Response to the Discussion Paper
‘The Future of Remote Participation and Employment Servicing Arrangements’

October 2011

Key messages
The main points we make in this submission are summarised as follows:

- Achieving more effective services will rely on the consistent application of key principles. We recommend ten principles drawn from the work of the Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre.

- Economic development strategy should be based on strong data, a coherent conceptual framework and a clear-sighted analysis of the history of initiatives in this field. We would like to see proper reflection on State and Territory efforts towards economic development. Too often, policy development is started with a blank sheet as if the past reveals nothing about some of the basic questions presented for discussion in the paper.

- The discussion paper is asking questions for which valuable knowledge can be gained through examining the recent experience of FaHCSIA, Regional Operations Centres and the Office of the Coordinator-General for Remote Service Delivery, especially initiatives taken under the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Service Delivery.

- The new arrangements must properly recognise the complexity of Aboriginal identity. A blanket approach to policy for Aboriginal people or communities will always fail to analyse the differences between people and the needs and challenges they face. The same applies to defining community for the purposes of employment services.

- We believe there is a strong role for initiatives to support individual capabilities and resources in economic development. Ninti One has trained Aboriginal people to be community researchers, including with Federal Government support. The data and analysis provided by trained community researchers is a powerful commodity within the process of policy development and is one way in which governments can work better with communities.

- The role of the community in participation and employment services is critical to the effectiveness of the services. Moreover, a key factor in achieving better results for people is their level of understanding of the ways in which government and policy interacts with them.

Introduction
Ninti One Limited wishes to make this submission to the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) in response to the Discussion Paper entitled ‘The Future of Remote Participation and Employment Servicing Arrangements’, which was released in August 2011. In doing so, we draw on the research we have undertaken through the Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre (DKCRC), contract research projects for various clients including Federal, State and Territory Governments, as well as our current programs, which include the leadership of the CRC for Remote Economic Participation.

The Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre (DKCRC) existed from July 2003 to June 2010. It was a research and brokerage institution that linked researchers from 28 partner organisations. In addition, our experience in the planning process and implementation of the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation (CRC-REP), which commenced operation in July 2010, is also relevant. Ninti One manages CRC-REP as well as the Australian Feral Camel Management Project. The constitution of the company provides for governance by a board with 50% of the members being Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and 50% who are non-Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. One-third of the 52 formal partners to Ninti One are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander organisations.

In providing this response, we acknowledge that the Department is seeking concise submissions. We will therefore concentrate on the questions posed in the discussion paper where they relate to the core knowledge of Ninti One, especially in relation to the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We provide responses under each question. In doing so, we draw on previous submissions made by Ninti One on the Draft Indigenous Economic Development Strategy, the Draft Indigenous Education Plan and other relevant government consultation processes.

Discussion paper question: How can we provide services in a better way?

More effective services
Over the period 2006 to 2009, the Desert Knowledge CRC conducted research on services to remote communities. This work involved eight of our partner organisations and seventeen researchers working in over 25 communities. We explored the experience of service users and providers relating to housing, remote transaction centres, civil contracting, outstation maintenance and a range of other services. The project generated 26 publications that are available through the Desert Knowledge CRC legacy website at www.desertknowledgecrc.com.au.

In conducting the research, one question addressed by the DKCRC team was ‘What are the conditions that permit successful practice to develop between consumers and service-providers?’ The overall synthesis report (Fisher et al, 2011) concluded that ten principles of demand-responsive services apply in remote communities, summarised as follows:

Principle 1: Quality and adequacy of supply
Whether for telephones, rubbish collection or the maintenance of water bores, service providers set out to deliver a high quality service that meets the needs of users. There are many reasons why the supply of
services often falls short of these aims. They include the challenges of recruiting and retaining suitable staff, the physical demands of the desert environment on equipment and materials, difficulties in communication and poor access to knowledge and information.

A critical principle of service delivery is that the quality of the service meets a standard that is appropriate for the local context and that the supply is adequate for local needs. At the same time, as described in Principle 2, quality and adequacy of supply should also be adaptable to local conditions affecting demand. A standardised high-quality but high-cost service may be unaffordable and therefore inaccessible to people wishing to use it.

**Principle 2: Supply of service is adaptable to local conditions affecting demand**

It may be cost-effective for service providers to deliver standardised services, but often local circumstances call for a more adaptable and flexible approach. For example, where people are committed to living in a certain place and accept that its natural resources may be limited, then for providers to insist on urban water or energy standards may ultimately lead to unsustainable costs of living for residents. This principle calls for an informed understanding of the aspirations of people and responsiveness to local conditions.

**Principle 3: Clear decision points**

It is simplistic to argue that more localised decision-making produces better results. After all, local people may not have the specialised knowledge and skills to make decisions. But there is plenty of evidence from DKCRC research in the Northern Territory and Western Australia in particular, that local organisations charged with service delivery often find themselves at the sharp end of a long supply chain over which they have little influence. When policy changes centrally (meaning at State, Territory or Federal level), so local staff interpret and explain the changes to their customers. Some agency staff have described themselves as experiencing waves of reform coming one after the other.

The principle here is about service systems incorporating well-defined decision points that are relevant for the kind of service being planned. For example, the location of a payphone may be an important decision in which local people need to be involved, but the actual decisions around the technical functioning of that service is a central rather than local matter. By contrast, the development of a ranger service will require a high level of local discussion and a series of decision points mapped out in advance.

**Principle 4: Involvement of trusted outsiders and insiders**

Where services are provided in English and with a heavy sprinkling of acronyms, technical jargon and official terms, desert dwellers often rely on outsiders to help interpret what is going on. We have observed through the research that local organisations can help to bridge the gap (or span the boundary) between service providers and Aboriginal people. This also applies to insiders too, such as the employment of local people as staff leading to greater use of services and enabling users to count on support from people who understand their perspective and their priorities.

**Principle 5: Quality of interpersonal relationships across a service network**

In small desert communities, relationships are important. Time is needed to build rapport and understanding between people. It is no coincidence that services perceived to be effective are often those in which people with an ability to anticipate local concerns, manage misunderstandings and communicate clearly are found. The quality of the service becomes person-dependent rather than system-dependent. Fostering good relationships and putting resources into maintaining them is critical to effective services.
**Principle 6: Form of engagement between service providers and users is determined by function**
The term engagement is used here to describe the way in which providers and users of services communicate, negotiate and cooperate to ensure best outcomes. Different forms of engagement suit different situations. Effective engagement is determined by the scope and nature of services. In examples such as housing maintenance, ongoing negotiation with residents about the maintenance regime is appropriate. In others, such as access to energy services, long-term agreements may be more suited to local circumstances.

**Principle 7: Stability in the policy environment**
Users of services become accustomed to the way they are delivered. When the system changes, people have to become used to new arrangements and learn how to gain the most benefit from them. Efficiency is often lost and the faith of service users becomes stretched, especially when the reasons for the change are determined centrally and are not apparent to them.

The presence of mature local organisations and a low turnover of staff in key positions have enabled transitions from one policy to another to be managed effectively in other locations in which researchers are working, a signal of policy stability being overcome through clear local responses.

**Principle 8: Service match to local needs and capacity**
The concept of ‘demand-responsive’ services came from the experience of improved strategies around access to water during the nineties. Demand-responsive services ensure that the capacity of a remote community to use a service for their particular needs is central to planning and investment.

A long-term vision for a settlement and the region within which it is located enables the supply chain of services to be better designed and orientated to goals to which residents themselves make a commitment. In this context, a key principle is that service development and implementation views both sides of the supply-demand equation and avoids the pitfall of focussing only on better delivery of services as opposed to improved access to services for locally-determined objectives.

**Principle 9: A culture of evaluation leading to learning and corrective change**
The experience of most people involved in services, either as providers or users, is that reviews and evaluations are usually an indication of an existing problem. They are commissioned by the funders of a program in order to justify changes or they may be a precursor to restructuring or reallocation of resources elsewhere. Evaluations tend to be set-piece affairs which imply pre-determined roles of the service provider as defendant and evaluator as probing investigator.

Evaluations should be seen as a tool for finding out what works and learning on how best to improve delivery of services. In this context, the commitment made in the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Service Delivery signed by the Council of Australian Governments in December 2008 to an accountability principle that ‘programs and services should have regular and transparent performance monitoring, review and evaluation’ is welcome. An important emphasis is on ‘evaluating programs and services from multiple perspectives including from the client, Aboriginal communities and government perspectives and incorporating lessons into future program and services design’. Of course, the quality of these processes will depend on the quality of the engagement achieved with Aboriginal people, a subject addressed by other service principles.
Principle 10: Suitable service setting
An appropriate service setting that enables a degree of control by the consumer, encourages successful service interactions. Physical settings can be designed to accommodate culturally specific behaviours, but often ownership, personalisation and patterns of use determine the success of a place for interactions with outsiders. A community hall may be such a location, being a place where agencies and contractors seeking to make contact with local people can come.

In assessing these ten principles against the questions posed by the discussion paper and the particular circumstances of remote participation and employment servicing arrangements, we suggest that the most relevant ones are Principles 5, 6, 7, 9 and 10, which mainly relate to the quality of interactions between service users and agency providers. These interactions are critical to the process of achieving effective participation and employment servicing.

Economic development through sound strategy
Policy responses to the challenge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander economic development so far suffer from poor data and information, a fragmented view of the issues, and ‘imposed’ initiatives generated from outside the regions which prove not to work on the ground. This situation is exacerbated by the inherent difficulty of implementing programs in remote regions, including logistics, expense, environment and cross-cultural misunderstanding.

Economic strategy should be based on strong data, a coherent conceptual framework and a clear-sighted analysis of the history of initiatives in this field. It is too often the case that new strategic development pays lip service to the lessons of the past. To make a point we repeat later in this paper, we would like to see proper reflection on State and Territory efforts towards economic development as well as those aspects of earlier policy work on Shared Responsibility Agreements, Regional Partnership Agreements and COAG trials taken into account so that the Strategy is informed by the experiences of the past.

The first ingredient in effective strategies for economic development is a thorough understanding of local perspectives on governance. Perceptions of the need for, and the role, value and functions of governance will vary across the range of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with an interest in the subject. The most stark divide is likely to lie between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on the one hand and government on the other. It will be coloured by individual experiences of the economic development, including those of the ATSIC era. And it will be influenced by recent developments, such as the Royalties for Regions policy in WA, the Northern Territory Emergency Response and Welfare Reform on Cape York, and how they have been felt by people and reported in the media.

Research by DKCRC in the Anmatyerr group of settlements in the Northern Territory and two settlements in Diamantina Shire, Western Queensland has shown that ‘distance from markets and from the mental maps of urban-centric policy-makers means that small, remote settlements do generate economic practices locally’ (Ingamells et al. 2010:1). The research pointed to the importance of local plans and strategies as a basis for economic development and sustainability. We argued that ‘current economic policy facilitates national prosperity to the detriment of local economies. It points to the necessity for desert regions, of developing an internal economic agenda held by a local agency, in ways that bring both Aboriginal and settler cultures into economic expression’ (Ingamells et al. 2010:1).

Ultimately, the conceptual basis for economic development strategy needs to be clearly articulated. We feel that this is an aspect of the discussion paper that merits some attention. Competing emphases include:
• National economic goals and the increased role that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people could play
• Localised economic development for self-reliance, for example through an emphasis on microenterprise and sustainable livelihoods
• Building connections between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the globalised economy
• Regional economic development driven by lead industries generating local demand for services.

In the case of one example above, sustainable livelihoods, Ninti One has extensive experience in applying conceptual thinking to the work we do. The Sustainable Livelihoods framework, commonly used in international development settings, is one way of conceptualising economic development (see Moran et al. 2007; Measham et al. 2006). Our view is that it offers potential for people to work out how to build conditions where they achieve local economic development aspirations.

But the key point we wish to make is that the over-arching conceptual framework that the Department uses in its work on economic development would benefit from further analysis and description. It should take into account the conceptual and policy development behind the Indigenous Economic Development Strategy, which provides frameworks within which economic initiatives can be located in a more coherent way than is implied in the discussion paper.

**Development of social enterprises**

For government to try to take a lead role in small enterprise development would seem to us a mistake. And while we realise that the discussion paper is not arguing for this, the danger exists that large external service providers will suffocate local initiatives by proposing and offering seed funding for a proscribed set of activities that are not community-initiated and don’t actually play to the strengths and passions of Aboriginal people. Some CDEP organisations are taking an interest in social enterprise and microenterprise, which is a positive development.

Again, this is where the Indigenous Economic Development Strategy (IEDS) may be useful. For groups with which we work, much can be achieved in supporting ‘individual capabilities and resources’, to use a term from the IEDS. This is because a significant proportion of people living in remote communities have not had the experience of production, enterprise or trading activities. In places where government transfers to individuals and families are the main source of income, young people are brought up in situations of welfare dependence rather than work or business. So an important starting point for them is support to work in an environment where people are producing or trading a good or service. The work of Enterprise Learning Projects (ELP) and Arnhem Human Enterprise Development (AHED) is relevant here, as both organisations emphasise individual partnership with families and groups living in remote locations. In the case of ELP, the organisation starts by listening to the interests of local people and working with them on their own microenterprise ideas.

We believe there is a strong role for local initiatives in this area, which is why we have trained Aboriginal people to be community researchers during the DKCRC and have recently employed 29 other people to be researchers in the four communities mentioned at the start of this section. Data and analysis provided by trained community researchers is a powerful commodity within the process of policy development. It is one important response to the questions in the discussion paper about governance and which ask how governments can work better with communities.
A concern we have about the discussion paper on ‘The Future of Remote Participation and Employment Servicing Arrangements’ is that it is asking questions that can, to some extent, be answered through examining the recent experience of FaHCSIA, Regional Operations Centres and the Office of the Coordinator-General for Remote Service Delivery. For example, the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Service Delivery has led to the development of Local Implementation Plans (LIPs) in selected remote communities, each of which include consideration of employment and economic development within them. Here lies considerable knowledge on community engagement, local generation of employment and enterprise and interactions with services such as Centrelink. Although the paper mentions the LIPs in passing, we are concerned that they will not be used to inform future servicing arrangements. In seeking advice on better coordination and integration of services, the discussion paper would do well to avoid becoming a silo itself and an example of the problem it is trying to overcome.

Discussion paper question: How can we improve results for people?

The scope and nature of participation
The questions posed by the discussion paper on participation are the right ones. Unfortunately they call for a longer response than is feasible here. However, we believe that there are participation activities that should be unique to remote communities, whether participation in planning processes or in economic activity and employment. This point is borne out time and again by our work, which indicates that, to a large extent, the effectiveness of any initiative from outside is largely dependent on the approach to participation adopted by the external agency.

Regarding the kinds of participation requirements that are appropriate for remote communities, we suggest two approaches to developing a sophisticated understanding of the subject that can contribute to remote servicing arrangements. The first is to consider developing a typology of participation types of the kind produced by Mikkelsen and which draws on the work of many others in this field (Mikkelsen 2004). The second is to conduct a review of the published literature on the subject and to confer with practitioners and communities, many of whom have long and profound knowledge in this area. These two steps will inform remote servicing arrangements by helping the Department develop a strategic approach to the subject and then determine the practical work required to turn strategy into reality.

Local understandings of ‘government’
A key factor in achieving better results for people is their level of understanding of the ways in which government and policy interacts with them. In remote communities two complex worlds exist; the world of local Aboriginal people and the world of government. Progress will depend on greater understanding across the boundaries that divide those worlds. A common criticism of the Northern Territory Emergency Response was that it treated everyone within the affected communities the same. Without retreading those arguments, the key point is that government departments and staff must bring into their focus the complexity and diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities.

Government has its internal structures, roles and responsibilities, hierarchies and cultures, each applying in different geographical areas. Similarly, our research on service delivery in Martu country in Western Australia has observed that ‘boundaries exist within the population on the ‘demand’ side of services. These include language group and ‘country’ origin, family, age (whether of not an individual is an elder), gender
and the primary settlement at which an individual is seen to be based.’ (McGrath et al 2009:8). Further observations are that ‘government and non-government programs are often targeted either at Aboriginal people or at Martu people, (but) both of these categories render invisible the differences that exist within these categorised groups or the hybridity that may exist between them. Often programs are labelled as Aboriginal but target Martu people only, or on the other hand, target the generic ‘other’ Aboriginal people and do not attract Martu participants. Aboriginal people from elsewhere in Australia working for service organisations are often expected to naturally form relationships and/or represent Martu people’ (McGrath et al 2009:9).

This example from Western Australia could equally apply to an analysis of government-community understandings in other states and territories. We would like to see future remote servicing arrangements properly recognise the complexity of Aboriginal identity. A blanket approach to policy for Aboriginal people or communities, will always fail to analyse the differences between people and the needs and challenges they face. And while we appreciate that this is a difficulty inherent to all public policy, a sophisticated approach is required to address it.

**Flexibility in service arrangements**

The service principles drawn from the work of DKCRC and summarised at the start of this paper are the basis for flexible services that are responsive to needs and demand. But implementing them requires a level of capability and autonomy on the part of service providers that has probably not been required before. Ninti One has been involved in the Remote Service Delivery (RSD) initiatives currently being implemented by Regional Operations Centres in some communities. We recommend a thorough review of processes and models being developed in these cases as they are certainly relevant to the aspirations expressed in the discussion paper.

**Support to young people to engage with education, training and employment**

In the area of education research, Ninti One provided a submission on the Indigenous Education Action Plan (IEAP). Our view is that government initiatives often concentrate on establishing a delivery system aimed at groups who are implicitly assumed to be passive recipients of the products of that system. Future remote participation and employment servicing arrangements would benefit from recognising and encouraging students, families and communities to be active choosers and influencers of the quality of their services, Recent international research indicates that a key factor in the higher performance of private schools in many countries where school attendance and performance falls short of international benchmarks is that parents demand more of teachers and other education staff (Tooley 2008). This is an important pointer as it shows that engagement with families is not just about getting them involved in supporting their children but also encouraging them to express their expectations of the education system.

There are complex challenges in improving pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through education and training to employment and enterprise. We are committed to a program of research under the CRC-REP that will contribute to better outcomes in this area. The research commences in early 2011 and aims to:

- Understand the factors that support transition into sustainable employment
- Identify the barriers to effective transition
- Compare and contrast the strengths and weaknesses of existing approaches
• Document Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander job seekers’ perspectives and experiences in order to identify key factors in particular results being achieved.

The research will build a picture of the system that supports pathways into work and enterprise, analysing the connections between different parts of the system, the behaviours that influence its effectiveness and the areas where specific improvements could be made that enhance the system as a whole. The methodology will draw greater attention to elements of the system that have not received consideration before, including conventions and standards in policy and professional practice and the engagement of family and community members.

In remote education, the CRC-REP will identify how education systems can be redesigned to better suit the needs of communities in remote regions by examining demand (what students, carers and the local economy need), supply (what systems need to provide, including better staff recruitment and retention), policy issues and alternative delivery models. For example, an area of focus is the idea that remote education systems would be more effective if they were constructed around social networks based on sparseness and high mobility, as well as taking into account the cultural and social practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Discussion paper question: How do we get more community ownership and responsibility?

Starting without a blank sheet

Too often, policy development starts with a blank sheet, as if the past reveals nothing about some of the basic questions presented for discussion in the paper. A better point of departure is the myriad of COAG trials, Regional Partnership Agreements and Shared Responsibility Agreements that were a feature of policy in the previous decade, along with their associated evaluations and reviews. Similarly, repeating an earlier message, the current FaHCSIA-led initiatives on remote service delivery and local planning of services offer much insight on the subjects raised in the discussion paper on this subject.

Although no two communities are the same, in our experience, community ownership and responsibility depend very much on local reactions to what has gone before. This means that service providers ought to reach a level of understanding of community perceptions on what worked best and what was least effective in collaboration with outside agencies in the past.

Coordination and integration within government

In remote areas with widely-dispersed populations and poor social and economic indicators, government agencies should certainly be playing a leading role in tackling the challenges that people face. The concerns and intentions expressed in the discussion paper are therefore important. However, government should recognise that, while a substantial part of its contribution will be in directly engaging with the issues, it also has a role in supporting those individuals and organisations that are well-placed to bridge the divide between government agencies and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In other words, government cannot and should do try to do everything, because this perpetuates some of the problems we see in remote Australia. An over-statement of the direct role of government can neglect the critical role of other agents of positive change in the Northern Territory. Results of research published by DKCRC provides pointers as to how this can be achieved in practice, especially the work of our partners in the Western Desert and the East Pilbara (McGrath et al. 2010) and the Northern Territory (Elvin et al. 2010).
Government has a propensity to roll out policy initiatives in a way that is experienced by citizens as inconsistent and sometimes incoherent waves of reform. A major lesson from the Northern Territory Emergency Response was that its implementation at the same time as the reform of local government in the Northern Territory only served to exacerbate the confusion of many local people. Despite worthwhile efforts to integrate and coordinate government programming between agencies and contractors through, Regional Operations Centres and Government Business Managers, there remain great challenges in achieving true coordination.

Our concern is that, once any concerted effort is over, government policy and practice will quickly return to the old silos. We would like to see continuing vigilance in this area. An important factor will be ensuring high standards of staff induction and performance management so that key individuals are supported to operate in a way that is coordinated and integrated with others and puts the needs of citizens at the centre of policy implementation. It is not good enough for government to, on the one hand, acknowledge that its own capacity in remote places has limitations, but on the other hand fail to provide adequate support to and management of the performance of key individuals in those locations.

Definitions of community

Most people living and working in remote Australia tend to use the term ‘community’ as a means of describing a settlement. In reality, notions of community are far more complex. Our experience is that some groups of Aboriginal people, such as outstation or town camp residents, will be comfortable with associating themselves with a physical location and naming the community as such. In other settings, such as larger settlements or regional groupings of people, language and kinship affiliations may be more appropriate as a means of identifying a community of people. Where a settlement includes more than one such group, then trying to define the community as a single population is inaccurate and counter-productive for service providers and external agencies.

This is a complex subject and the description above itself is simplistic. As included earlier in this paper, the example of DKCRC research with Martu people (McGrath et al 2010) provides an insight into the complexities of this subject. For the purposes of the discussion paper, the key point is that service arrangements need to be sensitive to local definitions of community.

The role of community in participation and employment services

The role of the community, however defined, in participation and employment services, is critical to their effectiveness. We have made comments earlier in this paper on how local people might best contribute to the development of policy and implementation of services in this field.

Ninti One has recently been working with FaHCSIA on projects relating to four of the priority communities under the National Indigenous Reform Agreement: Yuendumu, Ntaria, Amata and Mimili. Our experience to date is that the Local Implementation Plans (LIPs) developed in each location are valuable as a single over-arching document through which many initiatives can be taken across a wide range of topic areas. In some cases, the process of developing the LIPs itself has produced valuable knowledge on development goals for each community, within which economic development features prominently.
Conclusion

Although we value the intent that underlies the Discussion Paper ‘The Future of Remote Participation and Employment Servicing Arrangements’, and the extensive process of consultation that the government has introduced to support it, this response has pointed to key challenges that we feel are under-acknowledged. Most importantly, initiatives that have previously been undertaken in this field in recent years are in danger of being overlooked. The same applies to current work related to the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Service Delivery (RSD). Indeed, some questions posed in the paper appear to have been developed in ignorance of the experience and learning being gained in RSD projects.

Equally important will be the need for future arrangements to arrive at a sophisticated framework for working with clients in remote communities, to develop suitable policy and then to implement it in an effective, flexible and results-orientated way. This aim calls for government and service providers to make sure they have the capabilities necessary and to support and manage key individuals to achieve the desired results for remote communities.

References


Submitted by Ninti One Ltd
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