

# APONT ABORIGINAL GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

Progress Review  
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## Introduction

The Aboriginal Governance and Management Program (AGMP or ‘the program’) is an initiative of the Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory (APONT) which is comprised of five organisations: the Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance of the NT (AMSANT), Central Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service (CAALAS), Central Land Council (CLC), North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency (NAAJA) and Northern Land Council (NLC).

The program operates under two funding agreements with the (former) Commonwealth Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) (now, with the portfolio of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet).

The Program arose from the Strong Aboriginal Governance Summit, convened by APONT in April 2013 and attended by some 300 Aboriginal people from Aboriginal organisations across the NT. Opening the Summit, CLC Director David Ross recognised that:

*Governance is not just a matter of service delivery, or organisational compliance, or management. It is about the self-determining ability and authority of clans, nations and communities to govern: to decide what you want for your future, to implement your own initiatives, and take responsibility for your decisions and actions.*

The program was developed from key outcomes of the Summit, which recognised that:

- A gradual, development approach is critical to achieving sustained, effective and legitimate Aboriginal governance;
- Aboriginal groups, communities and organisations need support to develop models of governance and management that work well on the ground;
- Aboriginal governance solutions must simultaneously and satisfactorily meet ‘mainstream’ requirements of government and other funding bodies while remaining culturally legitimate and relevant to the Aboriginal social setting; and
- Education, mentoring, leadership, communication, advocacy, teamwork, a wise use of finances and gender balance are important.

The program is intended to complement existing Aboriginal governance and management support efforts such as those of the Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations (ORIC) and the Australian Indigenous Governance Institute (AIGI), take a long term view, and be based on evidence and engagement with communities and organisations. A focus is on supporting Aboriginal leaders in the Northern Territory to respond to their particular governance and management challenges.

The program design outlined three objectives:

1. To **engage** with NT Aboriginal organisations as they address their governance and management priorities
2. To **learn** about approaches that best support NT Aboriginal organisations' strong governance and management
3. To **sustain** efforts to support strong governance and management in NT Aboriginal organisations

The program effectively commenced in March 2014, once staffed, and is due to finish in June 2016. In line with the proposal for monitoring and evaluation in the program design document, an interim review of progress was undertaken in July 2015. This document reports on that review.

### Review Methodology

The AGMP is designed to operate as an action reflection program, that is, all activities are regularly assessed in order to understand what is being achieved and should change. This approach is key to the nature of the program - to learn by doing and therefore constantly improve and better focus efforts towards the program objectives.

This interim review therefore was largely focused on collating and analysing the considerable range of existing reports and monitoring data produced by the program. In addition, using the perspective of a critical methodology<sup>1</sup>, further verification of identified outcomes and analysis to date was undertaken through interviews with a sample of stakeholders.

These stakeholders included respondents from the demonstration sites and other activities where the program has been engaging with Aboriginal organisations. They also included people assisting with the program research and learning and external stakeholders contributing to and working with the program. To some degree therefore this range of stakeholders provided perspectives on each of the three objectives areas.

The review was undertaken by an independent monitoring and evaluation specialist in order to provide an independent review of data and reports and in order that interviews were undertaken in a confidential matter. The independent specialist undertook collation and analysis of all the available data, considering the material from the perspective of a critical approach as noted above.

As part of verification and checking of the analysis, the summary of results and recommendations were presented to the AGMP Steering Committee. The commentary and clarifications from this discussion were incorporated in the final report presented here.

### Context for AGMP

The AGMP focuses on support to improve governance and management of Aboriginal organisations in the Northern Territory. A brief review of the context within which the program operates assists in understanding both its relevance and the challenges with which it engages.

The Northern Territory is unique and complex environment with high geographic diversity, characterised by many remote community locations. In terms of development challenges it is significant that the median age is 21 with many young families. Against this growing cohort of young people and families, overall employment status in the territory is low and erratic, and general education status is poorer than the rest of Australia.

Aboriginal land ownership comprises 45% of the Territory. Negotiation of agreements around resource use on this land and benefits and protections from the use are ongoing. Given the limited other opportunities for market-generated employment within remote communities, there is a wide range of Aboriginal organisations in place, many seeking to develop businesses and/or other services to meet the unique needs of Aboriginal people living in the Territory. In 2014 there were 759 Aboriginal organisations operating in the Northern Territory. Together with many more informal

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<sup>1</sup>A critical approach to evaluation seeks to understand results and outcomes in context, looking to assess why a program had proceeded in a particular way to date and what is required for the program to improve.

organisations, this presents a very large and diverse range of organisations.<sup>2</sup> Taken altogether they create a high governance workload for Aboriginal people, particularly those in small and remote communities.

Government policy in the Northern Territory, and across Australia, towards Aboriginal organisations is currently very dynamic. With recent changes there is a high level of uncertainty about funding for many of these organisations. This, together with the growing external scrutiny and increased demands from Aboriginal people themselves for good quality governance and management, places considerable stress on the staff and boards of local organisations.

Into this context the AGMP has sought to engage with a diverse range of Aboriginal organisations, understand their specific needs and challenges in relation to governance and management, and devise ways to assist and support their development.

## Findings

### *Objective 1. To engage with NT Aboriginal organisations as they address their governance and management priorities*

In order to promote engagement with a diverse range of Aboriginal organisations the AGMP has worked through a series of activities. These include intensive work with Aboriginal organisations at a small number of demonstration sites, a series of governance and management workshops held around the Territory, a virtual network of NT Aboriginal organisation CEOs meeting bi-monthly, and responses to requests for particular needs.

Much of the early work around these activities was focused on building awareness of the AGMP. The program also experimented with each of its activity areas, seeking to understand how they could work most effectively with different organisations and a variety of needs.

To date work has been undertaken in two demonstration sites, with a further two sites just commencing. Significantly, while it was difficult to find appropriate sites in the initial round of advertising, the more recent requests for engagement as demonstration sites was considerably oversubscribed. This suggests the program is now beginning to be seen as an important and useful resource for Aboriginal organisations.

The work undertaken to date at demonstration sites suggests that there is considerable value in this close, tailored way of working. Discussions with local stakeholders suggest that the program has been able to tailor assistance to need, match current strengths and operate at a pace that is appropriate for that location. Considerable effort has been made to connect with staff and board members and ensure that they have information and ideas which make sense to them and which empower them to act further.

*It made sense to people. They explained governance through a football team analogy. People understood this.*

*The best part was having everything explained along the way.*

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<sup>2</sup> A third of ORIC's top ranking 500 (in terms of income size) Aboriginal organisations in 2013 – 14 were in the Northern Territory. There are many large confident and long-term organisations operating in this location. At the same time, there is a broad range of much smaller organisations with limited experience and/or capacity.

Reports and interviews suggest that this work has had results for local organisations. It is led to those organisations being able to work on specific tasks and make things happen. It allows organisations to improve their governance through relevant action. Organisations were able to identify the shift in their governance arrangements as a result of program support.

The approach demonstrates the value of relatively long term work with individual organisations using a flexible and creative approach built around trusting relationships.

On the other hand, this approach is very resource intensive and, given the challenges for some small and remote organisations, it is likely to require quite long-term engagement in some situations. Further, the work around governance and management is not the answer to all challenges in Aboriginal organisations. While it might address what are essential and important concerns for those organisations, it is not necessarily able to address the influence of other community issues or lack of services or funding and failure by other agencies to work in appropriate ways.

Also under this objective the program has run a series of workshops across the Northern Territory focused on engaging with a broad range of organisations around their needs and strengths and the ways forward for effective Aboriginal governance and management.

The six workshops undertaken to date have covered a wide range of organisations and participants. More than 60 organisations, each bringing various participants, have attended the six workshops. The reviews from each of the workshops show consistently high satisfaction by participants with an average of 85% indicating the workshops were either good or very good in relation to their particular needs.

Significantly the reports and data from the workshops show that the program has improved over time in terms of its presentation and targeting of issues of relevance for Aboriginal organisations. Time and resources permitting, AGMP staff undertake follow-up travel after workshops to visit organisations and understand how they have taken forward actions and ideas introduced at the workshops. Anecdotal evidence from these field visits indicates that organisations are using information and communicating ideas back into management and governance bodies of their organisations. Clearly with more resources, much more could be done in this follow-up process to further reinforce ideas and assist individual organisations.

There are some common themes that are beginning to emerge from the workshops. These include the focus on youth leadership and support for young people moving into governance positions in Aboriginal communities. Given the growing demographic of young people and families in the Northern Territory, this seems to be an important contribution that the program is making towards development opportunities for those young people.

Other common issues include the need for Aboriginal organisations and their governance mechanisms to communicate more broadly with the local community and with other stakeholders and actors in that community. A consistent theme is also the need for ongoing education for directors and board members particularly given the regular turnover of these people in different organisations. The experience of the AGMP has led to some discussion around the need for governance training to be mainstreamed into education for all young people and/or the need for some regular and consistent training opportunities available to organisations in the Northern Territory.

The CEO network started in August 2014 with a small group of participants. It is officially a CEO and Board member network, but by both design and default the participants have been mostly CEOs. It

has continued with bi-monthly meetings with some consistent members and new participants. The service appears, from conversations with stakeholders and minutes recorded, to be a popular and valuable service, although difficult to maintain given the many demands upon individual CEOs. It appears to be a cost-effective method of providing support directly to these managers.

The area which has been less developed by the program to date has been the responses to requests for assistance. Figures show that only a small number of requests have generally been received, a feature perhaps of a program which is still becoming known across the Territory.

Overall under this objective it seems clear that AGMP has been successful in a very small time frame in building profile and commencing engagement around an area of relevance and need. One respondent to the interviews from an external organisation commented that they stay engaged with the organisation because they can see the value of its work.

*We work with them because their work is relevant and it's well targeted. It meets a real need.*

The feedback from stakeholders suggests that the program staff have been very important in this process, bringing consistency and professionalism in the way that they work and therefore providing a high degree of legitimacy to the program.

There is a consistent concern throughout reports and in conversations with stakeholders that suggests the main limitation on the program engagement has been limited staff resources. A further concern that was raised by respondents was the need for the program to improve its methods of communication including working on a more interactive website, and making use of other social media to broaden its appeal and engagement, particularly with younger people.

*Objective 2. To learn about approaches that best support NT Aboriginal organisations' strong governance and management*

Under the second program objective, the AGMP has undertaken research across the Territory with a range of Aboriginal organisations to identify common governance needs. This research has been useful to scope the overall issues for organisations. It points to consistent need for training and knowledge for directors and board members to understand their roles. It also highlights a consistent concern with strategic planning.

Complementing this research, the program has sponsored formal enquiry about good practice in Aboriginal governance and management. This has resulted in a detailed publication bringing together practice based information for Aboriginal organisations and for external agencies seeking to support their development. This considerable research resource is available on the program website. It provides a useful addition to the resources available for Aboriginal organisations but, as noted by various respondents, many organisations would still need assistance to translate the ideas and pathways identified in the document into practice.

Alongside these two areas of formal research, the program staff undertake regular field trips as noted. The reports from these trips indicate a high degree of learning and detailed understanding gathered by staff about governance and management practices, challenges and possible solutions. The practical assistance offered to organisations during field trips appears to be well targeted but, apart from the broad reports on activities, the learning from this activity stays with staff members rather than being translated into more general learning and/or tools available to other organisations. The program has strictly limited staff resources for such translation.

The program also works with some other organisations to utilise and identify useful governance resources. This includes the AIGI.

While these series of activities indicate that the program has been active in achieving good learning as proposed by this objective, it leads to a further question about the way in which this learning is effectively communicated. As noted, the respondents suggested that the website operated by the program could become more interactive and much broader use could be made of social media to communicate ideas and challenges.

In addition, as identified in various reflections and staff reports, by the time of the research for this evaluation AGMP had not worked enough to communicate ideas to Territory or Federal governments or indeed to other groups working in Aboriginal communities such as NGOs and service groups. Correspondence with the AGMP Manager since reveals the program has, however, now entered this phase of work in earnest. Working on advocacy and education with this range of bodies might be very effective way to utilise learning in order to shift the practice of those impacting upon Aboriginal organisations.

Some of the questions that could be further explored through learning and research include a better understanding about the context in which governance inputs are most effective. There is now a diverse range of experience in the program around working with different types of organisations and providing various different tools and supports. It would be useful to understand those locations where program inputs can be most effective. This could be a particular focus of further enquiry and research.

### *Objective 3. To sustain efforts to support strong governance and management in NT Aboriginal organisations*

The program has given attention to long-term sustainability, seeking to broaden its funding base and develop a framework for long-term viability. Particular attention has been given to the auspice for the longer-term administration of the service and some recent attention to business planning.

The need for some sustainable support seems to be well evidenced by program experience and the growing demand for the service being provided. The AGMP continues to debate its possible future structure and has, through its experience, developed some good clarity around the core functions required to best serve governance and management in Aboriginal organisations. These include:

- Direct support for Aboriginal organisations including capacity building for boards, support for CEOs and broader organisational support.
- Strategic support for Aboriginal communities in order to grow the governance capacity within those communities.
- Contribution to policy development and public debate.

The program experience matches the experience of the AIGI at a national level which found that there was a huge demand for place based support but few service providers operating in this area.

The program therefore has a good basis from which to develop a long-term service, but has not to date met its intention under this objective.

### *Discussion of findings*

The findings from this review indicate that the AGMP meets a real need and is valued by those individuals and organisations that have participated in its activities to date. The program is growing in its ability to engage and in its relevance to the particular needs of Aboriginal organisations.

While the program may not have been clearly planned initially, its action reflection approach has enabled it to refine its activities and develop an approach that increasingly is effective within its context. It is likely that the program will continue to evolve utilising this action reflection approach, continuing to improve and be of increased value.

There are some areas where the program might consider further work and improvement.

The AGMP could benefit from attention to a more clear *theory of change*, that is, being much clearer about what it's trying to change, what is required for the change over time, and the contribution specifically made by the AGMP. Suggesting work on a theory of change is not to undervalue the work achieved to date, but such work would help the program to communicate more effectively and assist it in being realistic about its likely achievements within the complex and dynamic context within which it operates.

Alongside the development of the theory of change, a clearer political analysis might be a useful addition to program considerations. While the current government support for Aboriginal organisations might be unclear, a political analysis would be wider than government alone, enabling the program to consider other actors and stakeholders who are important in the Northern Territory and how it could best position and work with those able to influence policy and programs around governance and management.

This in turn might provide a basis to broaden the alliances between this program and others working in the Territory and nationally. The program is clearly part of APONT and seems to make some use of its relationship with the AIGI. However it's less clear how the program has worked to date with other political actors, NGOs and service organisations as well as private business, in order to further its objectives. Broadening alliances would be an important way to continue the program learning and improvement. It would also likely broaden the opportunities for engagement and the understanding of effective strategies gleaned from the experience of others.

Communication appears to be an area within which the program could seek to work further. As noted this might be through the extended use of social media.

The program focus on young people seems to be emerging as a valuable theme. It speaks in particular to the challenges more generally for development in the Northern Territory and also to the concerns of the current Federal government. This might be an area where the program could highlight its expertise and growing knowledge.

Looking at particular themes speaks to how the program could work to demonstrate its value and attract broader support. The monitoring that it is undertaken to date through its action reflection approach has been good quality, providing regular and detailed reporting. It has served the learning well and staff reflection reports show clearly the way in which areas of work are subsequently changed and improved. The program ought to be complimented on its attention to this area, one which is often lacking in action orientated activities.

But in addition to this monitoring, the program might also need to give attention to how it provides information for government and other bureaucracies that speaks to their particular areas of interest. The program's contribution to employment and education, albeit indirect, is strong and one which could be further developed in an overall theory of change.

One method through which the program could identify its value would be through a focused value for money (VfM) study. While this would be best undertaken by a specialist organisation, it would be possible to use a small number of case studies to demonstrate the value of functioning Aboriginal

organisations versus the cost involved when those organisations fail because of poor governance or management. There are now some wider examples of VfM analysis in Aboriginal health programs and other programs to demonstrate the value of culturally appropriate support. It might be wise for the AGMP to utilise that experience to further support its case for more sustained government funding.

Finally returning to the program objectives; these are broad and general statements of intent. They clearly provided an important starting point for the program and a framework around which to balance its activities. As the program moves ahead into its final phase and beyond, however, it might need to consider its intent for the long-term. This might be to provide specialised services, demonstrate need, demonstrate an approach, or a combination of these ideas. Being clearer about the intent of the program, and the specific difference that it seeks to make over the next 5 to 10 years would allow for development of clear objectives. In turn this would provide for clearer assessment of progress towards those objectives.

### Conclusions

The AGMP has started from a small base with limited resources to address a wide range of need in a challenging context.

It has demonstrated the value of culturally and context specific governance and management support for Aboriginal organisations. Its research indicates the need for ongoing attention to this area and for the value that can be achieved through a program such as this.

The program is now giving some attention to providing a more sustained service and this is the area where most urgent attention does need to be given. The current small resourcing and limited timeframe of the program is wholly insufficient to the need that is being identified. The value and outcomes that could be achieved through better resources and time are likely to be considerable, and it would be worth more clearly demonstrating this potential value to government and other stakeholders.