and crises. While the support of immediate and extended family is a key resource for individuals in dealing with stress, Indigenous policy must target the principal factors underpinning the present levels of family stress (see commentary box entitled *Understanding the impact of different levels of stress* in Chapter Five). At the same time it is also essential to ensure that policy makers, service providers, community leaders and parents are made aware of the potential harm which such stress exposures can have on children's development. This needs to be done in concert with supporting and encouraging the practical steps that can be taken to buffer them against the effects of 'toxic' levels of stress.

The WAACHS data show that the three leading factors associated with high family stress were:

◆ the total number of neighbourhood problems reported by the child's primary carer

◆ issues of cultural affiliation and acculturative stress

◆ high levels of family financial strain.

While these factors are not entirely independent of one another, they together account for the major portion of family stress. This suggests that policies and strategies targeting these particular factors would provide greatest leverage in reducing the stress-related effects of disadvantage.

Addressing neighbourhood problems

The communiqué from the 2006 Intergovernmental Summit on Violence and Child Abuse in Indigenous Communities acknowledged that the levels of violence and child abuse in Indigenous communities warranted a comprehensive national response. It also reconfirmed the principles of the Council of Australian Governments' (COAG) 2004 National Framework on Indigenous and Family Violence and Child Protection. This called for accelerated and coordinated action by all Australian governments and, in particular, 'the imperative of giving Indigenous Australians confidence that the justice system will work for them' and that 'Indigenous people should enjoy the same level of law and order as applies in the broader community.'[19]

Current programmes administered by departments and agencies in the family, community and justice sectors are seeking to ensure higher levels of neighbourhood and community safety generally, and specifically for Aboriginal people and their

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communities. Evidence from the WAACHS supports the general thrust and importance of these policies. These approaches should be the leading priority for the human development and health benefits they will bring. This should also be seen as a precondition to ensuring that expenditure by governments at all levels to overcome disadvantage is not dissipated but made sustainable.

Action 8	All levels of government should give high priority to community development initiatives aimed at building and sustaining safer communities and neighbourhoods. Particular priority should be given to efforts in the following areas:

- leadership training for Aboriginal people

- community governance training and support

- establishing, and funding of, community patrols

- establishing neighbourhood support and places of safety

- provision of 'time out' and respite opportunities for families (e.g. school vacation programmes)

- opportunities for young people to have supported relationships with appropriate adults.

Addressing stress associated with cultural affiliation and participation

While it is commonly believed that some level of cultural engagement and traditional cultural attachment is beneficial to wellbeing, these attachments are not without personal costs. Another leading factor independently associated with high levels of family stress was related to carers reporting higher levels of cultural affiliation and participation. This was more commonly reported in families where carers said they considered Aboriginal ceremonial business to be important and in those who had participated in Aboriginal organisations in the past 12 months. These associations were strongest in areas characterised by moderate to high relative geographic isolation. These are areas where there are high rates of transitional living (e.g. in areas where the rate of traditional language loss between the generations is highest). This would suggest that an appreciation of the nature and consequences of these 'acculturative stresses' experienced by Aboriginal families is important. This is because they could inform interventions and programmes in schools, communities and families to promote children's positive experience of culture and racial socialisation.

'Acculturative stress' refers to the stresses inherent in simultaneously striving to preserve one's cultural heritage, negotiating one's relationship with the dominant culture and having to deal with the racism and discrimination which one might encounter on a regular basis.[20] In short, it is the stress associated with 'living in two worlds'. These pressures can be experienced differently by children, young people and their adult carers. They depend on the nature of their past and ongoing contact with the dominant culture. Three ways in which traditional (i.e. ethnic minority) and mainstream culture are usually transmitted have been characterised as:

- vertically, through the learning and influence of one's parents

- horizontally through peer interactions

◆ obliquely through interactions with adults and institutions in one's society or community.[21]

The international cross-cultural literature suggests that the main factors influencing acculturative stress experienced by children and families are:

◆ the nature of the dominant society, i.e. how the values of the dominant society affect the acceptance or rejection of minority groups

◆ the nature of the acculturating group, i.e. the willingness for movement towards integration or permanent contact with the dominant group

◆ the mode of adaptation chosen, i.e. whether the chosen path is one of assimilation and integration, bi-culturalism, or separatism.[22] This is of particular note given the research evidence showing the protective benefits of positive racial socialisation for the educational success and behavioural adjustment of children from minority cultures.[23]

Johnson (2001) has described racial socialisation as including ' . . . the intentional and unintentional messages, childrearing behaviour, and other interactions that communicate to the child how he or she is to perceive, process, and respond to discrimination, prejudice and other barriers based on race.'[24] Given that positive racial identity is generally predictive of higher self-esteem, less stress, less delinquent behaviour and better educational outcomes, recent research is now focusing on how this can be promoted through the agents of socialisation most proximal to the child's experience — the family, school and local neighbourhood/community.[25]

Children internalise messages of racial socialisation from an early age and through the years of their formal schooling. At home, these messages are particularly influenced by parents and children's experiences of racial discrimination. At school, teachers can deliberately or unwittingly communicate racial socialisation messages in the classroom through their evaluations and attitudes towards race. This shapes both majority children's attitudes towards their own group and minority group self-evaluation.[26] Some minority-population children are socialised not to allow other's attitudes towards them to negatively influence the way they think about themselves. However, in the integrated classroom setting, majority-population attitudes can impact very negatively on children's sense of themselves — particularly their feelings of self-esteem and self-efficacy.[25]

Families, schools and communities need to share the responsibility of helping all children cope well with the experience of race. Parents can assist in helping children to have pride in their Aboriginal cultural heritage and in preparing them for experiences of discrimination. At school, teachers and other school personnel including Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers have a particular responsibility to look out for, and to be willing to engage in discussions of, prejudice and stereotyping of all kinds. They also have a responsibility to take prompt action in dealing with incidents of racial bullying. Local government and other community organisations can also initiate positive racial socialisation opportunities through whole community participation in sport and recreation, the arts, cultural events and other community activities.

The diversity of Western Australian Aboriginal communities described in this volume underscores the obligation of governments in providing for all citizens and ameliorating all forms of racism including systemic racism. Governments have a responsibility to ensure that public services are provided in a fair and non-discriminatory manner. They also play an important leadership role in their

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operational practices and employment policies which demonstrate the benefits of embracing diversity and acknowledging difference. In this respect, the Western Australian government's 2005 *Policy Framework for Substantive Equality* is of particular note.[27] This framework outlines a process of continuous improvement for public sector services in meeting its obligations to the *Equal Opportunity Act*[28] and the state government's statement of commitment to a *New and Just Relationship between the State Government and Aboriginal people*.[29] It articulates a vision for 'Creating an inclusive and harmonious Western Australia where all its members are treated equitably and fairly and are able to reach their full potential with dignity and respect.' Most specifically it draws the distinction between 'formal equality' and 'substantive equality' where the former refers to prescription of equal treatment of all peoples regardless of circumstances, on the understanding that all have the same rights and entitlements. 'Substantive equality' in contrast involves achieving equitable outcomes as well as equal opportunity. This takes account of past discrimination, recognises that rights, entitlements and opportunities are not equally distributed throughout society, and that equal or the same application of rules can produce unequal outcomes.

Action 9	Schools should be charged with an express responsibility to ensure that all children learn to cope well with the experience of race. Pre- and in-service training of teachers and other school personnel should ensure that new teachers understand the positive role they can play in communicating the message to all children that prejudice is potentially harmful and that discussion of such issues can help in reducing this harm.

Action 10	Practical strategies to assist parents' and carers' understanding of the benefits of positive racial socialisation for their children's educational success and behavioural adjustment should be promoted through cultural organisations, community education strategies and schools.

Action 11	The teaching and learning of traditional Aboriginal languages should be encouraged within schools and adult education as a key strategy for cultural preservation and promotion of cultural identification and intercultural understanding and respect.

Addressing the key factors associated with family financial strain

Addressing the financial strain experienced by families was another key factor which the survey identified as having considerable potential for reducing family stress. The analyses of the survey findings reported in Chapter Three of this volume provide a detailed description of the range of factors which are relevant to an understanding of this aspect of disadvantage. While the cross-sectional nature of the data do not permit confirmation of the direction of the observed associations, the sheer number of

factors found to make a significant independent contribution to the family's experience of financial strain is consistent with aspects of disadvantage that have a cumulative impact on family and individual stress.

Chapter Two of this volume outlines some of the population characteristics associated with the high levels of family financial strain observed in Aboriginal families. In addition to its relative youth and low adult-to-child ratio, two other family structural factors which contribute to the financial strain in families with Aboriginal children are family type and family size. For example, sole parent families with children are twice as common in the Aboriginal population than the non-Aboriginal population in Western Australia (33 per cent and 15 per cent, respectively).[30] Higher levels of sole parenthood are seen in families with Aboriginal children in the Perth metropolitan area and other urbanised areas of the state. Importantly, the WAACHS findings indicate that a variety of other family types — not presently recognised in official statistics — become increasingly prevalent as children enter their teenage years. Given the differential effect that combinations of these factors can have on the family financial resources, it is important that the current diversity and generational complexity in the care arrangements of families with children is properly recognised.

Action 12	The Australian Bureau of Statistics should be encouraged to review its existing family classification system for describing Indigenous and non-Indigenous families with a view to the Census and other official collections being more encompassing of the variety of family structures now present within contemporary Australian society.

The level of the current disparity in the educational outcomes of Aboriginal children and young people represents a major barrier to employment and opportunities for accumulation of financial and human capital through participation in the mainstream economy. While the education sector is generally looked to among human service agencies to provide leadership in initiating the changes needed, it is clear that what is required to break the present cycle of disadvantage cannot be achieved by the education sector alone.

At present, the population levels of successful secondary educational outcomes are simply insufficient to result in the intergenerational accumulation of human and financial capital which is seen to occur in non-Aboriginal families. The third volume of findings from the WAACHS recommended specific actions which are needed in the immediate and longer term to produce the generational change required.[8] However, in the interim, it is vital to encourage young parents to capitalise on opportunities for 'second chance' alternative education through vocational education and training (VET) and other secondary and tertiary education providers. It is also important to encourage young people to increase their prospects for employment through participation in the skills development and educational opportunities available through the more flexible implementation of Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP), and some of the 'welfare-to-work' programmes currently funded through Centrelink in metropolitan and regional centres.

CDEP accounts for around a quarter of total Indigenous employment in Australia and has operated over the past 29 years in providing 'work for welfare' in remote areas with limited mainstream employment opportunities for Aboriginal people.[31] While a 2002 study by the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) concluded

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that the scheme has been successful in delivering positive economic and community development outcomes for remote communities at minimal cost to the Australian taxpayer, other commentators argue that, at best, the scheme can only be said to have had very mixed results. They assert that while some communities have run very successful CDEP programmes, for too many others the scheme is not distinguishable from the 'dole' and is a 'poverty trap' which operates as a disincentive to 'real' employment.[32]

The transfer of the CDEP programme from ATSIC to the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) in 2005 has afforded a practical means of addressing some of the above concerns. This transition was preceded by a nationwide consultation on the *Building on Success* discussion paper which outlined the intended directions for the operation of CDEP under the new arrangements in Indigenous affairs.[33] This paper outlined the Australian Government's intention to build on the existing strengths of the programme — particularly for areas and communities without strong labour markets where CDEP plays a vital role in fostering employment opportunities and skills, community and business development. It is anticipated that the closer integration of CDEP with the Job Network and other mainstream employment programmes funded by DEWR, could develop new pathways for Aboriginal people to be assisted into non-CDEP jobs — particularly in metropolitan and other areas with better job opportunities. It particularly stressed the need for greater flexibility in the implementation of the programme to better reflect local job opportunities, specific community needs and the capacity of the local CDEP administering organisations. Finally, it defined three key areas of overlapping activity which will be supported by the new arrangements. These include: (a) the *employment stream* — which promotes jobs off CDEP, (b) the *community activities stream* — which delivers activities identified by community priorities, and (c) the *business development stream* — which supports the development of viable local commercial enterprises. The implementation of these new policy directions is now being supported through DEWR's 2005–06 guidelines for CDEP organisational funding.[34]

Action 13	Strategies for overcoming structural and attitudinal disincentives to proper employment need to be further developed to be applicable to the changing needs and opportunities for employment and training in remote, rural and metropolitan settings. These should include:

- ◆ regular review of the rules for CDEP, unemployment and Abstudy benefits

- ◆ extending the financial and other incentives to employers to provide workplace training and apprenticeship and traineeship opportunities, particularly in remote areas

- ◆ instituting programme and funding incentives to encourage strategic partnerships between government departments and other sectors, e.g. between DEST, FaCSIA, community and business organisations, and employers.

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Action 14   Current social welfare policies regarding child support, family payments and emergency family financial support should be adjusted to take account of household structural factors which appear to result in higher levels of disadvantage for some families with Aboriginal children. These include households where children are not with either of their natural parents, households where children's primary carers are aged 40 years or older, and households having three or more children.

Action 15   Practical interventions should be available to protect the income for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children in dysfunctional families, e.g. where it has been established that problems with alcohol, drugs or gambling in the household are diverting family income from meeting essential family needs. Such interventions could include the requirement that all or some of child support or family payments are made in the form of vouchers.

Action 16   Proactive 'Homemaker' type programmes should be available in a culturally appropriate manner to support parents developing home and financial management skills to reduce financial strain. Optimally, these could be developed and delivered in conjunction with the vocational and educational training sector.

ACTIONS FOR THE HOUSING SECTOR

Housing remains one of the most vexing features in the life and history of Aboriginal families. Having been deprived of their land, this termination of ownership and removal from traditional lands and food sources and, for some, removal from families, fuelled a consequent collapse of Aboriginal societies and economies and most particularly this has undermined spiritual and cultural practices intimately associated with land and place, self and family.

Home and land ownership are a principal form of wealth creation for the majority of the population. Through the establishment of equity, further wealth can be generated in the form of borrowings and investment. For Aboriginal people, the contemporary outcome is stark: over 70 per cent of families with Aboriginal children were in rental accommodation at the time of the survey. Home ownership by Aboriginal people in Western Australia is less than the national average for Aboriginal people. Non-Aboriginal people are four times more likely to own their own home than Aboriginal people.

Entering into home ownership requires substantial means, both in the form of available equity to borrow for home purchase as well as meeting mortgage payments. At the time of the writing of this volume, the median price for an established house in Perth was $353,000 — an increase of 35 per cent in the twelve months to June 2006.[35] It should be noted that in 2002, the mean equivalised gross household income of Indigenous people aged 18 years or over was $394 per week, compared with $665 per week in the non-Aboriginal population.[36]

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In addition to the disparity between the Indigenous median income and the median price of a house in (for example) Perth, there are other significant barriers to home ownership by Aboriginal people. These are in the form of the actual availability of housing in places where Aboriginal people live, market constraints to building owing to the real costs of building a home in rural and remote regions relative to its final market value on completion, and the questionable appropriateness of home ownership where there is traditional (i.e. communal) ownership of the land.

Finally, among federal, state and territory government authorities, there is a need for a shared and agreed standard for public housing occupancy. The Australian Bureau of Statistics uses the 'Proxy Occupancy Standard' definition of overcrowding in relation to housing assistance.[37] This standard is based upon the Canadian National Occupancy Standard.[38,39] However, at present this standard is not shared across federal, state and territory government housing agencies and authorities. In concert with increased availability and appropriateness of housing, a common occupancy standard for public housing would allow an improved audit and accountability function against a known and understood standard.

These current features impose substantial challenges for the Western Australian Department of Housing and Works and their rental accommodation division, 'Homeswest'. Of the 8,030 Aboriginal families renting, nearly 55 per cent were renting from Homeswest.

Across the suite of WAACHS volumes, the non-shelter benefits of housing have been documented in two important areas of child development: mental health and academic performance.[6,7,8] Poorer housing quality was associated with a greater likelihood of emotional and behavioural difficulties and lower academic performance. The data also show that, regardless of housing tenure, housing quality matters for these aspects of child development. Additionally, these findings show that it is possible to efficiently gather meaningful housing quality information from survey respondents and that a housing quality index can be derived to measure associations.

The findings on home ownership support the potential social and economic benefits of current policy initiatives to increase the proportion of Aboriginal families owning their own homes. These show that, regardless of the level of geographic isolation, families paying off or owning their own home have significantly better family socioeconomic circumstances in terms of carer education, employment, and the likelihood that children were living with one or both of their original parents. These policies have significant implications for generating not only wealth for Aboriginal people, but associated health and wellbeing benefits attributable to quality housing. Recommendations arising from these findings reflect the need for continued policy implementation as well as the provision of timely information about the progress of Indigenous home ownership, the market status of rental housing, and the need for independent public housing quality audits.

Action 17	Continue and extend the implementation of public housing policies that seek to increase the proportion of Indigenous people who own their own home.

Action 18	Monitor and report the proportion of Indigenous people owning or purchasing their own home.

Action 19	An independent body, such as the Equal Opportunity Commission, should monitor and report on rental housing availability, access, replacement, suitability and quality.

Action 20	Implement and report the results of independent audits of public housing quality.

Action 21	That federal, state and territory government housing agencies and authorities seek to establish a common occupancy standard for public housing.

ACTIONS TO IMPROVE FINANCIAL TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

On 26 July 1999, both houses of Parliament adopted the 'Motion of Reconciliation' in which the current direction of Indigenous policy was articulated in terms of 'practical reconciliation'. In that motion, the Australian Government declared its view that reconciliation would emerge from 'practical measures leading to practical results'.[40] From 1 July 2004, a new Australian Government office, the Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination (OIPC), has been responsible for providing the primary source of advice on Aboriginal issues to the Minister for Indigenous Affairs. In addition, the OIPC coordinates and drives whole-of-government policy development and service delivery across the Australian Government; develops ways of engaging directly with Aboriginal Australians at the regional and local level; brokers relations with state and territory governments on Aboriginal issues; reports on performance; and communicates government policy directions to Aboriginal people and the wider community. The work of the OIPC is supported by Indigenous Coordination Centres in metropolitan and regional Australia (formerly ATSIC-ATSIS offices) that have become (or are becoming) multi-agency centres for coordination of Aboriginal specific programmes in the regions.

While it is easy to assert that policy is aimed at bringing about 'practical results', this begs the questions as to which results are most urgently needed, and how their impact will be measured?

The Service Delivery Principles for the Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage (OID) framework were endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) in June 2004. This has been a particularly important step in seeking to address both of these questions. Since all jurisdictions must now report against the indicators of the OID framework on a biennial basis, this represents a significant milestone in raising the transparency of governments for their accountability in improving the

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future prospects of Aboriginal peoples. The long term commitment of Australian governments to further work to build clearer links between OID indicators and other policy frameworks, including the Service Delivery Framework, was endorsed in COAG's generational reform agenda approved at its July 2006 meeting[41] (see commentary box entitled *A national framework of principles for delivering services to Indigenous Australians*). This signals genuine resolve at the highest level of government to improve coordination and deliver better programmes and services that build capacity and address the causes and consequence of disadvantage. However, the extent to which this is actually translating through government departments and Indigenous Coordination Centres (ICC) regions into 'practical action' and 'genuine progress' remains frustratingly slow.[42]

Western Australia was the first state or territory to publish its jurisdictional OID report (in July 2005). The report compiled data from a wide variety of administrative and other sources for each of the OID outcome areas and not according to the 'traditional' functional areas of government departments.[43] This reflects one of the key principles of the framework — that no single government agency can expect to produce sustainable change in addressing these indicators in isolation from other agencies. It has also highlighted the fact that bringing about the needed changes is unlikely to be achievable without the commitment and active involvement of Indigenous peoples. Being the first jurisdictional report of its kind, it provided a 'baseline' reflecting the significant regional diversity of the Western Australian Indigenous population and highlights key areas for across-government and community action. The publication of the report and its findings highlight another of the fundamental principles of the OID framework, i.e. bringing about generational change will require an ongoing cycle of whole-of-government and across-sector engagement, collaborative planning, policy development, service delivery and evaluation.

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A NATIONAL FRAMEWORK OF PRINCIPLES FOR DELIVERING SERVICES TO INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS

On the 14 July 2006, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) reaffirmed its commitment to its Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators Report, setting out a national framework of principles for delivering services to Indigenous Australians.[44,45] This framework sets out principals in six areas:

Sharing responsibility

◆ Committing to cooperative approaches on policy and service delivery between agencies, at all levels of government and maintaining and strengthening government effort to address Indigenous disadvantage

◆ Building partnerships with Indigenous communities and organisations based on shared responsibilities and mutual obligations

◆ Committing to Indigenous participation at all levels and a willingness to engage with representatives, adopting flexible approaches and providing adequate resources to support capacity at the local and regional levels

◆ Committing to cooperation between jurisdictions on native title, consistent with Commonwealth native title legislation.

Harnessing the mainstream

◆ Ensuring that Indigenous-specific and mainstream programmes and services are complementary

◆ Lifting the performance of programmes and services by:
  – reducing bureaucratic red tape
  – increasing flexibility of funding (mainstream and Indigenous-specific) wherever practicable
  – demonstrating improved access for Indigenous people
  – maintaining a focus on regional areas and local communities and outcomes
  – identifying and working together on priority issues

◆ Supporting Indigenous communities to harness the engagement of corporate, non-government and philanthropic sectors.

Streamlining service delivery

◆ Delivering services and programmes that are appropriate, coordinated, flexible and avoid duplication, including fostering opportunities for Indigenous delivered services

Continued . . . .

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A NATIONAL FRAMEWORK OF PRINCIPLES FOR DELIVERING SERVICES TO INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS *(continued)*

Streamlining service delivery *(continued)*

- ◆ Addressing jurisdictional overlap and rationalising government interaction with Indigenous communities: negotiating bilateral agreements that provide for one level of government having primary responsibility for particular service delivery; or, where jurisdictions continue to have overlapping responsibilities, that services would be delivered in accordance with an agreed coherent approach

- ◆ Maximising the effectiveness of action at the local and regional level through whole-of-government(s) responses

- ◆ Recognising the need for services to take account of local circumstances and be informed by appropriate consultations and negotiations with local representatives.

Establishing transparency and accountability

- ◆ Strengthening the accountability of governments for the effectiveness of their programmes and services through regular performance review, evaluation and reporting

- ◆ Ensuring the accountability of organisations for the government funds that they administer on behalf of Indigenous people

- ◆ Tasking the Productivity Commission to continue to measure the effect of the COAG commitment through the jointly-agreed set of indicators.

Developing a learning framework

- ◆ Sharing information and experience about what is working and what is not

- ◆ Striving for best practice in the delivery of services to Indigenous people, families and communities.

Focusing on priority areas

- ◆ Tackling agreed priority issues, including those identified in the Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage report: early childhood development and growth; early school engagement and performance, positive childhood and transition to adulthood; substance use and misuse; functional and resilient families and communities; effective environmental health systems; and economic participation and development.

Within this national framework, appropriate consultation and delivery arrangements will be agreed between the Australian Government and individual states and territories.

Much has been made of the poor financial accountability of some community controlled and previously ATSIC-funded services. It is also the case that the way in which government funding for Indigenous services is prioritised and delivered frequently lacks the level of transparency which one would expect for proper public accountability.

The Australian Government's 2006–07 Budget has made the largest ever investment in Indigenous affairs with over $3.3 billion allocated for a range of programmes, services and strategies to improve the wellbeing and life opportunities of Indigenous Australians. However, it is not at all clear how the stated priorities and allocations of this funding can be expected to address the key objectives of the OID framework at the national, state and territory and community levels. The Western Australian Government is currently in the process of developing a 'whole-of-government' Indigenous affairs budget. While this is still in the early stages of development, it represents an important step towards more effective financial accountability.

THE CANADIAN APPROACH TO FINANCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY FOR FIRST NATIONS PROGRAMMES

Since 2004, the Treasury Board of Canada has implemented a nationally agreed accountability process for improving the social and economic circumstances of its Aboriginal peoples, entitled the 'Aboriginal Horizontal Framework'.[46] This is based on similar principles to those of Australia's OID framework and provides a government-wide view of Aboriginal direct programming and spending. It includes details of 360 federal programmes and services delivered by 34 federal departments and agencies and how they are coordinated fiscally to address key outcomes under seven thematic headings:

◆ Health

◆ Lifelong Learning

◆ Housing

◆ Safe and Sustainable Communities

◆ Economic Opportunities

◆ Lands and Resources and

◆ Governance and Relationships.

In addition to describing the strategic outcomes the Canadian Government is trying to achieve in each thematic area, the framework also provides an overview of programme expenditures for each financial year by themes, sub-themes and specific programmes broken down by the groups to whom they are specifically targeted (i.e. First Nations, Metis, Inuit or all Aboriginal Peoples).

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THE CANADIAN APPROACH TO FINANCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY FOR FIRST NATIONS PROGRAMMES *(continued)*

The Horizontal Framework is considered to be at an initial formative stage. It currently does not describe the Aboriginal share of programmes which are available to the general Canadian population (e.g. unemployment benefits and other social transfers) nor does it cover general application programme spending in regions of Canada where First Nations and Metis people and the Inuit constitute the majority or a high proportion of the local population (e.g. in the Arctic north of the 60th parallel). Given these limitations it is expected that much further work will be needed to complete the overall spending picture, and to enhance its use by the governments of Canada as a management tool to drive improvements in each of the seven thematic areas of Aboriginal policy.[47]

THE CANADIAN ABORIGINAL HORIZONTAL FRAMEWORK

Canadian Aboriginal Horizontal Framework Federal Government expenditures in Aboriginal programming by thematic area (2004-05)						
Health	**Lifelong Learning**	**Safe and Sustainable Communities**	**Housing**	**Economic Opportunity**	**Lands and Resources**	**Governance and Relationships**
Improved health of Aboriginal peoples	Maximised participation and success in early learning, education, training and skills development built on Aboriginal heritage	Aboriginal communities are safe, stable and sustainable	Aboriginal people have improved access to suitable, adequate, affordable housing and related support	Sustainable wealth creation and participation in the economy	Sustainable use and management of First Nations and Inuit lands and resources by First Nations people and Inuit	Sound Aboriginal governance and support of institutional capacity and clarification of respective roles in the relationship
$1,838.5 million (23%)	$1,940.7 million (24%)	$2,430.5 million (30%)	$438.8 million (5%)	$231.5 million (3%)	$144.8 million (2%)	$1,145.6 million (14%)

Over and above the general need for Australian governments to increase allocations to be commensurate with the scale of the disparities to be addressed, failures in the delivery of funding for Indigenous programmes to achieve their intended aims would seem to be disconcertingly common. One such example revealed by the Senate estimates processes showed a $182 million federal government underspend in Indigenous education during the 2004–05 financial year despite the acute need in Indigenous communities.[48] Another example is the recent report into government spending in the COAG trial site of Wadeye (Northern Territory) by the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR). This showed that, on average, for every dollar spent on the education of all Northern Territory children, just 26 cents was spent on the education of Aboriginal children in Wadeye.[49] Another example

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of how limited financial transparency can operate as an impediment to effective government and community action can be gauged from our experience in preparing the third volume of findings from the WAACHS. In reporting on the educational outcomes of Aboriginal children, it was not possible to obtain officially verifiable data to describe the per capita state and federal funding for Aboriginal education and how this compared with the average allocation for other Western Australian children in achieving 'practical results'.

The 2006 National Framework of Principles for Delivering Services to Indigenous Australians identifies the need to establish greater transparency and accountability as one of its key principles. However, this should ideally encompass more explicit financial transparency of governments, departments and community agencies in how their funds are allocated and distributed for the provision of Indigenous programmes and services. Such information should be available in a form that can be used by governments as a management tool to prioritise, coordinate and monitor traditional departmental budgets to ensure they achieve the human development objectives of the OID framework.[44,45]

Informed decisions about which set of investments are most likely to be effective in building the sustainable capacity of Indigenous people and communities ideally should occur at the points where government departments come together (e.g. Treasury) and where they are in dialogue with communities (e.g. regional planning forums). A logical next step in the ongoing development of the OID framework would therefore be to publicly identify funding allocations for Indigenous programmes targeting the OID strategic change areas.

Action 22	The ongoing implementation of the Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage (OID) framework should require Australian governments to identify the dollar amounts and proportions of spending dedicated to addressing each of the OID headline indicators and their respective strategic change indicators.

Action 23	Governments should be encouraged to build OID indicators into the key performance indicators (KPIs) for departments and into the performance reporting of ICC regions and community agency funding agreements.

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CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The following comments are provided by the Kulunga Research Network, the Aboriginal research unit within the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research. Kulunga has played central role in the development, implementation and reporting of the findings of the Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey. As Aboriginal researchers we have been both a witness to and an active participant in the process of the study since its inception. Of all the volumes of findings published to date, the current volume is one in which we have a particular stake in the telling of its story — as it is the story of our children, families and the communities in which we live.

The centrality of the family in traditional Aboriginal society has enabled our cultures to thrive for at least the last 60,000 years but this has been severely tested over the past 200 years. Well-functioning families, which are supported and valued, have enabled generations of children to grow in health and skills to take on the excitement and challenges of life, and in turn, to fulfil their responsibilities as parents, grandparents, community members and effective leaders within their families. However, where this capacity has been undermined, the potential of successive generations has not been properly realised. At present, Aboriginal children face a future where they are much less likely to attain the levels of health, education, emotional and social wellbeing enjoyed by other Australians, and consequently, their opportunities for full economic and social participation.

Reduced life-chances should not be seen as the 'automatic' birthright of Aboriginal people simply because they are Aboriginal nor because they are 'characteristic' of Aboriginal people. These outcomes are what one would expect in any population of marginalised and oppressed people — and particularly in the life outcomes of other Indigenous peoples who have faced experiences comparable to those of Aboriginal Australians since colonisation. The post-colonial experiences and the health and wellbeing outcomes of the Maori, Canadian and American First Nations peoples all show striking parallels to those of Aboriginal Australians. But while there are similarities in the outcomes and experiences of different Indigenous peoples, the way in which their respective governments have taken responsibility and shown leadership in addressing the disadvantage of Indigenous peoples differ markedly. The efforts of the New Zealand and Canadian Governments in particular attest to the type of leadership and the level of sustained commitment which is required to effect meaningful change in these unacceptable circumstances.

The Aboriginal families who gave us the stories which are encompassed in this and the previous volumes of findings from the Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey, asked us to use this information to get a better deal for their children, families and communities. As Aboriginal researchers, we have a particular responsibility to ensure that the findings are used to bring people together and that they enable careful consideration of the actions that must be employed to address the concerning outcomes reported here. However, our experience as Aboriginal people who have worked over decades within the Aboriginal community, the wider community and for the state and Australian governments, cautions us that the translation of evidence into action is never easily accomplished. It is all too easy for the findings and recommendations in this report to be overlooked or not considered seriously. Worse still, there is the risk that it may become yet another of the countless reports on Aboriginal issues gathering dust on library shelves.

The findings described in this volume detail the complexity and extent of the underlying issues involved. Addressing these issues will require more than notional changes in policies, programmes or services. Responding to the urgency of the circumstances experienced by Aboriginal families and communities will require strong compassionate leadership that draws together our common humanity. It is our sincere hope that the quality of the objective data provided in this volume will help to galvanize the resolve needed to tackle these hard issues and also inform a consensus on what actions are most critically needed to produce sustainable change. The proper use of these data can also ensure that the resources which are required to achieve improved outcomes for Aboriginal people are sufficient to the task at hand.

However there is an additional consideration — the relationship between Aboriginal people and other Australians. This relationship has been both a source of strength and sorrow for both parties that has either progressed or stifled the steps required to bring us together so Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples can take their rightful place alongside each other.

In their preface to this volume, Dennis Eggington and Fiona Skyring draw our attention to our collective responsibility — as the responsible adults — and to the legacy which we will leave for our children and grandchildren. The actions recommended in this chapter describe a framework for action to address the current unacceptable circumstances for Aboriginal families and their children. This requires leadership which transcends political, religious, cultural and geographical differences because it needs to engage all people, at all levels, and all of those who are charged with responsibility for Aboriginal children and families.

The former Australian Governor General, Sir William Deane in his famous inaugural Lingiari lecture (Some Signposts From Daguragu) made the comment that '…there will be no true reconciliation until it can be seen that we are making real progress towards the position where the future prospects – in terms of health, education, life expectancy, living conditions and self esteem – of an Aboriginal baby are at least within the same discourse as the future prospects of a non Aboriginal baby'. He asked: 'How can we hope to go forward as friends and equals while our children's hands cannot touch?'[50]

Australian children — black and white — deserve a better legacy than the one which is currently on offer.

How well we succeed in preparing the next generation to take on their responsibility will depend on the job we do today — as the responsible adults — in modelling the essential behaviours and practices of a society that places a central value on including all people as full members of the decision-making process.

We as a country can no longer respond in an unconnected or disassociated manner to the findings as listed in this volume as something that is happening to a faceless 'other'. The story told here is an Australian story about Australian citizens and requires a humanitarian response to ensure that underlying issues contributing to this situation are resolved with some urgency. Not only because it is the right thing to do — it is the only thing to do if we as a nation aspire to arrive at some point as a healed country with a common history and a secured future. A future reflecting the full diversity of dreams of our children and grandchildren who are able to respond creatively to the demands of a thriving, responsible and civil society.

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