

POLICY ANALYSIS

**Policy Analysis: Closing the Gap – Consultation Process and Policy Impact**

**Indigenous People and Policy**

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**Summary Paper: Closing the Gap Consultation Process and Policy Impact**

The Closing the Gap policy was introduced in Australia in 2008 to address the significant gap in health, education, and employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (Australian Government, 2021). While the policy has resulted in increased investment and some improvements in health, education, and employment outcomes, progress towards closing the gap has been limited, and there are concerns about the extent to which Indigenous voices are being heard and included in decision-making processes (Parliament of Australia, 2020). In 2018, the policy was revised to include more extensive consultation processes, including national, regional, and local engagement, and a focus on empowerment and self-determination for Indigenous people (Australian Government, 2021). This essay analyses the positive and negative impacts of the Closing the Gap policy and the methods and strategies utilised in the consultation process for the revised policy, applying theories such as power-sharing, collaborative governance, and cultural responsiveness to maximise the chances of success.

The Closing the Gap policy has resulted in increased investment in Indigenous communities in areas such as health, education, and employment. The Australian Government has committed over $4.6 billion towards Closing the Gap programs and initiatives since 2008 (Australian Government, 2021). While Indigenous Australians still experience poorer health outcomes than non-Indigenous Australians, there have been some improvements in areas such as child mortality rates. Between 1998 and 2018, the Indigenous child mortality rate decreased from 13.9 to 5.1 per 1000 live births (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021). The policy has resulted in increased access to education for Indigenous Australians, with the proportion of Indigenous Australians aged 20-24 years who had attained Year 12 or equivalent increasing from 45.4% to 65.3% between 2008 and 2018 (Australian Government, 2021). There have also been some improvements in employment outcomes for Indigenous Australians since the policy's inception, with the employment rate for Indigenous Australians aged 15-64 years increasing from 47.5% to 49.9% between 2008 and 2018 (Australian Government, 2021).

While there have been some improvements in certain areas, overall progress towards closing the gap has been limited. For example, there has been little progress in reducing the gap in life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021). The initial iterations of the policy faced criticisms for inadequate consultation with Indigenous communities, and despite improvements in the consultation process in the revised policy, there are still concerns about the extent to which Indigenous voices are being heard and included in decision-making processes (Parliament of Australia, 2020). There is a risk that joint partnerships between government and Indigenous communities can be used as a means of shifting responsibility away from the government and onto Indigenous communities. Additionally, some argue that the funding is inadequate to achieve meaningful change, with the Australian Medical Association stating that the government needs to commit more funding to Closing the Gap programs to achieve the desired outcomes (Australian Medical Association, 2021).

The consultation processes utilised in the development of the revised Closing the Gap policy emphasised the principles of joint partnerships, roundtable discussions, co-design, and empowerment (Australian Government, 2019). Joint partnerships between government and Indigenous communities were a key component of the consultation process, aimed at ensuring that Indigenous perspectives and experiences are taken into account in policy development and decision-making processes (Australian Government, 2019). Roundtable discussions brought together government representatives and Indigenous stakeholders to discuss issues related to Closing the Gap and develop solutions collaboratively (Australian Government, 2019). Co-design involved working collaboratively with Indigenous communities to develop solutions that are tailored to their specific needs and priorities (Australian Government, 2019). The revised policy aimed to empower Indigenous communities to take control of their own lives and futures, and to work in genuine partnership with the government (Australian Government, 2019).

To maximise the chances of success in consultation processes such as the Closing the Gap policy, there are several theories that can be applied. Power-sharing emphasises the importance of sharing power and decision-making between different stakeholders, which can help to ensure that Indigenous perspectives and experiences are adequately represented in the policy-making process (Healey & Hodgson, 2015). This can help to build trust and increase the likelihood of successful outcomes.

Another theory that can be applied is social exchange theory, which suggests that people are more likely to engage in cooperative behaviours when they feel that their contributions are valued and that they will receive something of value in return (Blau, 1964). In the context of the Closing the Gap policy, this could mean involving Indigenous communities in decision-making and ensuring that the policy addresses their needs and concerns.

In addition, the social identity theory can be useful in understanding the role of identity in consultation processes. This theory suggests that people's sense of identity is closely tied to the groups they belong to and that they are more likely to support policies that align with their group identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Therefore, it's important to ensure that Indigenous perspectives and experiences are reflected in the policy to help build a sense of collective identity and ownership of the policy among Indigenous communities.

In conclusion, the Closing the Gap policy has had both positive and negative impacts on Indigenous populations in Australia. The policy's positive impacts include improved health outcomes, increased educational and employment opportunities, while the negative impacts include lack of progress, inadequate funding, and a lack of consultation with Indigenous communities. The 2018 revision of the policy addressed some of the concerns raised by Indigenous Australians and stakeholders, including a co-design process, a greater focus on early childhood development, greater accountability measures, and increased funding. The consultation processes for both the 2008 policy and the 2018 revision were collaborative efforts involving various stakeholders, including Indigenous communities, organisations, and experts. The consultation processes were critical in ensuring that the policy reflected the needs and concerns of Indigenous Australians. However, there is still much work to be done to achieve the policy's goals of reducing the health and education disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

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