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Practical Reconciliation or a New Level of Paternalism?

Evaluating Shared Responsibility Agreements

Under the increasingly common Shared Responsibility Agreements, or SRAs, Indigenous communities have to barter for basic goods and services in exchange for changes in their behavior or hygiene.

Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islander communities have recently been subjected to complicated agreements, called SRAs, with federal and state governments in order gain needed assistance in meeting their goals to improve living standards. The federal government explains that an SRA "spell(s) out what communities, governments, and others will contribute to achieve long-term changes in indigenous communities". (www.indigenous.gov.au) SRAs are essentially an agreement where an indigenous community decides its goals, such as clean water, a local school, or opportunities for youth. In some SRAs the community asks the government to provide money to carry out these goals, such as funding a youth center or water treatment program, while in other SRAs the community organizes its own social programs in exchange for goods or services they need, such as air conditioners or petrol pumps. SRAs partly take the place of ATSIC. Former ATSIC regional offices are now "one stop" Indigenous Coordination Councils (ICCs) which oversee the formation and implementation of SRAs, and funding for the agreements comes from the former ATSIC budget.

In May 2005 Minister Amanda Vanstone addressed a National Reconciliation Planning Workshop stating "For many this will be the first time they have been asked to say what they in the community want for their future. The first time to tell us what they think will work. And the first time that they have had a hand in shaping their own immediate longer term future… Our shared responsibility approach is based on local people identifying the problem and defining their own solutions" *(Landers 2005)*

"SRAs are bad policy, lacking proper evidence-based research, as well as essential coordination, evaluation and accountability mechanisms" (www.antar.org.au)

Some question how an agreement between the Australian Federal government and any Indigenous "family, clan, or community council," (www.indigenous.gov.au/sra/kit/what_are.pdf) can be an equal partnership. ANTaR (Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation) asserts "concerns about the power imbalance and consultation processes of agreements struck directly between local communities and the federal government suggest it will be government priorities and interests, and not those of Indigenous communities, that will prevail."

The communities who are more organized with better connected ICCs are more likely to benefit, leaving behind communities most in need. (www.antar.org.au) There is no transparent government framework in place which exposes the amount of money being spent on the implementation of SRAs, or any discernable benchmarks or standards to which any governments are held to during development or implementation. There are no models of best practice and too little information made public. Ruth McCausland (2005d) points out that "there is no consistency between agreements, even those in communities in similar circumstances seeking to address similar problems. For example, the Government has variously committed $3000 for 'Activities for Young People' in Ringers Soak, Western Australia; $15,000 for 'Structured activities for young people' in Balgo, Western Australia; and $418,000 for 'Sport and recreation activities for young people' in Dubbo, NSW."

Although the government template for SRAs allocates space for benchmarks and a review of progress, neither the government published SRA kit or media releases explain what actions will be taken if a community does not hold up its side of the bargain. On the other end, as these agreements are not legally binding, a community has few options if the government does not fulfill its responsibilities *(See Murdi Park Case Study)*.

New Paternalism?

Aboriginal Lawyer and land rights activist Micheal Mansell asserts that the SRAs are imposing funding conditions on black communities, that are not imposed on any other group and are therefore unlawful under The Racial Discrimination Act. Even where a community agrees to Manell rejects SRAs claiming "Consent cannot make lawful that which is unlawful." *(Pennells 2004)*

Ruth McCausland (2005b) notes that the agreements are remeniscent of the "infamous Queensland Acts, which required that Aborigines on reserves kept the gates closed and love their children." The media lauded the Mulan communities SRA (see case study) for decreasing the incidents of Trachoma even though the disease had already been rapidly on the decline before the SRA was signed, raising the question – do these agreements effect real change or are they a media ploy?

Who is benefiting?

Senator Vanstone claims "…The concept of the agreement is what's important and that is, we'll put something extra in and the community will do something in return." *(ABC Radio 2004)* The Prime Minister stated "it is not just a question of money, because a lot more money has been put into Aboriginal health. It is a question of culture. It is a question of practice. It is a question of attitude. It is a question of community responsibility." *(Howard Unhappy)*

ANTaR assesses that it will take over 20 years to conclude at least one SRA with each of the over 1200 Indigenous communities across Australia. In 2005-06 the total allocation to SRAs is only 1% of Indigenous funding. The small size of the program has led some critics to see SRAs as tokenism. This assertion is highlighted by a recent report by OxFam which shows that after 10 years of so-called practical reconciliation Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islanders are faring far worse than comparable indigenous populations of Canada and New Zealand in the areas of health, life expectancy and infant mortality. (www.OxFam.au)

CASE STUDY ONE: Mulan community, WA: The first and most notable of all Shared Responsibility Agreements

The community had been frequently making requests for a petrol bowser to serve as a way to kick start the economy, making Mulan a tourist stop, and save residents the 44km drive to get fuel. The Administer of Mulan's Aboriginal corporation stated that their requests made no progress until he received advice from a senior Indigenous affairs bureaucrat that by negotiating a Shared Responsibility Agreement, the community may be able to exchange certain health measures for funding *(McCausland 2005a)* The health measures alluded to reducing the incidence of trachoma which had reached 90% among children in the community. Trachoma is an eye disease usually only found in the third world and the number one cause of preventable blindness in children ages 10 to 16. The SRA negotiated that in return for the petrol bowser, the community would implement a face and hand washing campaign to decrease the rate of the eye disease, as well as other measures such as rubbish removal. The Agreement was lauded by the media as a success for taking steps to eradicate this serious health problem *(North Shore Times)*, however community initiatives to eliminate the disease had already reduced the instance down to less that 16% before the SRA was put into place. *(McCausland 2005c)*

CASE STUDY TWO: Murdi Paaki region, NSW

The Murdi Paaki region was promised installation of air conditioning units in up to 200 community owned houses. The state government proposed to provide about $2 million in funds and technical support while communities were responsible for creating programs that would focus on school attendance and encourage young people to participate in community clean ups and family violence workshops. Two years later, despite the community working hard at fulfilling all of its obligations, not a single air conditioner had been installed. *(NIT November 2005)*

CASE STUDY THREE: Wadeye community, NT

The community implemented a "No School, No Pool" Policy as well as running a series of workshops on education and education planning. 600 students turned out for the first week of term one but the increase in student enrollment met with not enough desks, teachers, resources, and as a result less than 100 students completed the year *(NIT February 2006)*. This situation could possibly be what Dr. Brendan Nelson meant when he happily stated that under the new policy, the Wadeye school system was "bursting at the seams." *(North Shore Times)* The National Indigenous Times *(Feb 2006)* suggests that state government corruption may also be to blame for the failed Wadeye plan. "Every year, the NT government receives a bucket of money for the education of kids at Wadeye from the federal government. The amount is based on the number of school-aged children living in the region. The NT government then allocates funds to Wadeye based on the number of children who actually attend school – in other words, while the federal government will provide funding for 900-plus children in 2006, if only 300 turn up, the NT government keeps the rest of the cash… Politicians in the Northern Territory have an identifiable interest in seeing school retention rates drop…if (they) say nothing and do nothing, there's extra cash around to fund things like a redevelopment of the Darwin waterfront – that's a vote winner""*(NIT Feb 2006)*

Just Action

- Check out the Oxfam report on Indigenous health comparisons at www.oxfam.com.au
- Is your community thinking of signing an SRA? First read Ruth McCausland (2005e), Negotiating Shared Responsibility Agreements: A Toolkit www.jumbunna.uts.edu.au/ngiya/pdf/Toolkit_negotiating_SRA.pdf

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