

A Fairer Victoria for Indigenous Communities: A Framework for Action

A Proposal for building the capacity of community-controlled Aboriginal organisations in Victoria. Prepared by:

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Introduction

This is a proposal for the Victorian Government to build the capacity of the Aboriginal statewide and peak organisations to work together to improve outcomes for Indigenous Victorians. It includes a draft Framework for Action, and a funding proposal. It outlines the key principles we consider crucial to building effective partnerships with Indigenous communities, and the key areas in which the government can build the capacity of Aboriginal organisations.

Aboriginal statewide and peak organisations were established in Victoria by Indigenous communities to ensure a 'voice' in the development of policy and programs for Indigenous people. We represent our communities in the areas of health, education, child and family welfare, juvenile justice, community services and the law and, in many cases, provide Indigenous-specific services, which play an important role in cultural maintenance. Our organisations have evolved over several decades to reflect the changing needs and aspirations of the growing Victorian Indigenous demographic. We are key stakeholders in the work of improving outcomes and increasing opportunities for Indigenous people, pre-dating the establishment of ATSIC as advocates for Indigenous communities.

Our organisations play a unique role in both community and government. Our long-established networks throughout Victorian regions ensure a thorough, proven consultative mechanism. As we were created by our communities, we remain community-controlled and, as such, are key to Indigenous self-determination. We are anchored in community – not separate from it – and are always answerable to our communities.

As non-government organisations with a strong focus on policy, we are well-placed to facilitate partnerships between government and communities, and to advocate for the community. Our partnerships with government have been successful. They include: Yalca, a policy-based partnership between VAEAI and the Victorian State Government; the Aboriginal Justice Agreement and Koori Courts

As the 2007 state election approaches, we urge the Bracks government to continue its commitment to Indigenous communities by continuing to support our organisations to represent them at a statewide, local, and regional level. We are committed to working with the government towards 'a fairer Victoria' for Indigenous people.

A Fairer Victoria for Indigenous Communities

The Victorian Labor Government's social policy platform, *A Fairer Victoria*, was first released in 2005 and updated and expanded in 2006. It stresses the importance of supporting communities to be self-determining and effective (Strategy 13). It also promotes building new partnerships with Indigenous communities (Strategy 9). We welcome this emphasis on Indigenous communities; however, we also stress the importance, in working with communities, of building on existing partnerships and protocols.

For the government to expand its capacity to work effectively with communities, it is necessary to build the capacity of Indigenous community-controlled organisations to work with a cross-sector focus in both a policy and, where applicable, a service-provision capacity; expanding and enhancing our partnerships with government departments, non-government organisations and, most importantly, with each other. Supporting Indigenous organisations to work together will enable communities to utilise the extensive networks and local knowledge that our organisations bring together.

Our vision: key principles

Reconciliation and Self-determination

Indigenous peoples have long thrived through strong, sustainable social, cultural, legal, economic and ecological systems. Our capacity was greatly diminished by the process of colonisation which dispossessed and fragmented our communities. Today, this diminished capacity is evidenced by disproportionate rates of disadvantage, impoverishment, poor health and incarceration. To foster a true spirit of reconciliation, it is necessary to acknowledge the past and its impact on the present; but also to develop sustainable policies which acknowledge, and build on, the existing capacities and strengths of Indigenous communities.

Self-determination

Self-determination is internationally recognised as a human right. It is fundamental to building the capacity of our communities to overcome disadvantage. We believe that Indigenous Victorian communities are best-placed to work together to achieve positive outcomes for our people.

Culture

We believe that culturally-centred approaches to overcoming Indigenous disadvantage are the most effective. Australian Indigenous cultures are the longest continuing cultures in the world: sophisticated and holistic, linking spirituality with politics, education, economics, ecology and law. Victoria is rich in a diversity of Indigenous and Islander cultures. Our cultures are not static but constantly changing and evolving. Policy that is grounded in a respect for culture and an understanding of the need to ensure that it thrives into the future is vital.

Indigenous Peak Organisations and the Changing Policy

Environment

Statewide and peak organisations play an important role contributing to the development of policy for Indigenous Victorians in the areas of health, education, child and family welfare, juvenile justice, community services and the law. We provide high quality policy advice to government in our respective areas of expertise; assess the quality of services; advocate for the development of

improved services; and work to ensure, through various partnerships, strategies and agreements, that our people have access to culturally appropriate services. In many cases, we are also instrumental in providing non-Indigenous organisations with guidance on effectively engaging Indigenous people.

Since our organisations were established, the demand for our input into policy development has dramatically increased. This in turn places a great demand on the Indigenous community. In today's sophisticated policy environment, it is necessary for Indigenous organisations to be supported to contribute to policy development in a sophisticated, long-term capacity.

Specific Actions

We suggest that the state government increase funding for Indigenous organisations to develop policy, research and program delivery capacity. Funding each of the five peak and statewide organisations to employ a Senior Project Officer and a Junior Project Officer would enable:

- Improved workplace planning and training for Indigenous people
- Improved quality and range of partnerships between Indigenous service providers, government and non-government organisations
- Forecasting the likely impact of Government policy initiatives on Indigenous people.
- Providing advice about integrating and prioritising community consultations and service provider feedback.
- Developing policy proposals to improve outcomes for Indigenous people
- Liaison with non-Indigenous organisations to improve services.
- Gathering information from service users and community members about ways to strengthen community.
- Disseminating information on good practice to non-Government organisations and all levels of Government.
- Providing input into the research and development of national and international best practice for services.
- Identifying how programs and services could better reflect United Nations human rights standards, particularly in relation to economic, social and cultural rights.

Building the Capacity of Indigenous Service Providers

The Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates that the Indigenous population base will increase by up to 44.1% by 2009. Specifically, this will mean a dramatic escalation in the population of youth. Indigenous organisations are already facing increasing demand for services and expertise. There is a critical need to build the capacity of Indigenous statewide and peak organisations to remain responsive to a community which is changing demographically.

A majority of Indigenous people prefer to use Indigenous services where possible. By drawing on local knowledge, understanding of culture, and community consultation, Indigenous service providers are best placed to tackle specific issues and to offer culturally appropriate services. In

some cases the availability of Indigenous services is limited by funding or there is no proximate service.

There are key challenges for peak and statewide organisations in providing Indigenous services:

- Meeting an increasing demand for Indigenous services and coping with limited funding and extensive reporting requirements;
- Finding resources in this challenging environment to contribute to policy development, research and pilot projects, and forward planning;
- Sustaining and evaluating partnerships with non-Indigenous service providers (including providing quality information about culturally appropriate service provision).

Specific measures

We suggest that the state government

- Commit to the rolling out, funding and sustainability of best practice service delivery models as may emerge from the evaluation of pilot projects;
- Develop a sustainable Indigenous Sector Capacity Building Plan for developing skills and providing resources in the areas of:
 - Infrastructure/administration;
 - Recruitment, education and training;
 - Research and evaluation;
 - Advocacy;
 - Governance and management;
 - Community development and consultation and
 - Community sector-wide and government liaison

Cross-sectoral Policy Work and Whole-of-Government

A Fairer Victoria promotes cross-sectoral, 'whole-of-government' approaches to social policy and service delivery. We strongly support this move; we have long believed in holistic approaches to policy and service provision. Linking services is the most effective way to ensure that the needs of the Indigenous community are met, and that Indigenous people are informed of what services are available; particularly in isolated communities.

Successful whole-of-government and cross-sector approaches require effective partnerships between departments and organisations, as well as between organisations (e.g., Indigenous and non-Indigenous service providers).

At present, peak organisations are mandated to provide policy advice and/or services exclusively in their area of expertise (i.e. health or education). Supporting statewide and peak organisations to work proactively together on cross-sectoral policy issues would enable us to combine our expertise, experience and community networks to develop long-term initiatives that would benefit Indigenous communities.

We believe this could lead to significant progress in improving the efficiency of the community consultation process, developing long-term research projects and forecasting the likely impact of government policy initiatives on communities.

The 2006-2007 State Budget allocates \$10.8 million for new representative arrangements. If these new arrangements are to work well it is important that communities are supported, resourced and given access to relevant information. For this valuable initiative to be successful, it is vital that existing consultative arrangements and partnerships are taken into account and potential consultation fatigue is minimised.

Our organisations already have extensive representative models and community consultation structures which have proven to be effective in consulting Indigenous communities.

Specific measures

We suggest that government provide funding for an annual Indigenous sector joint forum to develop:

- An annually updated framework for culturally inclusive policy.
- Quarterly meetings to provide advice about consultation strategies, timing of consultation and possible integration and synergies to help minimise community consultation fatigue.
- Advice to government departments on key policy initiatives in the early stages of development.

Building Partnerships with Indigenous Communities

Formal partnerships between statewide and peak organisations and government are a highly effective means of promoting culturally appropriate and relevant best-practice strategies. Such partnerships enable the development of protocols which ensure that communities are consulted effectively on government initiatives and programs (i.e.: consolidation of consultation). Formal partnership arrangements facilitate the development of long-term policy and provide opportunities for the state government formally to commit to principles which are endorsed by Indigenous communities.

Building on existing partnerships and developing new partnerships are important steps in increasing the capacity of statewide and peak organisations to represent Indigenous communities.

Specific measures

We suggest that the State Government, in consultation with Indigenous statewide and peak organisations,

- Develop clear and equitable partnership protocols for engagement on issues concerning our areas of expertise,
- Resource Indigenous statewide and peak organisations to participate more extensively in governmental engagement processes

Partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous service providers

We commend government initiatives to make cultural competence a key requirement for registration for non-Indigenous service-providers (for example, child and family welfare). However, the onus to provide cultural competence training generally falls on Indigenous statewide and peak organisations. Government needs to ensure that our organisations are adequately supported to provide this training; and to develop protocols to facilitate partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous organisations; in particular, to ensure that such partnerships are genuine, sustainable, and of benefit to Indigenous organisations and communities.

Specific measures

We suggest that the state government, in consultation with Indigenous organisations, develops guidelines and standards for the formation and maintenance of equal partnerships. These guidelines should be underpinned by recognition of, and respect for, Indigenous culture and expertise, and should include the following commitments:

- To provide a culturally sensitive and accessible service to the Indigenous community that meets their needs.
- To be accountable in service delivery for funding that is secured for the purpose of meeting the needs of Indigenous people
- To develop culturally respectful and appropriate partnerships, policies and practices with Indigenous agencies.
- To support the capacity building of appropriate Indigenous organisations.
- To develop partnership arrangements with Indigenous organisations that ensure that there are proper protocols in place and that Indigenous organisations benefit from the partnership.
- For statistical purposes, to have in place a process of identifying whether a client is Indigenous or Torres Strait Islander.
- To make statements of acknowledgement and incorporate recognition of Indigenous traditional ownership/custodianship in their Constitutions.
- To acknowledge the traditional owners and custodians of the land at public meetings.
- To make cultural competence a key policy and to employ an appropriate Indigenous organisation to deliver cultural competence training.
- To employ Indigenous persons when appropriate and provide appropriate support.

Appendix: Draft Funding Proposal

We propose that the Victorian Labor Government provide funding from the Departments of Education, Human Services, Justice, and Victorian Communities, for the initiatives we have outlined above. Specifically, these are:

1. Five senior project workers and five junior project workers to be managed by the CEOs of the respective statewide and peak organisations. The indicative budget for this would be \$750,000.
2. Funding for an annual Indigenous sector joint forum (see page 6).