

Positioning Paper

Indigenous Housing and Governance: Case studies from remote communities in WA and NT

authored by

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The success of the 'environmental health' model has been mixed. For example, the delivery of housing was often seen as the problem and houses designed for the non-indigenous public housing sector were constructed for the indigenous population as rapidly as possible. There was little regard for their suitability, particularly in remote areas. In other areas such as the Housing for Health (Pholeros, Rainow *et al.* 1993) activities, now known as the 'Fixing Houses for Better Health' program (FaCS, 2002), research and training have been successful but limited due to the pilot scope of this work. There is also some evidence that European-style housing is less healthy than traditional camps for indigenous lifestyles, given the poor ventilation and drainage (Spiller Gibbins Swan Pty. Ltd, Flood *et al.* 2000).

This critique is also maintained by Thompson (2001) in a review of differing policy approaches to the same town camp issues. Thompson offers, in effect, three competing, and perhaps sequential, models by which policy has been implemented. Firstly, the 'punitive model', where punitive measures are taken against the indigenous community when their response to a service delivery is considered unsatisfactory by mainstream authorities. Such approaches can only be delivered fleetingly by political mavericks. Secondly, the current 'health model', where the attempt to deliver housing to all to conform with mainstream standards and regulations is thwarted by limited budgets and local capacity. Thirdly, the 'living environments model', where through a dialogical approach community needs are understood, negotiated and fulfilled where resources, capacities, budgets and commitment permit. Community initiative, participation and control along with partnerships are critical elements. It appears that the latter is not yet widely acknowledged with only several commentators describing such an approach (eg Memmott, Moran, Ross).

The emerging third model then involves an integration of governance, living environment and community health. As Ring and Elston point out, New Zealand's Maori health service has achieved success by embedding the delivery of health services within a wider array of holistic services including health, education, culture, community/social and economic issues. They managed to reduce Maori death rates by a third in the 1970's. Australia needs a concerted effort to build on the scattered positive initiatives to achieve a similar breakthrough (Ring and Elston 1999). This breakthrough may require a reformulated approach to look at health holistically. It may require increased funding for holistic programs that include local governance, housing and health, where the focus is developing and sustaining living environments, not delivery of houses. International experience has shown that devolution of control to local communities and the rationalisation and integration of services may have the dual benefits of improving indigenous health and ensuring sustainable communities.

Environmental health issues have strongly influenced recent indigenous housing policy formulation in Australia. Accordingly, these issues relate to the second research question on human service program integration in this project. Indigenous health programs have been joined up with housing programs and there is now an emerging trend to somehow link these with governance and capacity-building initiatives.

2.4 Housing Design, Essential Services and Town Planning Issues

The first research question of this project focuses on the perceived and 'actual' differences in the nature of community control, ownership and management of housing and how these contribute to asset management in remote indigenous communities. To adequately understand the context of indigenous housing, the related issues of housing design, essential services and town planning will be discussed.

2.4.1 Housing Design

Housing design seeks to respond to the needs of the inhabitants. It needs to reflect the use of space, which is largely culturally determined. For indigenous Australian families, traditional housing was seen as merely a shelter against the elements and 'living' is what went on around the shelter (Neutze 2000a). Social relationships largely determined the use of space. Fantin (2001) illustrates this in her study of the Yolngu people of northeast Arnhem Land. She discusses the impact of architecture and design on one aspect of social behaviour, that of avoidance behaviour. Avoidance behaviours are a set of behaviours

between kin that are probably best characterised as 'extreme respect'. Fantin identifies eighteen avoidance relationships that have to be observed in everyday interaction (Fantin 2001). This is only one of many types of social behaviours that need to be observed to be a respected community member. The need to observe these behaviours should have had a profound effect on housing design for indigenous people.

Indigenous community households generally have different design needs to the non-indigenous population. Indigenous households are often larger and consist of more than one family sub-group. The cohabitation of family kin groups can be by choice or can also reflect a lack of housing – secondary homelessness according to Chamberlain (2001) and the census definition (Memmott and Moran 2001). Kombumerri comments that, although in 2001 there were only six indigenous architects with tertiary qualifications, there has been much work done on appropriate design for indigenous housing in recent times, including work by indigenous architects. Whereas non-indigenous architects have had some success in interpreting indigenous culture and designing culturally appropriate buildings, promoting indigenous architects and designers is likely to have more consistent success (Kombumerri 2001).

The work of Pholeros, Rainow and Torzillo in Nganampa Health Council et al. (1987) and Pholeros et al. (1991, 1993) has had a profound influence on housing design policy in Australia. This work which began in South Australia during the 1980s was brought to the attention of WA housing authorities in 1995 (Lawrence, 1995). In 1999 their work resulted in the "National framework for the design, construction and maintenance of Indigenous housing" (Commonwealth State and Territory Housing-Ministers' Working Group on Indigenous Housing, Department of Family and Community Services, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, 1999) that included the *National Indigenous Housing Design Guide*. This work is now manifest in the FaCS indigenous housing program 'Fixing Houses for Better Health' being implemented across Australia. For States and Territories to receive indigenous housing assistance funds it is a requirement that their housing authorities observe the *National Indigenous Housing Design Guide* (see section 2.6).

How these activities contribute to asset management in remote indigenous communities and how they can form part of a whole of government approach relate to the research questions of this project.

2.4.2 Essential Services

Essential services in this context refers to power, water and sewerage but can also include solid waste management, roads, infrastructure and other physical services. In Australia, the trend has been for ATSIC to fund such services in remote indigenous communities while State and Territory housing authorities have limited their funding to the house itself. This has usually included onsite wastewater disposal facilities within the lot boundary. With the recent pooling of funds under the Bilateral agreements in WA and NT, AHU and IHANT respectively will now fund the power, water and sewerage services but this may not necessarily extend to roads and other infrastructure. This project and its research questions are concerned with the links between all of the services as they relate to housing assistance and the associated governance and capacity-building for asset management.

Various standards for essential services have emerged in the different States and Territories over the years to try to address the unique conditions found in remote indigenous communities, eg DIA et al., 2000. Various training programs have also emerged to improve local and regional management and maintenance of these essential services that support housing, eg the Essential Services Operator training program which is in WA is linked to the Remote Area Essential Services Program (RAESP).

2.4.3 Town Planning

Discrete indigenous settlements are not homogeneous and the inter-relationships between regional settlements and their associated services have significant implications for community control, ownership and management of housing. Memmott and Moran (2001) distinguish three types of indigenous settlements:

- Discrete urban settlements and town camps

It is through IHANT in NT and AHU (DHW) in WA that the agreed funds under the Bilateral Agreements are pooled. In addition to the core housing programs these organisations are also increasingly developing governance and capacity-building programs to sustain their housing stock.

2.6.3 The Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS)

FaCS is responsible for a broad range of social policy issues that affect Australians, including housing policy. FaCS currently focuses on three key social policy outcomes, namely Stronger Families, Stronger Communities and Economic and Social Participation.

An integral part of the Stronger Communities program is Housing Support. The Housing Support Branch helps to support and strengthen communities. They achieve this by assisting eligible people to access appropriate and affordable housing and by supporting people in the transition from homelessness.

Arising from the Stronger Communities program, the Indigenous Policy Unit of FaCS, which is based in Darwin, NT, provides policy formulation, support and monitoring for the States.

In 1999, a National Framework for the Design, Construction and Maintenance of Indigenous Housing was prepared by the Commonwealth, State and Territory Housing Ministers' Working Group on Indigenous Housing. The National Indigenous Housing Guide was produced as part of the National Framework and embeds the national principles of safety, health, quality control and sustainability as contributing factors to improved housing outcomes for Indigenous people (Commonwealth State and Territory Housing-Ministers' Working Group on Indigenous Housing *et al.* (1999), Carpenter, 2003).

FaCS administers the new 4-year Commonwealth funded project Fixing Houses for Better Health 2 (FHBH2). The FHBH2 project builds on the success of the previous program operated by ATSIC and will assess and fix approximately 1500 houses in Indigenous communities across Australia over three years. A qualitative assessment will be conducted during the project.

In addition, on behalf of the Commonwealth-State Working Group on Indigenous Housing, FaCS commissioned a national study to identify asset management 'best practice' in indigenous communities. The resulting comprehensive study reviewed asset management practices and distilled recommendations to improve national asset management practices. The report is entitled "Identification of Strategic Asset Management Best Practice for Indigenous Housing Organizations" (Spiller Gibbins Swan Pty. Ltd, Joe Flood et al. 2000).

A video called "My Place, Your Place", based on best practice asset management in communities, has been developed by the Centre for Appropriate Technology (CAT) for FaCS to make the report more accessible. It is intended to be workshopped with communities and has an accompanying booklet to assist in this process (enHealth Council 2001).

2.6.4 Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC)

The Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) has three indigenous-specific housing programs, namely: The Home Ownership Program; The Community Housing and Infrastructure Program (CHIP); and Housing for Health. It is the latter 2 programs that are of interest to this research project.

The **Community Housing and Infrastructure Program (CHIP)** is responsible for infrastructure (water, sewerage, electricity, roads) and the procurement and maintenance of housing in indigenous communities. The CHIP has several sub-programs including community housing (funded through Regional Council budgets), the National Aboriginal Health Strategy (NAHS) and the ATSIC Army Community Assistance Program (AACAP) (Commonwealth Grants Commission 2001).

There are five CHIP elements;

- **Housing** which provides for the capital construction, purchase and upgrade of rental housing as well as recurrent funding for Indigenous housing organisations where the rental income does not cover the administration and maintenance costs;

- **Infrastructure** which provides capital funding for essential services such as water, roads, sewerage, power, etc. to rural and remote;
- **Municipal services** which provides recurrent funding is provided for maintenance of infrastructure in remote areas;
- **Program support** which provides funding for initiatives that cannot be linked to a single community such as surveys, planning and technology research and design; and
- The **National Aboriginal Health Strategy** (NAHS) which provides capital funding for housing and related infrastructure (power, water, sewerage, drainage and dust control) to improve environmental living conditions, generally to rural and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. To ensure that the highest need communities are funded, projects need to meet stringent eligibility criteria and a rigorous assessment of priorities including Health Impact Statements. NAHS is administered on a State-wide basis by external program managers who have construction management and engineering expertise (ATSIC 2002). The same priority listing of areas of need are used to allocate the personnel and equipment provided by the Army under the ATSIC Army Community Assistance Program (AACAP) (ShelterWA 2001). Although NAHS is generally viewed as separate to CHIP, it falls within the CHIP budget as one of the five elements. As the program is considerably underfunded, many communities who are in need of assistance do not become part of the program.

The **Housing for Health** initiative started in 1986 as an attempt to improve the living conditions of indigenous people to improve their living environment (Nganampa *et al.*, 1987; Pholeros *et al.*, 1993). At that time there was a commonly held belief that the failure of housing-related infrastructure was the fault of the users. Evidence was mounting that this was simply not true. The real reason for the failure of the infrastructure was the use of substandard materials or incorrect installation. The Housing for Health program was initially a practical research program focused on assessing and repairing the health hardware in communities. Its success is demonstrated by the fact that it was adopted and funded by ATSIC and became a mainstream program. ATSIC contracted Healthabitat to assess and fix 1000 houses nationally. This "Fixing Houses for Better Health" (FHBH) project commenced in 2000/1 and by April 2002 had improved the living environment in almost 800 houses in 21 communities and 4 States in suburban, rural and remote localities. Interestingly, over 9000 items of health hardware were repaired and less than 200 repairs were necessitated by overuse, misuse or vandalism (Pholeros *et al.* 1993; Pholeros 2002).

In 1999, ATSIC released its National Homelands Policy. "Homelands" is a word used to refer to the various types of small family-based living areas known as 'homelands', 'outstations' and community living areas. Prior to the formulation of this policy, ATSIC placed a moratorium on the unplanned and unregulated proliferation of outstations. Under the National Homelands Policy, decisions on new outstations will be made by ATSIC Regional Councils based on their regional homelands plans, developed in accordance with national guidelines. The policy requires a potential outstation development to ensure that they have, for example, secure land tenure and access to clean water. The Regional Councils then have to identify and prioritise all housing and infrastructure needs in their region, including the need for new Outstations (Commonwealth Grants Commission 2001; ATSIC 2002).

In addition, ATSIC is implementing actions aligned to the "Ten Year Statement of New Directions for Indigenous Housing" and the "Statement of Commitment" and is developing a "Framework for Comprehensive Regional Agreements/Economic Sustainability" as a means of implementing complimentary projects. Ten priority projects are currently being identified by an intergovernment National Taskforce and in Western Australia the Tjurabalan Comprehensive Regional Agreement may be included (Pederson, 2002; ATSIC, 2002b). These projects will assist the Commonwealth in developing new policy which will include a focus on governance and capacity-building (COAG, 2002).

2.6.5 Government of Western Australia

The following WA organizations share a responsibility for indigenous housing and they will be discussed in turn:

Table 1: Suggested Case Study Communities

Name of Community	What can we learn from this Case Study?
Western Australia	
Wirrimanu (Balgo)	Integrated State Capacity Building Strategy (Framework and Scoping – research development of the Comprehensive Regional Agreement in relation to housing management, maintenance and governance)
Tjurabalan Priority Project	Comprehensive Regional Agreement – future possible relationships between the PBC and housing and infrastructure service delivery, management and maintenance institutions.
Mamabulanjin Aboriginal Corporation	Regional Resource Agency (research current housing and governance practice)
ATSIC Kullarri Regional Council	Relationship to Bi-lateral Agreement (review Bi-lateral mechanism and research KRC needs for enhanced governance from a regional decision making perspective)
Lombardina/Djarindjin	Djarindjin is a community responding well to the State Capacity Building Strategy. Lombardina is a stable, well-managed community adjacent to Djarindjin.
Ngaanyatjarra Council, Ngaanyatjarra Services and Shire of Ngaanyatjarraku	Successfully integrated programs, service delivery to a regional area of culturally related communities by indigenous community controlled organisations.
Burringarra	A large established remote community with a wide range of well developed services. A community governance training program has commenced.
Mungullah	A town reserve community near Carnarvon with recently improved governance.
Northern Territory	
Borroloola	Fixing Houses for Better Health (FHBH2) analysis for FaCS, issues facing town based housing Vs outstations, issues in having NAHS bypassing Bilateral/IHANT.
Mungoobada (Robinson River)	A large community self managed with successful programs.
Wadeye (Port Keates)	Large community with outstations, good rental collection, Whole of Government approach
Minyiri (Hodgson Downs)	Successful housing maintenance program.
Maningrida	Two different language groups in the one community running well.
Miwatj Regional Council	Regional autonomy model developed by Gatjil Djukerra
Papunya	Local housing maintenance initiated by Central/Remote Regional Council called the 'Papunya Model'.
Central/Remote Regional Council	Council initiated governance development program called the 'West MacDonnells Program'.
Julalikari Council Aboriginal Corporation with Buramana Resource Agency	Very well run indigenous organisations servicing 130 town houses (former) and 45 outstations
Tangentyere Council	Long history of an indigenous organisation delivering a range of services to town camps. Their model contributed to the development of the Papunya Model.

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