Submission to the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA): Remote Engagement Program

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Overview

This submission concerns the design of the new Remote Engagement Program that aims to increase the economic participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in remote Australia. It emphasises the value of situating the Indigenous volunteering landscape at the centre of the new program design. Several factors can inhibit the participation of Indigenous Australians in the mainstream economy; these range from inadequate training of Indigenous job seekers and a lack of cultural competency among employers to structural disadvantages such as the digital divide and infrastructural limitations in remote Australia. However, closing the gap in employment not only requires up-skilling of Indigenous participants of the new program, but also an appreciation of the economic and social value of the Indigenous volunteering landscape in the country. Volunteering inculcates important transferrable skills that can be further honed, recognized, and capitalized to increase Indigenous participation in the Australian economy. In the development of this new program, we recommend that the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA):

➢ Recognise the importance of volunteering as a pathway to employment - and in particular - the socio-economic value of Indigenous volunteering in remote Australia.

➢ Scope and attend to the range of skill sets that are inherent in Indigenous forms of volunteering within remote Australia, through a locally embedded and consultative process. This would assist in
  • Offering vocational support that capitalizes on the Indigenous skill set inherent in volunteering and bridges the employability gap.

➢ Empower and work in conjunction with Indigenous volunteer and community networks in the process of locating and offering alternative 'placement' sites for participants in lieu of paid employment.

➢ Take into consideration infrastructure limitations - such as the lack of proper workstations at home and the digital divide - in offering relevant non-vocational support to Indigenous participants of the program. This includes:
  • Working with the Indigenous volunteer and community networks to locate and use existing sites, such as schools or community centres, as alternative workstations.

➢ Conceive of 'non-vocational' support as a two-way process that entails reaching out to both Indigenous participants of the program as well as mainstream employers. The latter requires:
  • Building the cultural competency of mainstream employers vis-à-vis Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander job seekers and their skill set.
  • Promoting an understanding of Indigenous voluntary activities as a form of cultural obligation in the community, and the need for a flexible approach that appreciates the importance of these commitments.

- Developing a language, in consultation with the Elders of the community, that appreciates culturally relevant nuances and definitions of 'work' that may encompass Indigenous voluntary activities.[1]

About the Remote Engagement Program

The Minister of Indigenous Australians, Hon Ken Wyatt AM MP has announced the Remote Engagement Program will replace the existing Community Development Program from 2023. The aim of the Remote Engagement Program is to provide Indigenous Australians in remote Australia with better support and greater choice to participate in the Australian economy through employment. The new program envisages an approach that is tailored to the specific needs and concerns of Indigenous Australians in remote communities. The new program follows from the Australian government's commitment to the National Agreement on Closing the Gap – which, in consultation with Indigenous Australians, centres on four priority reforms: 1) partnership and shared decision-making 2) building Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled service sector 3) transforming mainstreaming government services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and 4) building better data infrastructure to support decision-making.

About this Submission

This submission was drafted by Volunteering Australia in collaboration with the State and Territory peak volunteering bodies, and the cross-sector Indigenous Practice and Policy Working Group. We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the development of the Remote Engagement Program by the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA).

The submission follows our previous advocacy efforts on behalf of First Nations People, which includes our submission to the Indigenous Voice Consultation[2] calling on the government to honour the Uluru Statement from the Heart in public policy development and enactment. It also follows submissions to the Pathways and Participation Opportunities for Indigenous Australians in Employment and Business Inquiry[3] and the Indigenous Skills and Employment Program.[4] It builds on our previous advocacy to recognize (mainstream) volunteering and Indigenous volunteering as important means of economic inclusion and participation.

Currently, we are working on the redesign of the Volunteer Management Activity in collaboration with the Australian government, which includes a focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

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[1] Not So Simple: Enhancing Indigenous Economic Opportunity, ACTU Submission to the Pathways and Participation Opportunities for Indigenous Australians in Employment and Business Inquiry, January 2020

[2] Submission to the Indigenous Voice Consultation, Volunteering Australia, March 2021

[3] Submission to the Pathways and Participation Opportunities for Indigenous Australians in Employment and Business Inquiry, Volunteering Australia, April 2021

[4] Submission to Indigenous Skills and Employment Program, Volunteering Australia, September 2021

communities and a commitment to empowering their participation in volunteering.[5] As a part of this endeavour, Volunteering Australia as well as the state and territory peak bodies are in the process of developing Reconciliation Action Plans, in coordination with Reconciliation Australia[6], to examine existing barriers to Indigenous participation within their organisations and to develop a strategy for more inclusive engagement. Our internal engagements and external advocacy will feed into the development of a National Strategy for Volunteering[7] which will retain a similar focus on the recognition and inclusion of Indigenous communities within the volunteering domain.

Submission to the National Indigenous Australians Agency

Introduction

This submission responds to the Discussion Paper on the Remote Engagement Program which aims to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in remote Australia have improved access to employment opportunities. In particular, the new program aims to improve on the following priority areas based on the feedback of current CDP participants and remote communities: 1) placements that help participants become "job ready" and acquire in-demand skills, 2) assistance required for "job-ready" participants to compete for and obtain long-term employment, 3) access to and availability of vocational training that is fit-for-purpose and attuned to the culturally specific needs of Indigenous Australians, 4) non-vocational support to overcome barriers to employment, and 5) an approach that would enable participants to better meet their Mutual Obligations requirements in the new envisaged program.[8] By considering the complex landscape in remote communities, the new program seeks to provide alternative and flexible engagement opportunities in order to overcome participation barriers.

The new Remote Engagement Program would be well-positioned to cater to the needs of its participants if it factors the centrality of Indigenous volunteering in remote communities. Volunteering can be a cultural way of life for Indigenous Australians in remote communities. Attending to the significance of these activities would make the new program more attuned to serve the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in remote Australia and their cultural needs. It would also allow the new program to build upon the social capital and skill-set inherent in these voluntary activities, by capitalizing on its strengths and covering the gaps required to prepare job-ready candidates for

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[5]Volunteer Management Activity Summary | Department of Social Services, Australian Government (dss.gov.au)

[6] https://www.reconciliation.org.au/

[7] Volunteering Australia has been funded by the Australian Department of Social Services to develop a National Strategy for Volunteering which will be designed and owned by the volunteering ecosystem and will provide a blueprint for a reimagined future for volunteering in Australia.

[8] The Community Development Program, National Indigenous Australians Agency

New Remote Engagement Program: Discussion Paper, National Indigenous Australians Agency

employment. In the development of the new Remote Engagement Program, therefore, Volunteering Australia, recommends a consideration of the following issues:

The Socio-economic Value of Volunteering for Indigenous Communities

Volunteering offers valuable pathways to employability for first-time as well as transitioning and returning job seekers. Accumulated evidence from organisations and peak bodies suggest that volunteering can impart valuable transferrable skills and signal important capabilities to employers. It can also provide critical experience and professional exposure to different work sites, akin to the process of 'shadowing' or 'on-the-job training' in many organisations.[9] Voluntary activities, often informally organized within kinship and structured outside of mainstream organisations, are particularly salient in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The first National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey (NATSIS) conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 1994 found that Indigenous communities engage in voluntary work at a higher rate at 26.9 per cent than non-Indigenous Australians at 19 per cent respectively.[10]

Research indicates that volunteering is a primary means through which community is constituted and ownership to place is established among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.[11] Indigenous forms of volunteering constitute a unique form of social capital in Australian society and deserve recognition in their full breadth. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people regularly contribute with their voluntary time and effort on a range of issues from health, education, arts, sports, youth, tourism, economic development, and criminal justice.[12] They serve on various boards, committees, government inquiries and consultative bodies at local, state, and national levels as a form of cultural obligation.

As a result of their voluntary activities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people possess privileged knowledge and embedded insights on cultural tourism, land management, water management, wild food harvesting, pest control, as well as community care and rehabilitation.[13] At the same time,

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[9]See for example, https://www.nationalservice.gov/sites/default/files/upload/employment_research_report.pdf; and Volunteering could be your pathway to employment, My Future, 2 June 2021; Proof that Volunteering Pays Off for Job Hunters, Forbes, 24 June 2013

[10] The 1994 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey, Findings and Future Prospects, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, ANU, p 67

[11] Spencer, M., & Christie, M. (2017). Collaboratively rethinking the nature and practice of voluntary service in three North Australian aboriginal communities. Third Sector Review, 23(1), 9–27.

[12] National Volunteer Skills Centre (2007), Subject Guide: Indigenous Australians and Volunteering – Take a Closer Look, Volunteering Australia, Melbourne

[13]Kerr et. Al (2001); Not So Simple: Enhancing Indigenous Economic Opportunity, ACTU Submission to the Pathways and Participation Opportunities for Indigenous Australians in Employment and Business Inquiry, January 2020

Indigenous voluntary activities also imbibe valuable transferrable skills in project management, team building, leadership, and organisation.

Considering Structural Impediments & Taking a Holistic Approach to Mitigating Participation Barriers

In addition to their engagement in voluntary activities, research indicates that young Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Australians routinely feel the need to build their credentials and connections to further their employment prospects.[14] Formal volunteering in mainstream organisations can contribute to upward mobility through networking and exposure. To increase the range of alternative "placements" in lieu of paid employment, it is imperative to tap into the Indigenous as well as the mainstream volunteering landscape. In the case of formal volunteering in mainstream organisations, the following issues must be considered:

I) Lack of Cultural Competency and Sensitivity

Several structural impediments exist, limiting both Indigenous employment as well as voluntary participation in mainstream organisations. Kerr et al (2001) found that racism as well as a lack of cultural competency and sensitivity among employers can contribute to attitudinal inhibitions among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.[15] As a result, many Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander opt to volunteer in known environments.[16] The natural outcome of this is that organisations may be deprived of the expertise and local knowledge possessed by Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islanders, while the latter, in turn, may lose out on the exposure provided by mainstream organisations. Structural barriers of access include lack of culturally and linguistically appropriate information and training, and financial costs[17] of participating in formal volunteering activities.

II) The Hidden Costs of Mainstream Volunteering

Research indicates that income levels directly influence Indigenous volunteer participation in mainstream organisations. Indigenous Australian volunteer participation increased with income from 21.7 per cent of the lowest income quintile to 39.7 per cent of the fourth and fifth quintiles.[18] Screening checks for organisations and Centrelink restrictions can also pose hidden costs for the

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[14] This was articulated in research in three North Australian Aboriginal Communities by Spencer et. al. Spencer, M., & Christie, M. (2017). Collaboratively rethinking the nature and practice of voluntary service in three North Australian aboriginal communities. Third Sector Review, 23(1), 9–27.

[15] Kerr et al (2001) found that a common issue for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents was a sense of the cultural exclusivity of formal volunteer arrangements

[16] Ibid

[17] Recent State of Volunteering reports have revealed significant costs to volunteering. For example, the 2021 NSW State of Volunteering research found volunteers were spending on average $1900 of their own money to volunteer.

[18] Biddle, N. 2009. 'Location and segregation: The distribution of the Indigenous population across Australia's urban centres', *CAEPR Working Paper No.53*, CAEPR, ANU, Canberra.

communities. Respondents from Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander communities have cited a lack of support from their organisations and respective government agencies in these processes. [19] Given the high number of conviction rates among youth from Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander communities, police checks add a further structural barrier to their reintegration into the mainstream through volunteering. [20]

III) The Digital Divide and Infrastructural Limitations

Infrastructure limitations in remote areas – pertaining to internet, appropriate workstations, or transportation – can pose major barriers to employment and volunteer participation in the mainstream. Feedback from Indigenous elders has already indicated digital illiteracy and internet outages as major obstacles to Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander participation in training and existing programs. Almost 50% of Indigenous households are reported to not have home internet access.[21] Some communities in remote Australia have no access to computers, internet or libraries at all.[22] As more work shifts online, this places an additional burden on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to up-skill amidst infrastructure limitations and an onus on mainstream organisations to cater to their needs.[23]

Recommendations

In consideration of the issues identified above, we make the following recommendations for the Remote Engagement Program:

1)The NIAA should recognize volunteering as a pathway to employment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in remote Australia and consider the Indigenous volunteering landscape in the design and development of the new program.

➢ Indigenous volunteering should be recognised as a unique form of cultural and social capital with concurrent value for the Australian workforce and economy.
➢ The indigenous skill set inherent in volunteering should be appreciated in its full breadth through a locally embedded co-design process, since each Indigenous community is different in its social and political constitution. This includes its recognition as a form of privileged, local knowledge on issues ranging from land and water management, and economic development to community building and rehabilitation. It also entails a recognition of its transferrable value in project management, team building, leadership, and organisation.

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[19]Indigenous Australian Participation in International Volunteering, Report on Exploratory Research, June 2008
[20] Based on consultation with Indigenous Elders of the community in the drafting of this report.
[21] New Training Seeks to Narrow Digital Literacy divide in Indigenous Communities, National Indigenous Times, 8 November 2019
Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan, September 2021, National Indigenous Australians Agency
[22] OPAN, The Ageing Mosaic: The First Nations Communities, https://opan.org.au/ageing-firstnations/
[23] Covid-19: The need to boost digital literacy in Indigenous Communities, The University of Western Australia, 17 June 2020

- The New Remote Engagement Program should engage, capitalize, and hone the skill set that is inherent in Indigenous volunteering activities. It should recognise that the notion of 'work' (vis-à-vis paid and volunteer activities) may be differentially conceived within Indigenous communities.[24] For instance, Indigenous elders may engage in activities classified as 'voluntary', but their proper designation may be that of 'managers' rather than 'volunteers' in their own community.[25]
- The Remote Engagement Program should also reflect the importance of Indigenous voluntary activities as cultural obligation in developing the guidelines of the Mutual Obligation Requirements.

2) The NIAA should empower and work in conjunction with the Indigenous volunteer networks in remote Australia in the process of offering alternative "placements" in lieu of paid employment

- Consistent with the principles of self-determination, Indigenous volunteer networks and organisations should be provided due recognition and incorporated in the design of the program
- Given the recent history of colonisation, trauma and ongoing discrimination, the range of placements in Indigenous-led organisations must be expanded as this is where First Nations people often prefer to volunteer and work.
- Relatedly, Indigenous organisations should be assisted with better resources to support the development of volunteer programs.[26]

3) The NIAA should envisage 'non-vocational support' as a two-way process to enable Indigenous participation in the program – that is, in the form of a) support provided *to* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants in remote Australia and b) and support *for* mainstream employers to acquire better cultural competency and sensitivity

- In terms of non-vocational support, the new program should take into consideration infrastructure limitations, such as the lack of proper work- stations at home and the digital divide, in offering relevant non-vocational support to Indigenous participants of the program.
- It should support participants to cover transportation costs, navigate bureaucratic processes and acquire relevant work clearances.
- It should work with the Indigenous volunteer and community networks to locate and use existing sites, such as schools or community centres, as alternative workstations
- The Indigenous volunteer ecosystem should be promoted to mainstream organisations. Efforts should be made to increase the cultural competency of employers on the socio-

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[24] Not So Simple: Enhancing Indigenous Economic Opportunity, ACTU Submission to the Pathways and Participation Opportunities for Indigenous Australians in Employment and Business Inquiry, January 2020
[25] Helping and Caring, not only our family: Northern Territory Indigenous Perspectives on Volunteering, Australian Red Cross, 2015
[26] Feedback from an Indigenous elder obtained by one of the volunteering state/territory peak bodies suggests that there is a desire for better volunteer management and funding to support the task.

economic value of the Indigenous skill set, the importance of volunteering as cultural obligation for Indigenous communities, and the need for a flexible approach that appreciates the importance of these commitments.

➢ Since racism and discrimination may be structurally embedded in some organisations and institutions, proactive steps need to be taken to create safe spaces and attract First Nations people to mainstream organisations.

➢ A language should be developed, in consultation with the elders of the community, that appreciates culturally relevant nuances and definitions of 'work' as well as Indigenous voluntary activities

Conclusion

Volunteering Australia emphasises the social and economic value of Indigenous volunteering as a pathway to employment for First Nations people in remote Australia. Volunteering can take different forms within remote communities. It is embedded in the everyday cultural life of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and often understood as cultural obligation and reciprocity. The submission emphasises that a greater recognition of the Indigenous volunteering landscape would enable the new program to cater comprehensively to the needs of its participants. Through an appreciation of the Indigenous skill set inherent in volunteering as well as culturally nuanced conceptualizations of work, the new program can be better placed to up-skill the participants and bridge the employability gap. Given the larger systemic and structural impediments to Indigenous participation in the mainstream economy, the new program may also consider 'non-vocational support' as a two-way approach that entails reaching out to Indigenous participants as well as to mainstream employers to enable greater cultural sensitivity and acceptance.

Authorisation

This submission has been authorised by the Chief Executive Officer of Volunteering Australia.

Mr Mark Pearce
Chief Executive Officer

Endorsements

This submission has been endorsed by the seven State and Territory volunteering peak bodies.

About Volunteering Australia

Volunteering Australia is the national peak body for volunteering, working to advance volunteering in the Australian community. The seven State and Territory volunteering peak bodies work to advance and promote volunteering in their respective jurisdictions and are Foundation Members of Volunteering Australia.

Volunteering Australia's vision is to promote strong, connected communities through volunteering. Our mission is to lead, strengthen, promote, and celebrate volunteering in Australia.

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