

COMMONWEALTH GRANTS COMMISSION
INDIGENOUS FUNDING INQUIRY
SUBMISSION

From: Nambucca Shire Council

Submission No.: IFI/SUB/0040

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COMMONWEALTH GRANTS COMMISSION “INDIGENOUS FUNDING INQUIRY”

1. NAMBUCCA SHIRE COUNCIL SUBMISSION

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Nambucca Shire Council is a small rural coastal council on the Mid North Coast of NSW approximately half way between Sydney and Brisbane. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (Census 1996), the population stands at approximately 19,000, some 5% of which are indigenous Australians. Nambucca Shire has a low socio-economic condition, which features high unemployment, a very low income base, high rates of child abuse and the like.

The Council faces the ongoing and increasing dilemma of how to allocate its scarce resources to meet increasing needs and therefore has a particular interest in how resources are allocated to local government and community.

BROAD ISSUES

The analysis of existing data is supported, however:

- I suggest reviewing the “Unequal in Life” report by Professor Tony Vinson ⁽¹⁾; and “Community Opportunity and Vulnerability...” by Baum, Stimson, O’Connor et al ⁽²⁾
- the ABS Census should be used as a guide only; and
- NSW Local Government Social and Community Plans are useful reference points.

Geographic regions used should be small enough to closely reflect community needs – ATSI regions may be too big and diverse to give an accurate picture.

Rural coastal regions have distinct needs.

Community consultation requires adequate notice to the community and resourcing to glean useful feedback.

The Nambucca Shire warrants a closer look.

SPECIFIC COMMENTS

Use of Existing Data Sources

I note that the Commission is looking at existing data sources when developing a method of determining need and allocating resources. I agree with this approach given that there is much work already published around identifying community needs.

I respectfully suggest that the Commission review the work of Professor Tony Vinson in his recently published study "Unequal in Life". Professor Vinson's assessment of need was done on a postcode basis and addressed a number of disadvantages including:

Unemployment
Low income
Low birth weight (an indication of lack of nourishment)
Child abuse
Education (including school leavers before 15 years of age)
Emergency assistance
Psychiatric hospital admissions
Court convictions
Child injuries
Mortality
Long term unemployed
Unskilled workers
Court defendants

These disadvantages are recognised in a World Health Organisation publication/study 1998. The indicators would however need to be broadened to reflect housing needs.

The Baum, Stimson, O'Connor report is also a useful document as it looks at indicators which include housing, population change and mobility, income, labour force engagement, levels of human capital, and social disadvantage. It has the added advantage of being able to assess community need at both national and small community levels.

In regard to using the Australian Bureau of Statistics, local experience shows that the ABS Census results are inaccurate. It is widely recognised in our community, and I am sure elsewhere as well, that the indigenous population is vastly under-represented in the census. A range of data sources is therefore recommended to give more accurate results.

Needs Identification by Geographic Regions

I refer to the Commission's plan to compare needs at quite a broad level (probably ATSI regions). I suggest that to apply this methodology across the nation may result in areas of high need being overlooked.

Professor Vinson ⁽¹⁾ maintains that studies of social disadvantage cannot be done effectively at even a local government wide basis as some pockets of disadvantage can be missed - because they become offset by other localities in a local government area that are not so disadvantaged.

SPECIFIC COMMENTS (continued)

The Baum, Stimson, O'Connor report analyses community opportunity and vulnerability from a national perspective that incorporates all communities. They have achieved this by

looking at the community at the Statistical Local Area (SLA) level, then in accordance with the type and size of community ie:

SLA's within metropolitan city regions;

SLA's with large regional cities and towns with a population 10,000 and above

SLA's with small regional towns with populations of 4,000 to 9,999.

The report then clusters together similar areas and can identify areas which are most vulnerable. The report may contain a suitable methodology for the Commission as it takes into account small areas within a national context.

The Nambucca Shire is located within the "Many Rivers" ATISC region of NSW which covers an area from the Tweed River in the north to the Hawkesbury River in the south. The area is extremely diverse in social fabric Eg it includes areas of both very high and quite low unemployment. If the Commission's methodology is going to use a regional average, there is potential that areas with extremely high unemployment, such as the Nambucca, will be overlooked. This situation could apply to any of the indicators and the result could be vastly different to the reality in local communities.

The extreme north and south of the Many Rivers region have a healthy growth rate and experience the positive influences of proximity to major urban centres. Areas in the heart of the region experience quite different pressures due to distance from major centres, lack of public transport etc. Regional Councils for Social Development would be useful sources of information to assist with need identification.

I recognise that there are practical difficulties in trying to assess the needs of the nation, however I believe that in order to adequately fund communities the Commonwealth government will need a reflective and responsive set of indicators, applied over a suitable geographic area, together with a strong decision-making system for allocating resources that is in touch with the "grass roots".

Community Consultation

I note that this is a key component in the Inquiry. I understand that there is a tight time frame, however I wish to request that for successful community visiting, there needs to be adequate notice. Also I wish to request that adequate attention be given to areas which are neither urban (such as the Sydney Metropolitan Area) nor remote (Eg Western and Central Australia). Rural coastal areas have distinct needs and require different approaches to meeting needs.

I respectfully request that areas such as the Nambucca Shire which features so obviously as an area of high need in the Vinson report, be given closer attention. I am sure that the Council and community would welcome a visit by the Commission to further explore funding issues for the indigenous community.

REFERENCES

- (1) "Unequal in Life – the distribution of social disadvantage in Victoria and New South Wales"; Professor Tony Vinson; Jesuit Social Services Ltd; 1999
- (2) "Community Opportunity and Vulnerability in Australia's Cities and Towns"; Baum, Stimson, O'Connor, Mullins and Davis; Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute 1999

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