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## The problem with Indigenous affairs solutions

By Mark Moran –  
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The Productivity Commission says Australia spends twice as much on programs and services for Indigenous people than the rest of the population. But how much of this is absorbed internally by government administration and how much actually reaches the ground?

Many people think there are just one or two "big-ticket" policies in Indigenous affairs but there are many, many more. Remote Indigenous communities of fewer than 1000 people are contending with up to 80 programs. Each has its own policy and objectives. The people implementing them are typically well intentioned and confident that they are making a difference. But are they?

Breaking things down to commonly targeted groups, say disengaged youth, there can be up to 10 programs working to assist a mere 50 young people. In one fortnight, a 15-year-old can be dealing with 10 providers who do not co-ordinate well, each pulling in different directions.

Each program has its own outcome measures but they combine into complex policy hybrids. As they can't control for the effects of other programs, it's impossible to clearly attribute success.

Remarkably, among all of this, some people are not serviced at all.

Those confronting this scenario are questioning the system of Indigenous affairs, dismissing it as Whitefella Stuff, out of their control. While policy sets the field of play, what occurs in practice is quite different. Policies come and go but outcomes are determined on the rocks of practical implementations, and people's actions. This is the engine room of Indigenous affairs, not the boardrooms or broadsheets of capital cities.

There are many examples of innovation for governments to draw on. The Turnbull government is considering whether to support the Empowered Communities initiative. Indigenous leaders from eight regions have banded together to redesign the system. They are calling for an overhaul, including adaptive reporting frameworks and co-ordinated funding mechanisms that wrap around local innovation. The status quo is not for want of ideas for reform, but previous governments have so far lacked the political will or ability to effect major changes. Pragmatically, there are five things that people working in Indigenous affairs can do.

First, stabilise the operating environment so capabilities and innovation can grow. More important than the ingenuity of a policy solution is that it stays still long enough for people to adapt to it. New policies tend to dismiss all before them, sweeping away organisations, jobs, people and long-term relationships. In the Northern Territory, the aftermath of the Intervention and the creation of the Super Shires led to the departure of long-term employees and community organisations. New policies should build on - not undermine - the achievements of their predecessors.

Second, upskill and bring in the best professionals. Much effort is targeted at capability building of local Indigenous people and organisations, but what about the capability of visiting outsiders? Half of the universities in Australia offer tertiary education to prepare students to work in international development, but there is no equivalent for remote Indigenous communities. So you arrive in a community from scratch, work it out through the school of hard knocks. Few Indigenous leaders have the endurance to cope with the revolving door of new recruits.

Third, instead of arriving with a predetermined solution, study the context. Each remote Indigenous community in Australia has a unique history, language(s) and socio-political structure.

There is always a range of capacities and strengths. Seek them out.

Fourth, work through Indigenous leaders and organisations, including local government. These are the local institutions that endure between policy rounds. They are the only structures of Indigenous self-governance in Australia to which powers, functions and resources can be devolved. They provide political counterpoints to government, towards a better-balanced system.

Finally, foster innovation and knowledge exchange. Instead of sticking to your solution and patch, co-ordinate with others to achieve collective learning and impact. Encourage long-term working relationships between leaders and outside professionals.