

Remote Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure: Factors affecting successful regional governance

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Abstract

The provision of adequate remote indigenous housing has long been a need. Attempts to meet this need have led to the development of a wide range of housing and housing-related programs in remote indigenous communities. There is a move from an external program-driven approach for housing to a focus on sustainable local and regional systems of governance in indigenous communities to support the delivery and recurrent maintenance of housing and infrastructure.

This paper will report on research into best practice case studies in remote area indigenous housing in WA and the NT. It includes community members' perceptions of current programs as well as suggestions for improvements. The lessons from the case studies provide direction for the development of strategies to support sustainable local and regional governance that, in turn, supports the development and maintenance of appropriate remote area indigenous housing.

1. Introduction

The research presented in this paper was conducted by the Remote Area Developments Group (RADG) for the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI). The questions that guided this research were drawn from AHURI's Research Agenda relating to "Indigenous Housing: The Housing System" (AHURI 2003) and focuses on program integration and community perceptions. The fieldwork for the research was undertaken during 2002/03 in remote Indigenous communities of Western Australia (WA) and the Northern Territory (NT). The draft project final report has been circulated for comment and a Positioning Paper, which was written in 2002 and provides background information, is available on the AHURI website www.ahuri.edu.au (Jardine-Orr et al. 2003). This paper presents some preliminary research findings of the research project with an emphasis on broadly applicable findings. The complete research findings will be available in the Final Report and Research and Policy Bulletin on the AHURI website.

The first section of this paper outlines the research process, including the research questions, selection of the Case Studies and the Methodology and the second section discusses the general Research Findings. The latter are, however, preliminary and incomplete as, at the time of writing, feedback has not yet been received from the Case Studies and User Group.

2. Research Process

The two questions that guided the research are:

- i. How can human service program integration in relation to housing assistance be improved to achieve a whole of government approach?
- ii. What are 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?

A literature review began at the inception of the project. It focussed on Indigenous housing and governance history, policies, programs and key national policy developments that give direction to policy. Due to the rapidly changing nature of housing policy, particularly in Western Australia, the

literature review became an ongoing process, essential to an understanding of the context of the project.

A User Group was established, to guide the project through all the necessary tasks and to ensure that the research is relevant to policy. The User Group, in most cases, also ensured access to up-to-date information sources. User Group meetings have been held in Perth and Darwin and regular contact maintained throughout the project. The final report has been circulated to members of the User Group which include:

- The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission;
- The Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services (Darwin Office);
- The WA Department of Housing and Works (Aboriginal Housing and Infrastructure Unit);
- The WA Department of Indigenous Affairs;
- The WA Department of the Premier and Cabinet;
- NT Dept of Community Development, Sports & Cultural Affairs – Indigenous Housing & Essential Services Unit (IHANT secretariat)

The selection of the final case studies was determined by three factors: first, input from the User Group, second, the personal contacts of the research team with the community and regional organisation members and third, the cost and logistics involved in visiting the communities. It was decided that selection should include two communities, two regional (umbrella) organisations, two ATSIC Regional Councils with IHANT and AHIC to provide context for the field study. The case studies were also selected to represent cases of best practice asset management. A fairly lengthy process preceded the selection of the final case studies. Secondary information was collected on a short-list of possible case studies and these were further refined. Table 1 shows the case studies that were agreed upon:

Table 1: Case Studies

Organisation	Western Australia	Northern Territory
State/Territory Housing Provider	AHID (within Department of Housing & Works)	IHANT (within Department of Community Development, Sport & Cultural Affairs)
Regional Council	Kullarri Regional Council	Central Remote Regional Council
Regional Organisation	Mamabulanjin Aboriginal Corporation	Tangentyere Council
Community	Lombadina	Papunya
Community	Djarindjin	Laramba
Regional Agreement	Tjurubalan Comprehensive Regional Agreement (The COAG WA Site Project)	West MacDonnells model (Wangka Willurara Regional Agreement)

Secondary data was collected on a far wider range of potential case studies than those reflected in the table above. In addition, a range of telephone interviews were conducted with key people in the potential case studies. This information was collated into profiles for each potential case study community. These profiles consist of information relevant for fieldwork including details of the Community Organisation/s, Chairperson, Councillors, Staff and details of relevant agencies. The profiles contain contact information, information on the location of the community as well as housing-related programs. The Community Profiles were an invaluable fieldwork tool and were continually updated as new information emerged. In their draft form they were sent to each of the case studies for confirmation and approval of the details contained therein.

To answer the research questions, a multi-level approach was adopted. This can best be explained as shown in Table 2:

Table 2: Levels of Research

Level	Information gathered	Research Methods
Commonwealth (FACS, OATSIS, excluding ATSIC/ATSIS)	Policy and Programs	Literature Review, Telephone Interviews

State/Territory (including ATSI/ATSIS State Offices)	Policy, Programs and their implementation	Literature Review, Telephone Interviews, Interviews, Meetings and email correspondence
Regional Council	Policy, Programs and their implementation	Literature Review, Telephone Interviews, Interviews and Meetings
Regional Service Providers	Programs, their implementation and perceptions	Literature Review, Telephone Interviews, Interviews, Meetings and email correspondence
Community Council/Committee	Program Implementation and Perceptions	Telephone Interviews, Interviews, Meetings
Community Housing Management Staff	Program Implementation and Perceptions	Telephone Interviews, Interviews, Meetings

It was originally intended to workshop the issues of program integration and community housing management with community members. The rationale for this approach is that housing programs should show an improvement in community members' housing and community members would be well placed to comment on community housing management and related issues. However, the aims of the research were not sufficiently tangible for community members to perceive them as having benefit for them and community workshops did not occur.

Four fieldwork trips were undertaken:

- October 2002: Broome (ATSIC, Mamabulanjin Aboriginal Corporation), Lombadina, Djarindjin, Wiramanu (Balgo);
- November 2002: Alice Springs (ATSIC, DCDSCA, IHANT, Tangentyere Council Ngaanyatjarra Council Head Office), Laramba, Papunya,;
- May 2003: Broome (ATSIC, Mamabulanjin), Lombadina, Djarindjin;
- June/July 2003: Alice Springs (ATSIC, DCDSCA, IHANT Tangentyere), Laramba, Papunya.

Social Assessment of the case studies is the primary method used to answer the research questions. Social Assessment draws from the applied social sciences, particularly applied anthropology (Taylor, Bryan & Goodrich 1995). The difference between Social Assessment and other forms of social research is that it is inductive rather than deductive and is issues-orientated. This makes the method particularly useful where an investigative approach is required. Another aspect of the method is that it is not linear but iterative and cumulative.

Concurrent with the writing of the Positioning Paper mentioned above, relevant secondary information on the Case Studies was collected and telephone interviews conducted. Key Issues relating to housing program integration and community governance guided the fieldwork. This ensures that the research is focused and relevant to the research topic. As mentioned above, this is an iterative process and the Key Issues in the study often evolve as the study progresses.

Two levels of Key Issues guided the research – first the Key Issues that apply to remote Indigenous housing in both Western Australia and the Northern Territory and possibly other jurisdictions as well; and, second, State/Territory – specific key issues. This paper concentrates on the Key Issues and related Research Findings that apply to both WA and the NT. These Key Issues are:

- The Program Integration Mechanisms, both current and emerging, such as the Housing Bilateral Agreements, the Comprehensive Regional Agreements and as well as the Central Remote (Papunya) Model and perceptions of these mechanisms;
- Housing Management at program, project and community level and;
- Capacity-Building/Empowerment.

Social Assessments do not routinely deal with as institutionally complex a program environment as presented by this project. The team therefore developed an additional tool to understand and analyse the institutional environment which we have called "Institutional Mapping". This developed out of a an organigram of the Commonwealth Indigenous Housing Programs in 2000 which appeared in the Indigenous Funding Inquiry (Commonwealth Grants Commission 2001 p.151) and a brief description of institutional analysis on the World Bank website (World Bank 2002).

The need for a tool to portray the complex layers of organisations and programs emerged prior to the first round of fieldwork. The research team found that a schematic portrayal of the different organisations and programs assisted them to understand the relationships between agencies and programs. The research team drew up organisational maps to represent their understanding of the interrelationships and workshopped these during the first round of fieldwork. Feedback was obtained from different sources and the institutional maps continually updated during fieldwork to capture inputs. Early in the fieldwork, the team realised that two types of institutional maps were needed:

- an organisational chart which illustrates the formal relationship between agencies and programs; and
- a process map which illustrates the flow of funding and information between organisations.

Diagrams 1 and 2 illustrate the institutional mapping tool.

These institutional maps provided a useful tool and were workshopped at meetings. Many people commented that they had never before understood how different organisations related to each other. Individuals who understood the overall Indigenous housing institutional structure of Western Australia and the Northern Territory were few and far between.

The next section of this report presents the Research Findings that relate to the Case Studies of both the WA and the NT.

3 Preliminary Research Findings

The preliminary research findings are presented with reference to each of the Key Issues mentioned above.

- Program Integration Mechanisms;
- Housing Management at program, project and community level and;
- Capacity-Building/Empowerment.

3.1 Program Integration Mechanisms

At the outset, the research team identified the complexity of the Indigenous housing system as a key issue affecting program integration. In the past, Commonwealth and State/Territory agencies attempted to address remote Indigenous housing with a range of programs, hence the current need for program integration mechanisms. The most significant of these in WA and the NT are the Housing Bilateral Agreements developed under the Commonwealth State Housing Agreement. The main feature of these agreements is that it permits the pooling of funding from a number of sources so programs can be rationalised. While these agreements have made a difference in both WA and NT, there is still a need for greater program flexibility and integration at community level.

Most of the current Indigenous housing and housing-related programs are designed and implemented on a State or Territory-wide basis. There is a need for more flexible implementation of programs to meet specific community conditions. This more flexible implementation of programs within communities would enable each community to integrate and tailor programs to suit their conditions.

Research Finding 1:

The complexity of the Indigenous housing program and policy environment inhibits the development of integrated and holistic approaches. The housing Bilateral Agreements in the NT and WA have improved program integration but there is a need for flexible program implementation within communities.

Policy Implication:

Greater program flexibility would enable communities to integrate program to suit their needs.

3.2 Housing Management

As far as housing management and maintenance are concerned, both WA and the NT have developed housing maintenance programs although they are often only implemented in pilot programs. In general, these housing management and maintenance programs are mostly focussed on asset management rather than empowering the community to manage and maintain their community assets through a transfer of skills and knowledge.

Research Finding 2:

Effective housing management and maintenance programs have been developed in both WA and the NT. However, their scope needs to be broadened to build capacity within communities and regional organisations, and should make use of existing skills.

Policy Implication: *Maintenance and management programs should include a regular monitoring system and should emphasise the use and development of local skills.*

The mechanism of delivery of Indigenous housing and housing-related programs is usually through a Program Manager who tends to be far removed from the community. For example, the NAHS (National Aboriginal Health Strategy) is currently delivered outside the pooled funding arrangements of IHANT and AHIC. It is program managed by Parsons Brinkerhoff (PB) in Western Australia and by Arup in the Northern Territory. For the Case Study Communities in the Northern Territory, the NAHS is locally project managed by GHD (Hanley pers. comm. 2003).

This 'program management at a distance' was cited by all the communities visited as an obstacle to effective housing management. It was perceived by some communities as paternalistic toward Indigenous communities – planning *for* and not *with* communities.

Research Finding 3:

Communities seek greater control of housing programs at local and regional levels. Program and Project Management is probably best placed to serve their clients when at a regional or local level rather than at a State/Territory level.

Policy Implication:

Shift Program and Project Management from a State/Territory level to a regional or local level.

The communities included in this research project were selected as best practice examples of remote indigenous communities yet displayed varying levels of management capacity. Nevertheless, the clear message from all Case Study communities was a desire to be more involved in decisions that affect them and a commitment to taking more responsibility for these decisions. This issue of the "ownership" or control of the housing process was flagged by the research team but was put most strongly by the Town Clerk of one of the communities when he was questioning the behaviour of the Program and Project Managers. He said government agencies, program and project managers are ultimately there to provide housing and housing-related infrastructure to communities. Despite this, the perception exists, among these program and project managers, that the government agency is the client or customer and not the community. He stated that the community should be treated as the customer and be able to manage the housing process themselves (Hanley 2003).

Research Finding 4:

Many Program and Project Managers treat the grants administrator rather than the community as the housing "client or customer". The result is that Community Councils are often treated as passive grant beneficiaries rather than active participants in the housing process.

Policy Implications:

The provision of housing in a community should be seen as a partnership between the

- *Indigenous Community,*
- *Program and Project managers, and,*
- *Government agencies (who should have an 'enabling' rather than 'controlling' role).*

Relevant program and project contractual arrangements should be reviewed to reflect this partnership and capture these roles and responsibilities in contracts. Community councils should be empowered to manage their relationships with government agencies, program/project managers and others.

3.3 Capacity-Building/Empowerment

The research team has identified the lack of a general "community development" approach to remote indigenous housing. A 'community development' or 'empowering' approach is usually implicit when dealing with a disadvantaged and underprivileged population. "Community development" is a broad concept that encompasses the concepts of capacity-building and empowerment. It includes increasing people's choices and opportunities which are few and far between in remote areas.

Economic opportunities are rare in remote areas. The construction, repair and maintenance of housing and related infrastructure present one such opportunity. The research team found a tendency among government agencies and program and project managers to underestimate the skills and expertise in remote indigenous communities as well as their desire to improve their situation. Remote Indigenous communities should be assisted to maximise these available opportunities.

Research finding 5:

Housing and the related infrastructure provides one of the few vehicles for community development in remote areas. In addition, there are real opportunities for remote Indigenous communities to become more economically sustainable through the construction, maintenance and repair of housing, infrastructure and other services.

Policy Implications:

Where possible, programs and projects in remote areas should include training in skills useful to the community and should use relevant existing community skills .

Program Managers should be required to develop and update regularly a skills audit of each of their regions.

To support indigenous communities in remote areas where there are few economic opportunities, reasonable preference should be given to a tender from an indigenous community and assistance could be provided in preparation of tender documents.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the research team is of the opinion that the Indigenous Housing system should undergo a reorientation from a focus on the supply of physical infrastructure to a process of developing and empowering the community through the supply of housing and related infrastructure.

An alternative approach would, inter alia, include the following:

- A partnership between communities, government agencies and other organisations;
- The identification of existing capacities and capacity-building to build on these;
- Community participation and empowerment;
- A focus on employment creation (at market rates) in remote communities;
- The development of the required skills within communities to ensure that repairs and maintenance occur and to reduce the need to import these skills.

As mentioned above, these research findings are preliminary and comments from the Case Studies and User Group have not yet been incorporated. The full research findings will be available in the final report which will be available on the AHURI website www.ahuri.edu.au when complete.

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