



Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet  
PO Box 6500  
Canberra ACT 2600  
Australia

Dear Closing the Gap Refresh Committee,

**Australian Indigenous Governance Institute Submission – Closing the Gap Refresh 2018**

The Australian Indigenous Governance Institute (AIGI) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Closing the Gap refresh 2018.

AIGI is a privately funded institute that conducts research and training for Indigenous organisations, corporations, institutes and unincorporated bodies throughout Australia.

AIGI is a national centre of governance excellence, connecting Indigenous Australians to world-class governance practice, providing accessible research, disseminating stories that celebrate outstanding success and solutions, and delivering professional development opportunities to meet the self-determined governance needs of Indigenous people.

AIGI considers the refresh of the Closing the Gap agenda a significant opportunity to transform the relationships between Indigenous peoples and communities, and governments throughout Australia. Whilst we welcome the refresh, AIGI believe that significant work is yet to be done to ensure that the voices and ambitions of Indigenous peoples are captured and embedded in a revised agenda. We entreat that governments at all levels must be committed to meaningful and substantive self-determination of Indigenous peoples and communities.

Yours sincerely,

Ms Michelle Deshong,  
Chief Executive Officer, Australian Indigenous Governance Institute.

## Australian Indigenous Governance Institute

### Submission to the Closing the Gap Refresh – 30 April 2018

#### **Summary**

The Australian Indigenous Governance Institute supports the refresh of the Closing the Gap policy. AIGI believe that keeping the current objectives in place and adding additional targets in the areas of criminal justice and addressing systematic racism will create a strong basis from which Australian governments can assess their impact and effectiveness in a new Closing the Gap framework. Furthermore, supporting locally controlled, culturally informed Indigenous governing bodies with genuine decision-making powers must form the core of a refreshed CTG agenda.

#### **Recommendations**

1. Clearly communicate who, how and for what purposes, information is being collected about Indigenous peoples and communities.
2. That the current targets in CTG remain.
3. Support Indigenous peoples and communities through vesting genuine decision-making powers in locally controlled, culturally informed Indigenous organisations.
4. Ensure that local Indigenous organisations are adequately resourced both financially and with the necessary skills.
5. Shift policy to a strength-based discourse.
6. Review the term ‘prosperity’.
7. That additional objectives be included in a refreshed CTG including:
  - a. Reducing the number of Indigenous peoples incarcerated; and
  - b. Addressing systematic racism.
8. That governments support sector-specific Indigenous advocacy groups, including the National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples as a national body representing the interests of Indigenous peoples.
9. Indigenous community organisations be embedded in a refreshed CTG.

## **1. Introduction**

- 1.1. The Australian Indigenous Governance Institute (AIGI) welcomes the refresh of the Closing the Gap agenda (CTG). This submission responds to a number of specific points raised in the ‘Closing the Gap Public Discussion Paper’ released by Prime Minister and Cabinet (PMC) as well as general comments on the past ten years of CTG.
- 1.2. Whilst this submission represents the views of AIGI, we recognise that Indigenous peoples and communities are best placed to speak about their experiences and circumstances themselves. AIGI acknowledges and supports Indigenous peoples and communities’ right to self-determination. This includes the right of Indigenous peoples to seek advancement through any strategy they feel responds adequately to the needs of their communities.
- 1.3. This submission addresses several issues AIGI believe are vital to consider when refreshing CTG. This submission will respond to three specific areas:
  - Reviewing ten years of CTG;
  - Responding to ‘Closing the Gap: The Next Phase, Public Discussion Paper’;
  - Future of CTG.

## **2. Reviewing ten years of CTG**

- 2.1. The adoption of CTG in 2008 was a significant initiative to highlight and address the disparity that exists between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in the fields of health, education and employment. The commitment to produce and review an annual CTG report is an effective way to address Indigenous policy at a national level.
- 2.2. The seven targets identified through CTG are sound objectives. The ability to live a full life, equal to that of non-Indigenous Australians, remains a necessary component in supporting the livelihoods of Indigenous peoples. So too is the ability of Indigenous children to attend and complete school, and the rights of Indigenous peoples to access the same employment opportunities as other Australians. Together, the seven objectives outlined in CTG remain critical to the ability of Indigenous Australians to enjoy a rich and full life. However, AIGI believes that ongoing issues with data collection and management, as well as the implementation of CTG, have stifled the ability of governments to achieve these seven objectives.

## **Data collection and management**

2.3. As a peak body in the field of Indigenous Governance in Australia, AIGI understand the importance of collecting, storing and interpreting data. Indigenous data sovereignty is increasingly important for Indigenous organisations; not only for their success, but also to understand *how* and *why* they are succeeding. The Indigenous Governance Awards demonstrate that Indigenous organisations have the skills to both collect data and use this data to inform their strategic direction and operational requirements. It allows Indigenous organisations to connect their needs to their outputs and in so doing, supporting their community in a way that is locally relevant. Indigenous organisations use their data, collected through their own means and interpreted through the lens of their community, to tell their story in a way that reflects their history, culture and people today.

2.4. Relatively little is known about the Australian governments' collection, storage and interpretation of data on Indigenous peoples through the CTG approach. The lack of transparency around these processes, and the lack of information around contradictory data, have significantly weakened the achievements of CTG. The target to 'halve the gap in child mortality by 2018' illustrates the lack of transparency around contradictory data. The annual CTG report states the achievement of this target as being:

- 2016 – On track
- 2017 – Not on track
- 2018 – On track

2.5. More must be done to communicate who is collecting data, how they are collecting it, where it is being stored and safeguarded, and how it is interpreted and analysed.

#### Equal partners in the relationship

2.6. The evidence collected from the Indigenous Community Governance Project from 2003-08 clearly demonstrates that top-down approaches in Indigenous policy and service delivery have not and will not succeed. Furthermore, the evidence demonstrates that when governments engage Indigenous peoples and communities as equal partners, meaningful improvements in the health, wellbeing and general livelihoods of Indigenous peoples are realised.

2.7. AIGI believes that working with local Indigenous-led and Indigenous-controlled organisations must form a cornerstone of the CTG refresh. Supporting local Indigenous organisations will provide meaningful employment opportunities for Indigenous peoples, and offer locally relevant and culturally appropriate mechanisms to engage with community. This strategy

requires vesting genuine decision-making powers in Indigenous communities and organisations. This aligns with Australia's obligations under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples (UNDRIP). Additionally, this requires Australian governments to support Indigenous organisations, both financially and through skills development, to perform their core functions.

- 2.8. Returning to the issue of data: local Indigenous organisations are not only best placed to collect data, but are best placed to interpret what that data means in the context of their community at any point in time. This is an important opportunity to engage local Indigenous organisations, support local jobs and training opportunities, and facilitate a strength-based conversation. When communities are in control of their data, they are in control of the story about their community and are able to measure the risk against return in making information available. Working with Indigenous communities in this way strengthens the accuracy of the data and demonstrates not only what is working, but *why* it is working. This is just one example of how governments can more meaningfully engage Indigenous peoples and communities through the CTG refresh.
- 2.9. The improvement of health, education and employment outcomes, as identified in the current CTG policy, will remain critical to improving the general wellbeing of Indigenous peoples and communities. As such, AIGI supports the continuation of the seven objectives of the current CTG policy. However, shifting the CTG implementation schedule from a top-down government initiated and controlled process, to collaborative partnerships between governments, Indigenous led and controlled organisations is necessary. It will be essential to change the way Australian government's work with Indigenous peoples and communities in the future.

### **3. Response to the discussion paper released as part of the CTG refresh**

- 3.1. AIGI welcomes a change of discourse to a strength-based model and agrees that this should inform government policy at all levels throughout Australia. However, we believe the term 'prosperity' to be problematic. According to the 'Closing the Gap Discussion Paper':

*Prosperity is about moving beyond wellbeing to flourishing and thriving. It refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people having economic empowerment to be decision-makers over issues that impact their lives, and to seize opportunities for themselves, their families and communities. (p. 4)*

- 3.2. Although the discussion paper goes on to discuss the meaning of ‘prosperity’ as pertaining to four key areas (Individual, Community, Economic and Environment), the above definition demonstrates that ‘prosperity’ is understood and will be applied primarily as ‘economic prosperity’. This interpretation fails to consider the holistic and integrated components of Indigenous peoples’ lives. The implication that an Indigenous community or individual cannot be prosperous without economic empowerment is flawed.
- 3.3. Indigenous communities throughout Australia are endowed with vibrant history and culture. In many ways, Indigenous communities are already prosperous and thrive in areas that are important to them. As a co-convenor of the biennial Indigenous Governance Awards, AIGI has celebrated Indigenous communities’ successes and innovations in the field of governance since 2005. This has required us to engage with a multiplicity of definitions for the term ‘success’; what it means to be successful for one group, may be, and usually is, different to another.
- 3.4. For this reason, AIGI have serious concerns that the term ‘prosperity’ does not account for variation, as demonstrated in the Indigenous Governance Awards. The failure of the Discussion Paper to ask ‘What does it mean to be prosperous from an Indigenous perspective?’ suggests that government has not consulted Indigenous peoples and communities, and has not reflected on the constructed nature of the definition.
- 3.5. To reiterate, AIGI welcome a change of discourse to a strength-based approach in Indigenous policy through all levels of Australian government. However, we suggest that the term ‘prosperity’ be re-examined.

#### **4. Future of Closing the Gap**

##### Future Targets

- 4.1. As stated previously, AIGI believe the current objectives identified in CTG should remain. However, for CTG to create transformative change, additional targets must be included. We suggest that additional targets be added in the fields of criminal justice and incarceration, as well as addressing systematic racism.
- 4.2. Indigenous incarceration rates throughout Australia are appalling. Of particular concern are the rates of Indigenous youth (10-17 years) in juvenile justice systems. Indigenous peoples are systemically targeted and prosecuted by the Australian legal system. As a result, Indigenous men, women and young people are disproportionately represented in Australia’s criminal justice system (National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service, September 2017, Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the

Northern Territory, 2017, p. 117). Adopting an objective as part of CTG to lower the rates of incarceration would strengthen CTG and add a significant objective to improve the livelihoods of Indigenous peoples.

- 4.3. A second target to include in a refreshed CTG agenda includes addressing systemic racism. Evidence from every Indigenous sector including but not limited to health, education, government and corporate, clearly demonstrate that systemic racism exists and that it affects the daily lives of Indigenous peoples (Australian NGO Coalition Submission to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 2017). Adopting a second target to identify and address systematic racism would also add significant value to a refreshed CTG agenda.

#### Advocacy

- 4.4. Strong and independent advocacy groups are essential to represent the diverse views and interests of Indigenous peoples throughout Australia. Unlike locally controlled Indigenous organisations, advocacy groups can offer independent support to sector-specific needs and solutions.
- 4.5. AIGI suggest that Australian governments increase funding to sector-specific Indigenous advocacy groups, to enable better communication between Indigenous peoples and professionals, and Australian governments. This should include the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples as a national body representing the interests of Indigenous peoples.

#### Supporting self-governance

- 4.6. AIGI supports Indigenous communities through strengthening the governing bodies that represent their interests. Such groups include but are not limited to Native Title Corporations, Local Aboriginal Land Councils, Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations, Men's and Women's groups and programs, Indigenous Youth programs and Regional Authorities. Indigenous peoples have effectively taken control of their livelihoods and asserted their right to self-determination through many of these governing bodies. The Indigenous Community Governance Project clearly demonstrates that where Indigenous communities have developed locally relevant, culturally informed governing structures, they have implemented initiatives that have improved the lived reality of their community members.
- 4.7. AIGI supports Minister for Indigenous Affairs Nigel Scullion in his response to the 2016 Indigenous Governance Awards, that: '*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations are*



*key players in delivering services to Indigenous communities across Australia'.* However, more must be done to support the decision-making power of these organisations in their communities. Evidence collected through AIGI led research demonstrates that where Indigenous people have locally relevant and culturally informed governing institutions, matched with real decision-making power, they achieve meaningful results. Supporting Indigenous communities in this way allows them to define what they believe is most urgent and necessary to address in their communities. Through this process, local targets can be identified, and strategies put in place to achieve community-defined goals. As such, AIGI firmly believe that supporting localised, culturally informed governing bodies must form a central component in any future CTG policy.

## 5. **Conclusion**

- 5.1. This submission is based on evidence produced in collaboration with Indigenous peoples and organisations over the past 15 years. Central to this submission is the well-established truth that Indigenous peoples have the right to determine their own futures and devise culturally informed solutions for their own peoples. Adding two new objectives to CTG as well as changing the way that Australian governments engage with Indigenous peoples (with increased respect for self-determination and self-government) will provide the best opportunity for transformative change between both Indigenous peoples and Australians more generally.
- 5.2. AIGI welcome this refresh and look forward to working together with government, Indigenous peoples and Indigenous communities to usher in a new relationship based on mutual respect, understanding and a willingness to work together.