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A new model of inclusion? Centrelink's development of income support service delivery for remote Indigenous communities

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Table of Contents

Abbreviations and Acronyms	iii
Acknowledgments	iii
Abstract	iii
Introduction	1
Administrative inclusion: A brief history	1
Centrelink's development of service delivery mechanisms	2
Findings.....	3
Implementation.....	3
Conclusion.....	4
References.....	5

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

ANU	The Australian National University
CAEPR	Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research
CAP	Community Agents Program
CSC	Customer Service Centre
DSS	Department of Social Security
RASC	Remote Area Service Centres

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Abstract

When Centrelink was established in 1997, it inherited from the Department of Social Security a model of service delivery for Indigenous communities in remote areas built around relatively large social security offices based in urban centres and agents based in Indigenous communities. Some dissatisfaction with this model has led Centrelink to experiment with additional ways of delivering services to remote Indigenous communities. In particular, it has piloted the development of some very small Centrelink offices, or Customer Service Centres (CSCs), located in some of the larger Indigenous communities.

This paper reports on a consultancy undertaken in 2002 which provided a formative evaluation of the first two such small CSCs. It outlines plans, originating in the 2001 budget, for the establishment over the next four years of another 12 such small CSCs servicing Indigenous people in remote areas. I argue that these small CSCs are a significant development in the way in which Indigenous people in remote areas have been included in the social security system over the last 40 years. While perhaps not an entirely new model of inclusion of Indigenous people in the social security system *per se*, they are a significant development in the service delivery model through which, in practice, this inclusion occurs.

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Introduction

Indigenous Australians were legislatively excluded from the Australian social security system as it gradually developed in the first half of the twentieth century. This legislative exclusion came to an end in 1959, except for the 'nomadic and primitive', and by 1966 it had been totally dismantled. From this time social security legislation made no reference to Indigenous people at all. Inclusion in the social security system for Indigenous Australians has, however, taken many forms over the years since and this paper reports on a development in recent times in the way in which Centrelink has sought to service Indigenous people in remote areas through small Remote Area Service Centres (RASCs).

I will begin with a brief history of the different ways in which Indigenous people in remote areas have been administratively included in the social security system since the legislative changes of the late 1950s and 1960s. I will then focus on the development of the RASCs under Centrelink since 2001 and on the findings of a formative evaluation of two precursor small remote area offices I undertook for Centrelink in 2002. I will suggest that while the RASCs are not an entirely new administrative model for the inclusion of Indigenous Australians in the social security system, they are a significant development in the service delivery mechanisms through which inclusion occurs.

Administrative inclusion: A brief history

In 1960, inclusion in the social security system for Indigenous people was differentiated, administratively and geographically, as follows:

Payment will generally be made direct to the aborigine in New South Wales and Victoria. Where the pensioner requests, or where the Director of Social Services considers it desirable, the whole or portion of the pension may be paid to some other person or authority on behalf of the pensioner. The same principles will apply to the payment of maternity allowances.

Where aborigines are living in a controlled community such as a Church mission, Government settlement or pastoral property, pensions will be paid on the institutional basis, i.e. portion will be paid to the aborigine for his own personal use and the balance will be paid to the authority controlling the community for the maintenance of the aborigine.

Because of the various stages of advancement of the aborigines, the personal or pocket money component will not be uniform in all cases but will vary from 10s. a week in the more remote areas to 33s. a week on the Government settlements in Queensland and on certain of the Church missions where the aborigines are sufficiently advanced to be able to handle that amount of money themselves.

While the Government has agreed that the amount of pocket money may for the present be less than 33s. a week in some cases its objective is that, in the course of time, all aborigines in controlled communities will be advanced to the stage where they can properly handle the full institutional rate of 33s. per week (Social Services Journal 1960: 3)

The maximum rate of age or invalid pension was, at the time, 95s. (shillings) (Kewley 1973: 307). Thus some Indigenous people in remote areas were receiving only a little over 10 per cent of their pension entitlement as a direct payment, with the remainder being directed to third parties.

This system of third party payments, with pocket money, persisted through the 1960s as a way of delivering social security entitlements to Indigenous people in remote areas. It began to be challenged in 1968 when W.C. Wentworth, as Commonwealth minister with responsibility for Indigenous affairs as well as social security, instructed that progress towards direct payments to Indigenous people in remote areas be accelerated. Under the Whitlam government in the early 1970s, a number of developments contributed to this gradually becoming more of a realistic possibility. Among these was the regionalisation of social security administration, which saw social security offices opened for the first time in places like Alice Springs, Mt Isa and Broome. A further development was the appointment of out-posted district officers of the social security department in Katherine and Tennant

Creek. Beginning in 1975, Aboriginal Liaison Officers began to be appointed in some of these offices, with specific responsibility within the social security administration for liaising with Indigenous clients. Even so the ability of the social security department to deal directly with Indigenous clients in remote areas was very limited and departmental officers still found themselves often dealing with third party intermediaries acting on behalf of Indigenous people (Sanders 1982, 1986).

Even as late as 1980, there were still some instances of Indigenous people's social security entitlement payments being made to a third party on their behalf. A review of three mission communities in the Kimberley in 1980–81, for example, still listed Indigenous people's social security payments as a very significant 'source of mission income' (MacFarlane & Foley 1981). This prompted a couple of cartoons in the newsletter of the Kimberley Land Council which, from their tone, were at least implicitly very critical of this arrangement (see Fig. 1). Social security payments to a third party were clearly no longer seen as acceptable as a general approach by the social security system to the servicing of Indigenous people in remote areas.

In the mid 1980s, following a report from a departmental Remote Area Task Force, a Community Agents Program (CAP) was developed by the DSS in which it began training and paying the employees of community councils and other Indigenous organisations to undertake social security-related work (Remote Area Task Force 1986). This was clearly a major further development in the service delivery mechanism through which Indigenous people in remote areas were to be included in the social security system, in addition to more regional offices and departmental Indigenous Liaison Officers. Under CAP, relations with third party intermediaries were to be regularised and limited to acceptable servicing roles.

By 1997, when social security administration was divided between a policy department and a service delivery agency, Centrelink, the number of agents trained and paid for by the administration in Indigenous communities under CAP was approximately 140. Together with social security offices in urban centres like Darwin, Cairns, Mt Isa, Port Hedland and Alice Springs and in smaller towns like Katherine, Tennant Creek, Kununurra, Broome, Derby, Karatha, Normanton and Thursday Island, agents were the main service delivery mechanism through which Indigenous people in remote areas were administratively included in the social security system. Agents extended the social security administrative network beyond the urban centres of sparsely settled northern and central Australia into at least the larger discrete Indigenous communities.

Centrelink's development of service delivery mechanisms

Centrelink quickly developed a somewhat different organisational style from DSS, which it liked to think was more focused on customers and service delivery. As part of that change, Centrelink, in its early years, considerably expanded a second community agents scheme which began during the later years of DSS and focused on rural and regional servicing (Vardon 2000: 102–3). However, the Indigenous-focused CAP was not expanding at that time. This may have reflected some reservations about whether CAP was achieving value for money as a mechanism for delivering social security services to discrete Indigenous communities. In some places agents were paid for up to 35 hours per week of work, but they were not formal decision-makers under the Social Security Act and they were not on-line on the computer-based Centrelink information system. There was, thus, a definite limit both to the amount of assistance that agents could give customers and, indeed, to the level of assistance they could give to the decision-making Centrelink employees with whom they also interacted. A couple of Centrelink area offices began experimenting with the out-posting of Centrelink employees to Indigenous communities. These employees could be on-line on the Centrelink computer-based information system and, as well as personally assisting customers, could also make decisions under the Social Security Act. Two instances in which such arrangements had developed were in Palm Island, off Townsville in Queensland, and in Maningrida, on the north coast of Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. Both arrangements seemed to be working quite well and in the 2001 budget a commitment was made to review these two existing small community-based offices and to

open 12 new small Remote Area Service Centres (RASCs) over the next four years. In early 2002, I undertook a consultancy for Centrelink to evaluate the pilot small offices in Maningrida and Palm Island and, on the basis of this, make recommendations about the future of these two offices and the RASCs in general.

Findings

The most important finding of the consultancy was that service delivery in Maningrida and Palm Island had improved considerably. This flowed largely from the workers being on-line, able to respond immediately and in person to customer queries and, at least in some instances, being able to make relevant decisions. The perceptions of Indigenous customers in the two communities were certainly of a significant improvement in service delivery. Relations with Indigenous organisations in the communities, including the community councils, also seemed to benefit. More critical findings in the evaluation related to internal office employment structures, links with parent Customer Service Centres (CSCs), and costing, training and information technology issues (there were some limitations in the on-line computer capabilities at Maningrida and Palm Island, unbeknown to customers). This combination of supportive and critical findings formed the basis for a model of RASC's which had four elements:

- at least two Centrelink staff;
- full IT functionality on site;
- a strong ongoing relationship with a parent CSC; and
- a strong partnership with a local representative Indigenous body (Sanders 2002).

Implementation

Despite the fact that this model required the commitment of more resources than budgeted by government in 2001, Centrelink has since implemented this model derived from the consultancy, both at Maningrida and Palm Island and at three new RASC in Laverton and Halls Creek in Western Australia and in Yarrabah in Queensland. Indeed, by allocating a new 'personal advisor' and an office manager to these RASCs, Centrelink has effectively increased the preferred model described above from two to four staff members.

It is noteworthy that, rather than being in totally discrete Indigenous communities, the two new Western Australian RASCs are located in open roadside towns which have high Indigenous proportions of their total population. The 2002 evaluation anticipated that some RASCs probably would, and should, end up in such locations. These towns are often good service points for Indigenous populations, where the numbers are as large or larger than those in any one discrete Indigenous community. An additional advantage is that office and staff housing accommodation can sometimes be easier to obtain—though Centrelink emphasises that this in itself is not a criteria for the placement of RASCs.

Another nine RASCs are in various stages of planning and Centrelink intends to try to open three of these each year for the next three years. Together with the existing RASCs and some very small CSCs in places like Derby, Tennant Creek, Normanton and Thursday Island, this will mean that, three years from now, Centrelink will have almost 20 very small offices servicing remote areas of sparsely settled northern and central Australia. This is a significant development from the time of Centrelink's establishment six years ago and a massive development from the days when Indigenous people in remote areas were serviced through third party payments, remnants of which continued until only 20 years ago.

One final note on Centrelink's development of service delivery for remote Indigenous communities relates to the reinvigoration of the CAP. In the 2003 budget, it was announced that another 50 agent sites would be opened in the next two years, bringing the numbers of CAP agents up to approximately 200. Having had virtually no growth in CAP since Centrelink's establishment, this too appears to be a significant development in remote area servicing. Now that the numbers of very small CSCs in remote areas is growing, Centrelink seems more assured that it can make good use of agents.

Conclusion

Inclusion in the social security system for Indigenous people in remote areas has taken a number of different forms since the 1960s. While not being a totally new model of inclusion, Centrelink's development of income support service delivery mechanisms for Indigenous people in these areas has been substantial and significant. It has built on some initiatives of the 1970s and 1980s, such as more regional offices, Indigenous Liaison Offices and CAP. But through the RASCs and, more lately, through an expansion of CAP, Centrelink is genuinely changing the existing patterns of service delivery inclusion.

Fig. 1. Cartoons from Kimberley Land Council Newsletter, 1981





Source: *Kimberley Land Council Newsletter*, (2) 1, March 1981.

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