

COMMONWEALTH GRANTS COMMISSION

INDIGENOUS FUNDING INQUIRY

SUBMISSION

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Submission to the Commonwealth Grants Commission Inquiry into the distribution of funding programs that affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples,

April 2000

Measuring the needs of indigenous people: Torres Strait Islanders

The following functional areas are considered here:

1. Housing and infrastructure
2. Employment and training
3. Health
4. Education
5. Culture
6. Business development
7. Policing
8. Transport
9. Provisioning
10. Governance

I will consider data and measurements at the level of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) region (including the region of the Torres Strait Regional authority (TSRA)). At this level, the Inquiry can be viewed as follows:

1	Aboriginal people in one ATSIC region	versus	Aboriginal people in other ATSIC regions
2	Aboriginal people in Torres Strait	versus	Torres Strait Islanders in Torres Strait
3	Aboriginal people in one mainland ATSIC region	versus	Torres Strait Islanders in that region
4	Torres Strait Islanders in one mainland ATSIC region	versus	Torres Strait Islanders in other mainland ATSIC regions

This submission deals primarily with items 2, 3 4.

Measuring need inside Torres Strait

There are very few Aboriginal people in the TSRA (Figure 1) and I suggest that the Inquiry consider only the needs of Torres Strait Islanders there. However, the impact of Papua New Guineans on the service needs across the region should be taken into account. Torres Strait includes the 'open' international border with Papua New Guinea. It is also the entry point for illegal immigrants and fishers (Arthur 1992). It is likely that the open-border provisions of the Treaty between Australia and Papua New Guinea and the location of Torres Strait, create additional and special needs for the Torres Strait region. It is also possible that the CGC's 1985 approach to assessing the level of need on Christmas Island may have some relevance to Torres Strait.

As with many Pacific archipelagoes, Torres Strait can be usefully broken into two sub-regions: the Inner Islands (including the regional centre Thursday Island) and the Outer Islands (composed of dispersed island communities). (These two sub-regions can be equated with mainland rural regional centres and their outlying remot(er) communities.) The needs are quite different in the two sub-regions. This difference applies to all of the Inquiry's functional areas.

1. Housing and infrastructure.

Housing and infrastructure needs on the Outer Islands are more basic than on the Inner Islands and estimates should consider especially the provision of water and sewerage and electricity. Housing and infrastructure needs on the Outer Islands should take into account the impact of Papua New Guinea residents and visitors (Arthur 1992). It should be noted that Papua New Guineans can become Australian citizens but not Australian indigenous people. To the best of my knowledge this means that they are not necessarily included in estimates of indigenous-specific program funding, or indeed of any program funding. Data on housing and infrastructure will be available through the Island Coordinating Council (ICC) and the TSRA.

2. Employment and training.

The formal labour market is located on the Inner islands. The CDEP scheme dominates employment on the Outer Islands (Arthur 1999). CDEP is largely part-time work, however there is a desire by many (which could be classified as a need) for full-time employment, apprenticeships and traineeships (Arthur 1999; forthcoming). One way of fulfilling this need would be to fund more full-time CDEP positions, possibly through joint funding with non-CDEP programs. The CDEP scheme has the potential to articulate well with the fishing industry. There appears to be a need to extend Islander training in trades, and management (Arthur 1999; forthcoming). Data on employment, training and CDEP are available from the ABS censuses, the TSRA, the Torres Strait Regional Employment Committee and Thursday Island TAFE.

2. Health

Estimates of health needs should consider the open border with Papua New Guinea which increases the risk of introducing exotic diseases. In addition, estimates of the health needs should include the use of services by Papua New Guineans who are on traditional visits (Arthur 1992).¹ The resulting extra demand applies to both the Outer Island Medical Aid Posts and the Thursday Island Hospital. Health data will be available through the Torres Strait Health Committee.

4. Education.

Outer Islands have only primary schools. In the past, Outer Island schools have accommodated Papua New Guinean residents and visitors. This factor should be considered when computing need. Secondary schools are at Thursday Island and Bamaga. There is a tendency for parents on the Outer Islands to send students to the mainland for secondary schooling. One reason for this is the lack of facilities (student accommodation) on Thursday Island. Recent research indicates that students attending mainland schools are less likely to stay to Year 12 than those attending Thursday Island. This suggests a need for more local facilities (Arthur forthcoming). Education data should be available through the ABS censuses and the Torres Strait Regional Education Committee.

5. Culture

Ailan Kastom or island custom, the culture of Torres Strait Islanders, is alive and vibrant in Torres Strait. Comments about cultural needs are best left to Islander people and organisations in Torres Strait. It would appear that the incorporation of cultural appropriate practices are part of the work of the health and education committees noted above. There is possibly an unmet cultural need for the return of artefacts taken out of Torres Strait by the Cambridge Expedition in the late 19th century.

6. Business development

Past research has indicated the need for a development arm to cater for business and fisheries development (Arthur 1990). A need appears to remain for Islanders to expand into: the prawn fishery (possibly by the strategy of joint venturing); into fish processing and servicing the industry; and for upskilling in fisheries generally. However, the extent of this need is unclear.

7. Policing

Torres Strait has an additional need for policing the international border. This applies to quarantine, fisheries, and immigration. It is unclear that this additional need is adequately met.

8. Transport

Archipelagoes have special transport needs. It is unclear if these are being met, especially regarding inter-island air services.

9. Provisioning

Associated with the above is the issue of provisioning small remote islands. There is, and has been for some time, a need to provide more fresh vegetables to Outer Islands.

¹ These visits are permitted under the Treaty between Australia and Papua New Guinea.

10. Governance

Recently, local government on some islands has been adapted to include cultural systems (clans). The degree to which this need exists across the whole Strait is unclear.

The Torres Strait Islander population outside Torres Strait

Quantifying need is influenced by both the size and location of the target population. There are a number of problems associated with estimating the size and location of the Torres Strait Islander population outside Torres Strait.

Dealing with dual identifiers in the 1996 Census

The 1996 ABS Census gave people the opportunity to identify as Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, or as someone who considers themselves as both an Aboriginal person *and* as a Torres Strait Islander (dual identifiers). This effectively created three categories of indigenous person. The Inquiry however, has only two categories of person: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. The question arises of what to do with the dual identifiers. They could either be all added to the Aboriginal population, or to the Islander population, or they could be split in some way between the two. There has been a tendency to add all of the dual identifiers to the Torres Strait Islander population. As there are around 10,000 of these nationally, this method increases the Islander population significantly from around 25,000 to around 35,000. The issue applies almost entirely outside the TSRA. This is because dual identification appears, in large part, to be associated with Torres Strait islanders who live on the mainland intermarrying with non-Torres Strait Islanders.

Discussions with John Taylor of CAEPR indicate that a suitable approach for the purposes of the Inquiry would be to distribute the dual identifiers between the Aboriginal and Torres Strait populations on a pro rata basis in *each* ATSI region and this is the procedure recommended for the Inquiry. The populations derived by this method are shown in Figure 1.²

Dubious identification on the mainland

The issue of dual identifiers discussed above applies only to the 1996 ABS Census. However, the overall integrity of the ABS census data *outside* Torres Strait has been questioned for some time (Fisk et al 1974; Beckett 1987; Taylor and Arthur 1993; ABS/CAEPR 1997).

One of the most recent concerns about the quality of the data has been triggered by the large number of Torres Strait Islanders (around 1500) found by the censuses in Tasmania (Figure 1). This has caused concern because the Office of Torres Strait Islander Affairs is largely unaware of the existence of any Islanders in Tasmania. It is thought that the Tasmanian data actually refer to people of Aboriginal descent who live on the islands of the Bass Strait. These people often refer to themselves as Strait Islanders or 'Straitsmen' and may incorrectly identify on the census forms as Torres Strait Islanders (ABS/CAEPR 1997: 30).

² Source: 1996 ABS Census. In Figure 1 the dual identifiers have been redistributed on a pro rata basis to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations.

Figure 1. The indigenous population, 1996

ATSI region, State/Terr.	Aboriginal people	Torres Strait Islanders	All	TSIs/All %
Torres Strait	323	5741	6064	95
Cairns	11228	3484	14712	24
Townsville	11264	3414	14678	23
Brisbane	24773	2862	27635	10
Cooktown	5066	569	5635	10
Rockhampton	10483	849	11332	7
Roma	8482	322	8804	4
Mt. Isa	6525	133	6658	2
Qld. mainland	77821	11633	89454	13
Wangaratta	9162	1233	10395	12
Ballarat	9722	1357	11079	12
Victoria	18883	2591	21474	12
Sydney	31508	2778	34286	8
Coffs Harbour	23561	1497	25058	6
Queanbeyan	8745	378	9123	4
Wagga Wagga	17420	627	18047	3
Tamworth	10469	242	10711	2
Bourke	7270	74	7344	1
ACT/NSW	98974	5595	104569	5
Hobart/Tas.	12357	1516	13873	11
Adelaide	11623	1066	12689	8
Ceduna	1843	24	1867	1
Port Augusta	5817	71	5888	1
South Australia	19283	1161	20444	6
South Hedland	4109	189	4298	4
Perth	17411	587	17998	3
Narrogin	6091	113	6204	2
Kalgoorlie	3087	65	3152	2
Broome	3376	47	3423	1
Warburton	2664	24	2688	1
Geraldton	4960	46	5006	1
Kununurra	4076	12	4088	<1
Derby	3940	18	3958	<1
Western Australia	49713	1102	50815	2
Darwin	8441	551	8992	6
Alice Springs	4420	29	4449	1
Katherine	7035	87	7122	1
Jabiru	7716	30	7746	<1
Aputula	7501	17	7518	<1
Nhulunbuy	6985	16	7001	<1
Tennant Creek	3437	12	3449	<1
Northern Territory	45534	743	46277	2
Australia	322889	30082	352971	9

Others may also complete the census forms incorrectly, either by mistake or by intention. For example, it is thought that some non-indigenous Australians who themselves or whose forebears come from island countries such as the Mediterranean may, through a lack of understanding, mistakenly mark the census forms as 'Islanders'. People of Pacific Islander descent, especially those who are descendants of those brought to Australia in the 19th century to work in the Queensland cane fields may also complete the census forms incorrectly. These people may mistakenly think that the Torres Strait Island box on census forms refers to them. (This is not too far fetched given that there is a group of Torres Islands in the South Pacific.) Others may intentionally mark the Torres Strait Islander box on census forms in the hope that this will in some way increase their chances of being recognised within Australia as a special and disadvantaged group.³ For the above reasons, the number and location of those identified as Torres Strait Islanders by the ABS census is open to some doubt.

Measuring need amongst Torres Strait Islanders outside Torres Strait

Whatever special needs Torres Strait Islanders might have, determining them and meeting them are not made any easier by their population distribution.

Taking the data in Figure 1, the first thing we can see is that the greatest concentrations of Torres Strait Islanders are in coastal cities and towns; that is they are largely urbanites. Also, we can see that outside Torres Strait, Islanders as a percentage of the total indigenous population varies greatly across ATSI regions: from 24 and 23 per cent in Cairns and Townsville to less than one per cent in some regions in Western Australia and the Northern Territory. Also, in 28 of the ATSI regions Islanders are less than 10 per cent of the total.

Similarly, the number of Torres Strait Islanders in each region varies significantly, from around 3,500 in the Cairns region to a dozen in Tennant Creek. In 26 of the ATSI regions, Islanders are less than 1000 people and in 15 regions they are less than 100 people. If we assume that questions of need might only be addressed to those 15 years old and over, then the potential number of Islanders that can provide information is approximately halved, and only 16 regions have more than 100 people.

Even when the data are aggregated to the State/Territory level, only in Queensland, Victoria and Tasmania are Islanders more than six per cent of the indigenous population (and Tasmania should probably be discounted given my earlier statements).

One outcome of this population distribution is that Torres Strait Islanders on the mainland are largely invisible to the mainstream and indigenous programs and services at all levels of government (see Arthur 1998a, 1998b). Research has shown that outside the state of Queensland Islanders are not identified in any government administrative data bases (indigenous or mainstream) for any of the functional areas covered by the Inquiry (Arthur 1998a). Therefore, there are no administrative data which the Inquiry can use to determine need. Even within the administration of the government departments on the mainland of Queensland, where most Torres Strait Islanders are, there are few Islander identifiers (see Arthur 1998a; 1998b).

³ Some of the descendants of the Pacific Islanders who were brought to this country in the 19th century feel that this history has disadvantaged them.

In fact, the greatest need that can be stated with some certainty is the need for a Torres Strait Islander identifier to be included within administrative data bases across the mainland (Arthur 1998a).

An additional problem created by the population distribution is that Torres Strait Islanders are hard to locate and survey. For example, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey of 1994 was only able to produce reliable and meaningful results inside Queensland because it was only there that a sufficient number of Islanders could be located (see ABS/CAEPR 1997). I experienced something of the same problem in my own work on mainland Torres Strait Islanders in 1997 (see Arthur 1998a; 1998b). At that time I surveyed the mainland population by interviewing Islander organisations. However, these organisations are very small, especially outside Queensland, and it is possible that this method revealed the views of a limited number of people.

Given all of this, it is possible that the Inquiry should focus on the major population centres both when analysing ABS data and when conducting surveys.

Matters and perceptions of need outside Torres Strait

The purpose of the 1997 survey noted above was to determine if Torres Strait Islanders were experiencing problems accessing government programs and services across several functional areas: business development; employment; education and training; health; housing; and arts and culture. As this survey dealt with access, it did not have the same brief as the Inquiry. None the less, the findings from the survey may be useful for the Inquiry and these follow.

Extracts from *Access to Government Programs and Services for Torres Strait Islanders Residing on the Mainland of Australia*, a report prepared for the Office of Torres Strait Islander Affairs, Canberra (see Arthur 1998b):

Commonwealth Government

- The Australian Bureau of Statistics has published very few census statistics on Torres Strait Islanders.
- Torres Strait Islanders are not identified by name in all of the Commonwealth Government's indigenous programs. The Commonwealth Government has no specific programs for Torres Strait Islanders, nor do its departments presently maintain statistics on Torres Strait Islanders.

State/Territory Governments

- The Queensland Government generally gives greater attention to Torres Strait Islander issues than do other State/Territory Governments and it has some programs specifically for Torres Strait Islanders in the health area. Torres Strait Islanders are identified in some Queensland health and housing statistics.
- States/Territories other than Queensland do not identify Torres Strait Islanders in their policies or programs and do not keep statistics on Torres Strait Islanders.
- No level of government has staffing programs specifically for Torres Strait Islanders. Positions are not normally reserved for Torres Strait Islanders on governmental consultative committees.
- In some cases, States/Territories other than Queensland, are uninformed about the number of Torres Strait Islanders in their States/Territories.

Local governments

- There are no local government programs for Torres Strait Islanders. However, local governments in Queensland appear to be more aware of their Torres Strait Islander residents than are those in other States.

Summary

- There are few data on mainland Torres Strait Islanders to which policy makers can refer.
- There is no statistical evidence, and only a little anecdotal evidence that Torres Strait Islanders experience any major problems accessing mainstream government programs and services. There are no good data that would reveal whether Torres Strait Islanders are less able to access indigenous programs and services than Aboriginal people.
- At a general level, access by organisations to government departments appears to be improved if departmental staff are available to visit the organisation. Access may also be improved if staff are professional in their approach and if there is either an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander staff member in a department.
- At the Commonwealth level, Torres Strait Islanders may have experienced some difficulties accessing the (former) Department of Social Security (DSS) and the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) due to the complexity of the paperwork and the approach of counter staff. Departmental counter staff sometimes appear to believe that Torres Strait Islanders on the mainland are the responsibility of the Torres Strait Regional Authority. In addition, people may experience difficulty having their Torres Strait Islander identity accepted by counter staff. (Since the survey, the relevant functions of the DSS and CES have been replaced by Centrelink and Job Network.)
- Torres Strait Islanders feel underrepresented in, or excluded from, State/Territory indigenous policies. In States other than Queensland, Torres Strait Islanders perceive that they are entirely excluded from State/Territory government indigenous programs and services. In some respects, this perception may be fuelled by the fact that Torres Strait Islanders are not specified by name in departmental and program titles.
- If individuals are unsuccessful in an application to the government for funding or assistance they may, for cultural reasons, take this as a form of rejection and not pursue their objective further.
- Many Torres Strait Islander organisations appear preoccupied with accessing funds from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) for their operations and perceive that this access is poor. This is a major concern for Torres Strait Islanders and one which may result in the perception that access to all government programs and services is poor. This situation could be relieved by earmarking a separate proportion of ATSIC funds for mainland Torres Strait Islanders.
- Many Torres Strait Islander organisations are involved in cultural activities and services.
- There appears to be a general and incorrect perception by Torres Strait Islanders and mainstream departments that indigenous people are supposed to access services primarily through ATSIC and through other indigenous-specific programs. As a result, mainstream service providers may reject Torres Strait Islander applications and refer applicants back to indigenous and ATSIC programs and services.

Recommendations

1. Centrelink and the agencies in Job Network should be encouraged to consider the ability of their counter staff to respond to their Torres Strait Islander clients needs.
2. Consideration should be given to the possibility of Torres Strait Islander community groups performing the function of employment agents, or of entering into joint-ventures with non-indigenous agencies to perform this function. (See also recommendation No. 8)
3. All governments should be encouraged to identify Torres Strait Islanders by name in their policies, departments and programs.
4. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) could review its commitment to providing more publications of the census data on mainland Torres Strait Islanders. These should be compared with results for non-indigenous people and focus on urban and major urban areas.
5. Through the agency of the ABS, the relevant Commonwealth, State/Territory departments and local governments should be encouraged to maintain statistics on Torres Strait Islanders in the relevant administrative data-bases for programs and services. To this end, the Office of Torres Strait Islander Affairs (OTSIA) could ensure representation on any statistical consultative committees.
6. To enable OTSIA to fulfil its responsibilities, consideration should be given to establishing an OTSIA data-base on Torres Strait Islanders. Initially, this could include data on Torres Strait Islanders from the censuses, from ATSI's programs and from other Commonwealth departments. Later, the data-base could include data from the States/Territories and local governments.
7. Greater attention should be given to explaining clearly to applicants why their applications to government are unsuccessful.
8. Attention should be given to clarifying for all Torres Strait Islander clients and service providers whether the programs and services specifically for indigenous people which are provided by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission and other agencies, are intended to supplement or to replace mainstream programs and services. In this regard and in relation to service provision, consideration should be given to Recommendation 18 of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs' report *Torres Strait Islanders: A New Deal*, which states that:

The Committee recommends that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission develop a program encouraging mainstream Commonwealth, State, local government and non-government agencies to develop partnerships and joint ventures with Torres Strait Islander community groups on the mainland (Commonwealth of Australia 1997: 106).

Torres Strait Islanders feel that they are disadvantaged in terms of accessing land. The mainland is not their traditional territory, and so unless they marry into an Aboriginal land-owning group or can make some other arrangement with local Aboriginal land-owners, they cannot access land by recourse to traditional forms of ownership. In one case, despite protracted negotiations with land-owners and ATSIC, a Torres Strait Islander group in Western Australia have been unable to obtain any form of rights to either land or the sea for commercial purposes. Further, it seems that Torres Strait Islanders on the mainland may experience some difficulty accessing land through the Indigenous Land Corporation (ILC). The ILC states that, where possible, it will aim to assist 'traditional owners (or people with traditional links to the land)' to become title-holders. Torres Strait Islanders on the mainland will find it hard to meet these criteria. The intent of the ILC's policy is to avoid causing conflict and tension at the regional level and so it does not wish to 'purchase land for one group in what is the traditional country of another group'. Although Torres Strait Islanders are not traditional owners of land on the mainland, they may, in some instances, have fairly long-standing historical connections with certain areas. The ability of Torres Strait Islanders on the mainland to obtain land through the ILC will hinge very much on how the ILC defines notions of traditional ownership and traditional links.

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