

THE END OF THE LINE – A REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON POLICY AND THE BENEFIT OF LINKAGES BETWEEN AGENCIES

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What do we mean by 'The end of the line'? Agencies talk about the 'community' as being 'at the end of the line' in service delivery or at the 'grass-roots'. But I say the end of the line is now, our communities can take no more. We, and I mean government agencies, NGOs and communities collectively, must make a new beginning. And we must begin with the community. I want to talk with you today about how we make that new beginning, how communities must be an equal partner with agencies in policy making and service delivery, and what will be the benefits.

I'll begin by talking about ATSIC. Our role is often misunderstood by many other agencies, and even by some people in communities. But we are a unique organisation. We are an organisation in Australia that has a direct relationship with communities through our program delivery, the administration field arm, and, most importantly, the Elected Representatives. Whilst Governments are primarily responsible for the delivery of services, ATSIC is a supplementary provider but also the key agency for providing advice. We are the peak Indigenous body that has a very clear role under the ATSIC Act where we are responsible for monitoring government agencies' programs and providing advice on policy and programs that impact upon the quality of life of our Indigenous peoples. Yet few government agencies come along to our Regional Council meetings. I ask you, how many of your agencies know about, or plan your Indigenous-related programs and policies by the ATSIC Regional Plans? These plans directly reflect regional and community needs and aspirations.

I don't have to tell you about how our communities are living on a knife-edge. I have no doubt that all agencies have the political will and intent to get things right for communities. But I believe that many agencies don't realise the impact and the implications of their actions and policies on communities. We have a problem here. On one hand there are the agencies, government and non-government, that have the funding, resources, and years of knowledge and skills. On the other hand there are our communities that are suffering and are bombarded with a range of changing and, at times, complicated policies and programs. But there are strengths in many communities that are either not recognised by agencies or not being utilised to maximum benefit.

This cannot continue. Entering its second decade, ATSIC launched what we call the Rights Framework. It means the Right to Resources. It means Autonomy Rights, to determine the way we live and control our social, economic and political development. It means Equity Rights of full

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participation in policy making and service delivery. It means finding the Right Foundation to Rebuild our Communities.

You may be asking, well that's all well and good but how does it affect linkages between agencies? It means that all agencies have to recognise the community is a significant partner and link in making policies and delivering services. The community must be at the beginning of the line, not just seen as an entity to consult at the end of the line. It means that right in the very beginning, agencies and communities have to agree on certain principles. These principles are:

- **Identity:** Our place in the world, as an individual, part of a family, a clan, a community, a society. Agencies must recognise community dynamics and groups are important factors in the success of failure or policy and programs. I ask you to think - where do you, as a public servant, fit in to our community?
- **Rights:** We have inherent rights that must be recognised - not just human rights but our political rights, our Indigenous rights, our cultural rights. The right to determine the way in which we live. The right to resources and land entitlements. Again I ask you to think - do your agency's policies reflect these rights?
- **Access:** All Australians have the right to receive essential services, such as education, health, good drinking water, etc. Our people have citizenship rights where we are due particular access to overcome the continuing disadvantage amongst our peoples. Is your agency adequately fulfilling this principle of access for our people?

At the same time communities must recognise their own failings and strengths and be prepared to tackle the hard issues and recognise the benefits that agencies can bring. As well, agencies must recognise communities as an equal partner in the process and see that communities have a lot to contribute. They have to accept they have an obligation to come to the table and communities have to accept that they need to work with agencies towards a common goal. All parties need to become outcomes focused - not just aiming for more houses, or more money to be spent, but focussing on long-term improvements to quality of life. Above all the relationship must be one of negotiation. Not just consultation, we - agencies and communities - must negotiate to get the best positive outcomes and benefits for our communities.

This means a major mindset change for agencies, and for communities too. In the NT we have examples of communities and agencies sitting at the one table. One example is IHANT. Another is the NT Health Framework Agreement with the Indigenous Health Forum. And we are currently negotiating a Partnership Agreement between ATSIC and the NT Government. There are also ATSIC Regional Plans and I urge you to contact the local Regional Council in your area and seek a copy. These plans are key documents to be used as a linkage between all agencies and the community.

What are the benefits of these linkages? If implemented well we might see:

- *Community-driven* programs and policy;
- *Partnerships* as the key with the community seen as a partner in the process;
- *Sharing* of information and resources;
- *Enhancement* networks & relationships;
- *Awareness* and real *Understanding* of community needs and aspirations;
- *Capacity Building* of our communities;.
- *Planning* for the future, not just short-term knee-jerk reactions to urgent situations.

Now it's over to you as pivotal links in the 'line'. I'd like you to break into groups and think about these questions:

- What are some more benefits, extra to those in the above list, that your agency would gain in improving linkages with other agencies and the community?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of your agency in embarking on linkages processes with other agencies?
- How could your agency improve its current processes in dealing with other agencies that will ultimately benefit the community

