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# Closing the Gap Refresh: Incorporating First Nations Voices in Policy Design

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**Keywords:** Close the Gap, Coalition of Peaks, Reconciliation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, Partnership Agreement

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### Abstract

In 2008, the Council of Australian Governments reached an agreement to work with Indigenous communities on 'Closing the Gap' in Indigenous disadvantage. Over the years, however, it became clear that the agreement was not working. In 2018, Australian governments and the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations agreed to 'refresh' the agreement. In 2019, the *Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap, 2019-2029* was formally signed. This case study explores how Indigenous communities and Australian governments reframed Closing the Gap to improve upon its predecessor by drawing on the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples involved in negotiations over the refresh. Nevertheless, while the development of the targets may have improved, in practice, progress to Close the Gap remains stalled.

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## Key points and lessons

- When Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are included and have a say in the design and delivery of services that impact on them, better outcomes are achieved.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people need to be at the centre of the Closing the Gap policy because the gap will not close without their full involvement.
- Australian governments at all levels, cannot expect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to take charge of their own lives or to work constructively with Australian governments if they are excluded from decision-making processes that affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' rights and affairs.
- Consultation with Indigenous communities and representatives takes time. Governments cannot rush such a process.
- Incorporating Indigenous peoples' voices in policy design is a precondition to improving outcomes, but it will not by itself lead to that result.

## Introduction

*'We must be the architects of policies that affect our lives, and the governments must recognise our right to self-determine'*<sup>1</sup>.

Australian Indigenous affairs policy has been characterised by top-down interventions that fail to consider the distinct and unique circumstances of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. First initiated in 2008, 'Closing the Gap' was intended to improve Indigenous Australians health and life outcomes by empowering and working in partnership with Indigenous peoples. The program was not as successful as its proponents had hoped. In 2016, COAG agreed that the agenda needed work. In 2018, the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations pushed government to undertake a 'refresh' of the Closing the Gap agenda. This Case Study provides a brief history of the Closing the Gap framework, examines what went wrong, and explores how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and Australian governments reframed Closing the Gap to improve upon its predecessor.

## The Beginning of the Original Closing the Gap Campaign

The health and life outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have lagged those of non-Indigenous Australians for many years (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2022, n.p.). For example, the Australian Bureau of Statistics found that between 1996 and 2001, the life expectancy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was approximately 17 years less than non-Indigenous Australians (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2005, n.p.). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were also twice as likely to be hospitalised compared to non-Indigenous Australians for preventable chronic conditions (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2005, n.p.).

In 2005, Tom Calma, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, urged all Australian governments to 'commit to achieving equality of health status and life expectation between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous people within 25 years'. Calma also recommended that any benchmarks and targets must be 'negotiated, with the full participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner 2005, 96). Previous Australian government approaches to Indigenous service-delivery had typically given minimal attention to properly consulting with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations.

After the release of Calma's 2005 Social Justice Report, a coalition of peak Indigenous and non-Indigenous health and human rights organisations led a public campaign to press for the implementation of Calma's recommendations<sup>2</sup>. It was not until 2008, however, that COAG reached an agreement to work together to 'Close the Gap' with Indigenous disadvantage (Australia Human Rights Commission 2008, n.p.). Under the *National Indigenous Reform Agreement*,

<sup>1</sup> Cheryl Axleby, Narungga woman, former Co-Chair of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service (Allam 2020a, n.p.).

<sup>2</sup> 'Peak organisations' are non-government organisations whose membership consists of smaller organisations of allied interests.

all governments committed to a \$4.6 billion plan and set in place evidenced-based targets to mitigate factors that contributed to Indigenous health inequality. In February 2009, the government published the Closing the Gap on Indigenous Disadvantage Report. In its foreword, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd linked the Closing the Gap framework to the 2008 Apology he made on behalf of all Australians for the stolen generations:

The Apology was about acknowledging a dark chapter in our nation's history. It was also about recognising past wrongdoings and in a modest way righting the wrongs of the past. The Apology is only the first step.

If we are to move forward together as a nation, and build a stronger and fairer Australia in the twenty-first century, we must address the appalling gap between the life opportunities enjoyed by Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (Commonwealth 2009, 1)<sup>3</sup>.

The National Indigenous Reform Agreement included six key targets:

- to close the life expectancy gap within a generation.
- to halve the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five within a decade.
- to ensure access to early childhood education for all Indigenous four-year-olds in remote communities within five years.
- to halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievements for children within a decade.
- to halve the gap for Indigenous students in Year 12 attainment rates by 2020.
- to halve the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a decade (Council of Australian Governments 2009, 8).

In 2014, a school attendance target was added. The following year an expanded early childhood target was also added, after the expiry of the remote early childhood education target in 2013. The agreement included specific targets that represented meaningful improvements in outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

Funding was provided through several distinct National Partnerships that were connected to each target. The National Partnerships included:

- National Partnership on Closing the Gap in Indigenous Health Outcomes
- National Partnership on Remote Indigenous Housing
- Closing the Gap: National Partnership Agreement on Indigenous Early Childhood Development
- National Partnership on Indigenous Economic Participation
- National Partnership Agreement on Remote Service Delivery
- Closing the Gap: National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Public Internet Access
- Closing the Gap in the Northern Territory National Partnership Agreement

National leaders praised the Closing the Gap framework. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd described it as 'a new beginning' in Indigenous affairs policy that marked the 'core' of his government's commitment to working in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Commonwealth Hansard 2008, 170). Calma also saw the agenda as a starting point. He explained the new targets 'should be seen as the first step in a continuing process, where their refinement and implementation can be conducted through a genuine partnership between government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other organisations' (Calma 2008, n.p.).

To maintain transparency and accountability, each year the Commonwealth government delivered an annual Closing the Gap Report (see video below). Over the years, these reports painted a consistent picture: while progress was being made in some areas, the gap was widening in others. By 2020 it was clear the program was not working. That year's Closing the Gap report revealed that only two of the seven targets were on track to be met (National Indigenous Australians Agency 2020, 11). They were:

- to have 95 per cent of Indigenous four-year-olds enrolled in early childhood education by 2025; and

<sup>3</sup> On 13 February 2008, the then Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, issued a formal apology to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, particularly to the Stolen Generations whose lives had been destroyed by past government policies of forced child removal and assimilation.

- to halve the gap for Indigenous Australians aged 20–24 in Year 12 attainment or equivalent by 2020. (See Appendix One)

There are several reasons why some targets progressed while others failed. The targets were framed relative to non-Indigenous health and life outcomes. In many cases, Indigenous health and life outcomes did improve, but not enough to bridge the gap that had widened by improved non-Indigenous health and life outcomes. Other factors also contributed. The 2020 Closing the Gap report noted that governments varied in prioritising the targets, did not always collect accurate data, and failed to invest in research into how to improve progress on targets (National Indigenous Australians Agency 2020, 20).

Many Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians were extremely concerned about the lack of progress. The failure is not limited to numbers on a spreadsheet but represents poorer health and life outcomes for real people. Arrernte and Gurdanji woman Pat Turner, the CEO of the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation and Lead Convenor of the National Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations (Coalition of Peaks)<sup>4</sup> lamented the ‘seemingly endless cycle of failure’ (Allam 2020a, n.p.). In 2020, Prime Minister Scott Morrison delivered a sobering assessment of Closing the Gap:

For 12 years, I have sat in this chamber and listened to Closing the Gap speeches. It’s a tale of hope, frustration and disappointment — a tale of good intentions and, indeed, good faith. But the results are not good enough. This is, sadly, still true.

Last year I opened this address with what I believe is a national truth and a national shame — that our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Australia today do not have the same opportunities as all other children growing up in Australia. They never have in Australia. Never. This is the ultimate test of our efforts — that every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boy and girl can grow up in this country with the same opportunities and expectations as any other Australian boy and girl (Commonwealth Hansard 2020, 969).

Video: Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s 2021 Closing the Gap Statement to Parliament ([link](#)). (See Appendix 2 for further information)

### The Start of the Closing the Gap Refresh

The Closing the Gap framework was intended to operate over a 10-year cycle. Recognising that this cycle was almost complete and that many of the targets had not been met, COAG agreed to ‘refresh’ the agenda in 2016 (Council of Australian Governments 2016, n.p.). Members of the Coalition of Peaks were supportive of a new process but were worried that Australian governments might adopt a new approach without the formal say and involvement of Indigenous peoples. Most community-controlled peak bodies wanted more time to consider what a new framework might look like (Coalition of Peaks 2020, n.p.).

Government pressed ahead. By the end of 2017, all levels of government had commenced the process of refreshing the Closing the Gap framework. In February 2018, however, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ alarm about the process intensified. That month, a Special Gathering of 64 prominent Indigenous leaders called on all Australian governments to negotiate with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their representative bodies on the next targets. Palawa elder and lawyer Michael Mansell explained that he did not hold much hope for the refresh process:

If we really want to make a difference to the living standard of Aboriginal people, it must be driven by Aboriginal people who are directly affected. There needs to be a shift in the administration of the policy from the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet to a new national Aboriginal body (Higgins and Conifer 2018, n.p.)

<sup>4</sup> The Coalition of Peaks comprises more than 80 peak bodies representing First Nations community-controlled organisations and some independent statutory organisations.

The meeting put governments on notice but did not immediately lead to a change in approach. Pat Turner explained that the consultations that followed were 'superficial' given they did not engage with Indigenous communities and perspectives. Turner argued that despite promising rhetoric, the approach:

has been 'more of the same old same old'. This damaging process has only further entrenched the failed way that governments work with Indigenous peoples and their communities (Turner 2018, n.p.).

The non-government organisation, Close the Gap Campaign Steering Committee, agreed, reporting that: 'the refresh process has lacked clarity and appears to be promoting an agenda based on views within government that have involved virtually no engagement with First Peoples in their development' (Close the Gap Steering Committee 2018, 9).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations continued to press. In early October 2018, a group of 14 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled peak organisations (consisting of land councils, health groups and social and legal services) wrote to the Prime Minister, State Premiers and Territory Chief Ministers. They insisted that COAG not agree to any changes to the Closing the Gap framework 'without formal input and support from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities' (Coalition of Peaks 2020, n.p.).

The Northern Territory was the only government that responded to the letter. Frustrated and disappointed, the 14 peak organisations adopted a different strategy, writing a second letter and releasing it to the media. The letter read:

The gap won't close without our full involvement. All of us believe it is essential that agreement is reached on the Closing the Gap Refresh policy between Indigenous organisations, on behalf of communities across Australia and Australian governments (Breen 2018, n.p.).

This time it worked. Prime Minister Scott Morrison met with members of the 14 peak organisations and agreed that the Coalition of Peaks should share in ownership and decision making on Closing the Gap (Coalition of Peaks 2020, n.p.). In November 2018, COAG also agreed to those terms and formally committed to entering into respectful partnerships with Indigenous communities in developing and monitoring appropriate targets:

COAG recognises that in order to effect real change, governments must work collaboratively and in genuine, formal partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as they are the essential agents of change. This formal partnership must be based on mutual respect between parties and an acceptance that direct engagement and negotiation will be the preferred pathway to productive and effective agreements. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples must play an integral part in the making of the decisions that affect their lives – this is critical to closing the gap (Council of Australian Governments 2018, n.p.).

Commitment to Closing the Gap required changes to the ordinary public sector processes. For example, the original Closing the Gap strategy lacked stability and consistency in policy and program design. In 2018 the National Employment Services Association (NESA) reported that in their experience, 'services and programmes related to Closing the Gap in employment are all too often subject to regular large-scale reform, rapid implementation timeframes, or both'. However, to Close the Gap in Indigenous employment, 'greater consideration needs to be given to the impacts of reform, change and implementation' (NESA Response 2018, 7). NESA also emphasised the importance of accurate and consistently gathered quantitative and qualitative data for determining what is working and what is not. In practice, this requires Governments to create new partnerships with academics, businesses and peak bodies to identify and collate this data.

Negotiations continued over the summer. In March 2019, COAG and the Coalition of Peaks signed the *Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap 2019-2029*. Prime Minister Scott Morrison explained that the agreement:

recognises that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples must play an integral part in making the decisions that affect their lives. This agreement will put Indigenous peoples at the heart of the development and implementation of the next phase of Closing the Gap, embedding shared decision making and accountability at the centre of the way we do business (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet 2019, n.p.).

The Partnership Agreement ensured that – for the first time – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples would share decision-making in relation to Closing the Gap. The Agreement led directly to the negotiation and finalisation of the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, signed by representatives of the Commonwealth, state and territory governments, the President of the Australian Local Government Association and the Coalition of Peaks in July 2020. Pat Turner described the National Agreement as ‘a real turning point’ (Allam 2020b, n.p.) by setting ‘a new benchmark for our people and our relationship with governments’ (Turner 2021, n.p.). In the past, the original Closing the Gap policy agreed to in 2008, only captured some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ voices on policy and program design which meant that it lacked full ownership from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through their representatives. As a result, most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people considered the original Closing the Gap framework as an initiative of Australian governments.

The 2020 National Agreement marked the first time that Indigenous organisations were involved in drafting targets as part of the Closing the Gap framework. Prime Minister Scott Morrison explained its significance:

Today finally marks a new chapter in our efforts to close the gap — one built on mutual trust, shared responsibility, dignity and respect. The gaps we are now seeking to close are the gaps that have now been defined by the representatives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This is as it should be. This creates a shared commitment and a shared responsibility (Higgins 2020, n.p.).

Shadow Minister for Indigenous Australians and Wiradjuri woman, Linda Burney also welcomed the new partnership, noting that it was grounded on the principle of self-determination. Burney cautioned, however, that targets ‘must be backed by money actions and accountability. Targets are only part of the story’ (Higgins, Collard and Ryan 2020, n.p.).

Video: Shadow Minister for Indigenous Australians, Linda Burney, welcomes the new Closing the Gap Agreement ([link](#)).

The National Agreement was premised on ‘a new approach’ where ‘policy making that impacts on the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is done in full and genuine partnership’ (National Agreement on Closing the Gap 2020, 4). The Agreement is built around four Priority Reforms designed to change the way Governments work with First Nations peoples:

- Developing and strengthening structures to ensure the full involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in shared decision making at the national, state and local or regional level and embedding their ownership, responsibility and expertise to close the gap.
- Building the formal Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled services sector to deliver Closing the Gap services and programs.
- Ensuring all mainstream government agencies and institutions undertake systemic and structural transformation to contribute to Closing the Gap, improve accountability and respond to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- Ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have access to, and the capability to use, locally relevant data and information to monitor the implementation of the Priority Reforms, the Closing the Gap targets and drive local priorities (National Closing the Gap Agreement 2020, 5–13).

Within these priority reforms sit 17 socio-economic outcomes and targets developed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The targets cover education, employment, health and wellbeing, early childhood care and development, justice, safety, child protection, economic participation, housing, land and waters, digital inclusion and languages.

Video: Minister for Indigenous Australians, Ken Wyatt, talks about the new Closing the Gap Agreement ([link](#))

### **The Establishment of the Joint Council on Closing the Gap**

In 2019, COAG also established a Joint Council on Closing the Gap to assist in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the new targets. In addition to representatives from governments, the Council included 12 members of the Coalition of Peaks and a representative of the Australian Local Government Association. The 12 Coalition of Peaks members are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who hold broad geographic and subject

matter coverage. Their role is to support national leadership, coordination and cooperation on Closing the Gap and provide advice to COAG<sup>5</sup> (Joint Council on Closing the Gap 2019, n.p.). Notably, this was the first COAG Council to include members from outside government - a significant step in demonstrating a renewed commitment to developing respectful partnerships.

### **New Focus Areas for the Closing the Gap Refresh**

Decision-makers in government faced several key challenges. One key challenge was to ensure priorities were shared across key stakeholders and that the coordination of activities worked to support achievement against the targets. Another challenge was ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were involved in decisions that determine the setting of local priorities, defining activities and directing investment. Members from the Coalition of Peaks viewed community input and feedback as integral for tailoring services, service guidelines, and priorities to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The overall sentiment shared amongst members of the Coalition of Peaks was that there needed to be a concerted effort to meaningfully engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to develop and design programs and policies that would connect more clearly with their values and experiences.

But what would this look like in practice? And how could it be accomplished? The Commonwealth government's decision to step away from its commitment by failing to renew funding and partnerships in the initial cycle left many Indigenous stakeholders cynical and distrustful.

Linda Burney, the Minister for Indigenous Australians, noted that 'the Closing the Gap architecture can only work when all parties are invested and there is a coordinated effort from all jurisdictions in partnership with First Nations peoples' (Morse 2022, n.p.). As Minister Burney explained, to give the refresh the greatest chance of success, governments must both commit to the strategy and prove that commitment.

Implementation and accountability challenges weakened the initial Closing the Gap program. While the COVID-19 pandemic delayed progress on the new National Agreement, the parties to the Agreement developed comprehensive implementation plans, potentially signalling a new approach. In 2021, each party developed and published their own plan which outlined how their policies and programs are aligned to the National Agreement and what actions they will take to realise the Priority Reforms and the socio-economic targets.

Each party has also agreed to report annually on their efforts. The Joint Council will consider the implementation plans and provide advice on how the parties can better work together to achieve shared outcomes where relevant. The Productivity Commission has also been tasked, following the publication of implementation plans, with monitoring and updating progress towards the targets via a publicly accessible [dashboard](#). It also publishes an [annual data compilation report](#) to monitor progress under the Agreement.

The parties have also committed to institute regular reviews to promote accountability and transparency. The Productivity Commission will undertake an independent review of progress every three years with the first expected to be reviewed by 2023. Significantly, reflective of the partnership approach that culminated in the National Agreement, an independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led review will also be conducted within twelve months of each Productivity Commission review. The Indigenous-led review will provide decision-makers with an 'opportunity to better understand Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' experiences of change' informing development of the strategy (Closing the Gap 2022, n.p.).

The Commonwealth government has also begun to commit substantial funding to the refreshed agenda. Its first implementation plan comprised \$1.1 billion, including \$378 million for a reparations scheme for Stolen Generations survivors in the ACT and the Northern Territory. A priority for Indigenous Australians for many years, successive Commonwealth governments had dismissed the prospect of such a scheme. The decision suggests that government is meaningfully listening to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Pat Turner, the CEO of the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation and Lead Convenor of the National Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations (Coalition of Peaks), welcomed the announcement, recognising that it marked a commitment by the Commonwealth government to the refreshed agenda:

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<sup>5</sup> COAG replaced by the National Federation Reform Council / National Cabinet in 2020.

We have seen governments slowly walk away from the previous Closing the Gap agreement, our programs were being defunded, and governments were no longer working together. The Prime Minister is beginning to overturn some significant legacy issues, and some chronic underfunding of vital services for our peoples (Gooley 2021, n.p.).

Nonetheless, as Turner noted, the initial Closing the Gap framework failed after the Commonwealth government stepped away from its commitments. The refreshed agenda will only succeed if all governments stay the course.

### **Is the Refresh Working?**

In July 2022, the Productivity Commission found that only four of the 17 targets were on track to be met. Some gaps were worsening, including rates of adult imprisonment, out of home care, child development and deaths by suicide (Morse 2022, n.p.). Minister Burney described the findings as ‘disappointing’ and reiterated her commitment to work collaboratively and in partnership with the Coalition of Peaks and state and territory ministerial colleagues (Collard 2022, n.p.).

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap is not legislated and nor is it a legally binding contract. There is no legal redress if the commitments made by governments are not fulfilled. Nevertheless, the Labor government has confirmed its support for the National Agreement and is committed to its effective working. It sees the implementation of the Uluru Statement from the Heart as part of this commitment.

According to Professor Megan Davis, the Uluru Statement from the Heart provides one approach that could strengthen the framework through structural reform which is ‘where the real power lies’ (Phelan, 2020, n.p.). The Statement calls for an Indigenous representative body to be put in the Australian Constitution. A constitutionally enshrined First Nations Voice could enhance the position and voice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations when developing policy that affects Indigenous Australians. A First Nations Voice could also contribute to reframing the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the Australian state. As co-chairs of the Close the Gap campaign, June Oscar and Karl Briscoe have stated, ‘Self-determination is critical to ensure that change occurs, our voices must be heard by governments at every level of society’ (Hislop 2021, n.p.).

### **Conclusions**

The health and life outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have lagged those of non-Indigenous Australians since records have been monitored. First developed in 2008, the ‘Closing the Gap’ framework sought to reduce inequality and overcome disadvantage. The framework was underpinned by the belief that when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a genuine say in the design and delivery of policies, programs and services that affect them, better life outcomes are achieved. However, the initial program did not succeed. Targets were not set in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and governments were not committed to its success. In 2018, COAG and the Coalition of Peaks reached agreement to ‘refresh’ Closing the Gap. Built on partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and organisations and with a renewed commitment by all Australian governments, the new Closing the Gap framework focuses on changing the way governments work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to improve health and life outcomes across 17 targets.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Closing the Gap Initial Targets

- to close the life expectancy gap within a generation.
  - The Australian Bureau of Statistics found by 2009 that Indigenous men born in the period 2005-2007 could be expected to live to 66.9 years which was almost 12 years less than a non-Indigenous male who could expect to live 78.7 years. Similarly, Indigenous women in the same period were expected to live to 72.6 years of age, 10 years less than a non-Indigenous woman who could expect to live 82.6 years (HealthInfoNet 2009, 3).
- to halve the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five within a decade.
  - According to the 2009 Summary of Australian Indigenous health, in 2005- 2007, the infant mortality rate for babies born to Indigenous women was highest in the NT (almost 16 babies died out of 1,000 births) and WA (10 babies died out of 1,000 births). NSW and SA were the lowest in that almost nine babies died out of 1,000 births for both States (HealthInfoNet 2009, 3).
- to ensure access to early childhood education for all Indigenous four-year-olds in remote communities within five years.
  - The 2009 Closing the Gap report found that Indigenous children aged 3 to 5 years of age living in remote communities were less likely to attend a preschool compared to those living in major cities, and that those residing in major cities were only slightly more likely to attend preschools than those living regionally or remotely (Closing the Gap Report 2009, 13).
- to halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievements for children within a decade.
  - The 2009 Closing the Gap report found that academic achievement is lower for Indigenous students across all primary school and high school year levels. This was particularly so for Indigenous students residing in remote communities who had extremely poor levels of reading, writing and numeracy which did not meet the national minimum standard (Closing the Gap Report 2009, 15).
- to halve the gap for Indigenous students in year 12 attainment rates by 2020.
  - In 2007, only 42.9 per cent of Indigenous 17-year-olds attended secondary school compared to the 65 per cent of non-Indigenous 17-year-olds (Closing the Gap Report 2009, 16).
- to halve the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a decade.
  - Australian Census data from 2006 revealed approximately 48 per cent of the Indigenous population was employed compared to 72 per cent for non- Indigenous Australians (Closing the Gap Report 2009, 17).

## Appendix 2: What Went Wrong with the Original Closing the Gap Framework?

In the years following the signing of the National Indigenous Reform Agreement, it became clear that the 'gap' in Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians' health and life outcomes had not been closed. What went wrong? Three main issues have been identified.

First, there was a lack of genuine engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Closing the Gap emerged out of a public campaign initiated and led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and organisations. However, comprehensive inquiries revealed that 'there was limited consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders in the development of the original Closing the Gap framework'. For instance, working groups responsible for overseeing the design did not include representatives of First Nations people. Similarly, governments routinely failed to consult with the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples (following its establishment in 2011), the peak representative body for Indigenous peoples in Australia, as they had promised (Auditor-General 2019, 30-31). Prime Minister Scott Morrison surmised, 'We told Indigenous Australians what the gap was that we were going to close – and somehow thought they should be thankful for that' (Higgins, Collard, and Ryan 2020, n.p.). Gomeri man and Tamworth Regional Councillor, Marc Sutherland agreed, explaining:

Aboriginal people have been asking for their voices to be heard on issues that are local and on priorities that are important to them. The voice that is coming from the Aboriginal community is that closing the gap needs to be driven by Aboriginal people and supported by the government, not the other way around (Gilbert 2022, n.p.).

Video: Prime Minister Scott Morrison explains that the original approach did not listen to Indigenous Australians ([link](#)).

Second, Australian governments were not committed to the success of the Closing the Gap strategy. In 2019, the Commonwealth Auditor-General found that arrangements for monitoring, evaluating, and reporting progress towards meeting the targets was only partially effective between 2008 and 2014, and since 2015 has 'not been effective' as mechanisms for monitoring government performance 'have ceased' (Auditor-General 2019, 53-55). Monitoring was not the only function hampered. As Michael Dillon has explained, oversight institutions established to monitor the implementation of the Closing the Gap strategy were abolished, national partnerships under the National Indigenous Reform Agreement were not renewed, and funding agreements were not replaced (Dillon 2020, n.p.). In short, Australian governments reduced funding and dismantled the architecture necessary to implement the strategy effectively.

Third, Australia's federal structure also presented problems. The Constitution distributes law-making power between the Commonwealth and the States. Both levels of government have the power to make laws with respect to Indigenous affairs, and responsibility for many issues of concern for Indigenous peoples, including health, education, and housing, lies with the States. This can produce duplication and impose onerous requirements on Indigenous communities. It also means that the Commonwealth must work with the States to implement programs and policies. The federal government has sought to resolve this challenge by using intergovernmental structures like COAG and partnering with Indigenous communities and stakeholders.

However, over the course of the Closing the Gap cycle the Commonwealth shifted from cooperation and coordination towards centralised and top-down interventions. For example, in 2014 the federal government introduced the Indigenous Advancement Strategy. The strategy rationalised 150 Indigenous programs and services previously run by eight different departments into five funding streams centralised within the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. The shift was announced with 'minimal consultation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' and 'little or no consultation with those working at the coalface' (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner 2014, 18). In 2017, the Australian National Audit Office found that the Strategy was planned and designed in just seven weeks (Australian National Audit Office 2017, 26).

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