

Giving up or giving in? Remote Employment Programs for Aboriginal Australians

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January 2025

After nearly 50 years of remote employment programs for Aboriginals, these communities have the lowest Aboriginal employment levels in Australia. Despite many evaluations, do we know what types of policies and programs work best at increasing employment for Aboriginal Australians in remote communities? Have we considered all possible policy options?

This paper considers how evaluation efforts and policy suggestions have changed.¹ It finds a noticeable shift in evaluation focus from around the late 2010s, away from clear and objective measures of employment and community functioning and towards subjective, qualitative measures that focus on redefining how employment and community functioning are measured.

Policy dialogue has largely ceased questioning whether remote employment and community development programs can achieve tangible results or are worthwhile investments. There is growing emphasis on turning 'cultural activities' into government-funded jobs and little critical consideration of alternatives to remote employment programs. There is only muted acknowledgement of the circumstances that make individuals uncompetitive in the open labour market.

There is a sense that policy has given up on employment in remote Australia and is giving in to those who refuse to acknowledge the incompatibility of creating jobs for those who exist well outside the labour market's requirements.

Without serious policy focus on changing the circumstances that render people unemployable and with no apparent will to ask what the value is of funding jobs in remote communities that have no prospects other than permanent reliance on government largesse, it remains unlikely that remote employment programs will help to close the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians.

Background

Aboriginal Australians are less likely to be employed than non-Aboriginal Australians. Nationally, in 2021, 56 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 25 to 64 years were employed.² This is an increase from 51 per cent in 2016.³ However, this is considerably lower than the 78 per cent of working-age non-Aboriginal Australians employed in 2021.⁴

Employment levels vary across jurisdictions. In 2021, employment was highest for Aboriginal Australians living in the Australian Capital Territory (73 per cent) and lowest for individuals residing in the Northern Territory (34 per cent).⁵ The gap in employment between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians increases with geographic remoteness.⁶ Aboriginal employment decreases with remoteness, whereas non-Aboriginal employment increases slightly⁷ (Figure 1). Remote communities have the lowest Aboriginal employment levels.

¹ Evaluations encompass formal evaluations, reviews and policy discussions.

² The most recent publicly available data.

³ Productivity Commission. (2023). Closing the Gap information repository

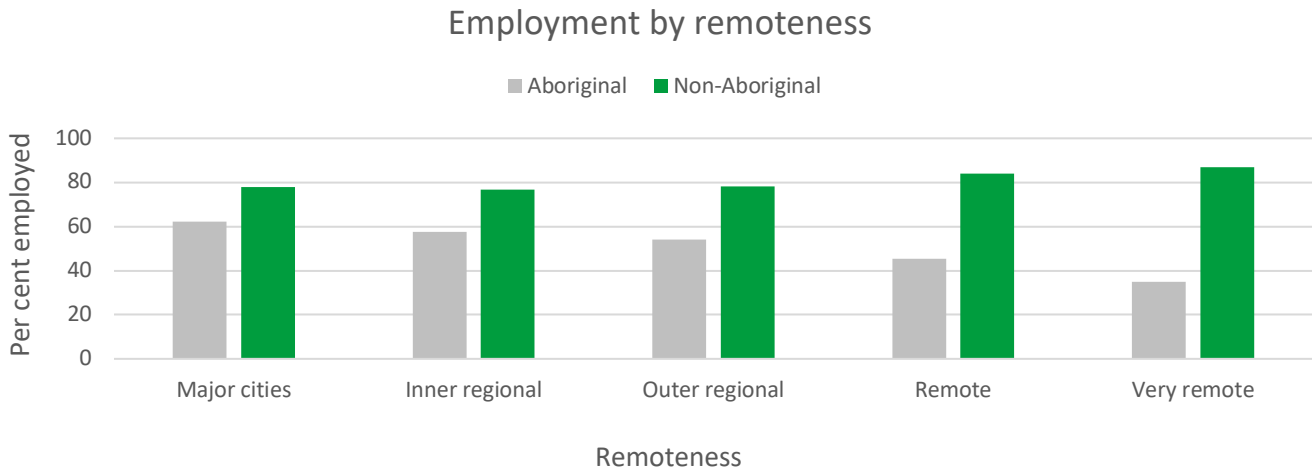
⁴ Productivity Commission. (2023)

⁵ Productivity Commission. (2023)

⁶ Productivity Commission. (2023)

⁷ Productivity Commission. (2023)

Figure 1: Per cent of individuals employed by Aboriginality and geographic remoteness



Source: Productivity Commission (2023)

What factors contribute to low employment in remote locations?

Remote locations typically have limited labour markets and a low (or no) economic base to create employment opportunities.⁸ Also, remote locations generally have lower access to services affecting an individual's employability, such as healthcare and education.⁹

Aboriginal Australians – particularly those who live in remote locations/designated Aboriginal communities - are disproportionately affected by factors such as low literacy and numeracy, not speaking English as a first language, chronic health issues and disability, intergenerational unemployment and income support dependence, drug and

alcohol dependence, contact with the criminal justice system, and entrenched social and community problems.¹⁰

Cultural factors (such as balancing family, community, and spiritual obligations with work or low perceived relevance of work) and attitudes and decisions of influential community members can also play a role in employment.¹¹ Logistical factors, such as lack of transport or difficulty obtaining access to premises or permits/licences, can further limit employment prospects.¹²

How have governments attempted to address low Aboriginal employment in remote locations?

Since the late 1970s, the Australian Government has funded programs to increase employment for Aboriginal Australians. The Community Development Employment Projects program (CDEP, from 1977 to 2015) was Aboriginal-specific and operated in remote and non-remote locations.

8 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and National Indigenous Australians Agency. (2024). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework; Department of the Treasury. (2023). Working Future: the Australian Government's White Paper on jobs and opportunities; Dockery, M. & Lovell, J. (2016). Far removed: an insight into the labour markets of remote communities in central Australia. *Australian Journal of Labour Economics*, 19(3), 145-174

9 Productivity Commission. (2023)

10 Senate Standing Committees on Finance and Public Administration (SSCFPA). (2017). Senate Inquiry into the

appropriateness and effectiveness of the objectives, design, implementation and evaluation of the Community

Development Program (CDP). Parliament of Australia: Canberra

11 Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. (2018a). The many pathways of the Community Development Programme – Summary report of community voices and stakeholder perspectives from eight communities

12 Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. (2018a); House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs. (2021). Report on Indigenous Participation in Employment and Business. Parliament of Australia: Canberra

More recent programs, such as the Remote Jobs and Communities Program (RJCP) (2013 to 2015) and Community Development Program (CDP) (2015 to 2024), have not been Aboriginal-specific but focussed on remote and very remote locations where a greater proportion of Aboriginal Australians live relative to non-Aboriginal Australians.¹³ Most program participants are Aboriginal.¹⁴

Broadly, these programs seek to provide ‘work-like’ opportunities, usually in contexts with no or limited mainstream employment opportunities.¹⁵ Despite some administrative differences between these programs (such as their degree of alignment with mainstream social security policies like Work for the Dole¹⁶), all reflect the short-term objective of having working-age individuals participate in work-like activities to improve their employment prospects while improving their communities.¹⁷ All have the long-term goal of supporting transitions to stable, ongoing employment – or ‘real’ jobs – thereby reducing welfare dependence. All share the underlying assumption that community and economic development are closely related and that developing local communities develops the local economy, creating jobs.

Most recently, the Australian Government has announced that the Remote Jobs and Economic Development Program (RJEDP) will create 3000 jobs over three years for people living in remote areas. Few details are available; however, trials are currently underway to “inform the design of the [program] ... test ideas and understand barriers to employment in very remote regions of Australia that are a significant distance from a regional centre,” and “implement projects that help move participants into real jobs, capture learnings and insights, and further strengthen community-led approaches.”¹⁸

Have remote employment programs changed anything?

A key issue is whether remote employment rates for Aboriginal Australians have changed significantly over the past decades. Answering this is surprisingly challenging, partly due to a lack of publicly accessible information disaggregated by location, Aboriginal identification, and ‘type’ of employment. For example, employment is not consistently disaggregated into program (i.e., a government-subsidised position) and non-program (i.e., non-subsidised) employment. The latter measure is the crucial indicator of whether programs fulfil their objective of moving people from unemployment into ‘real’ jobs. Available information shows that there has been little change in ‘real’ employment over time (and, potentially, even a decline). For instance, Venn and Biddle¹⁹ observed that Aboriginal employment rates in remote areas dropped substantially between 2011 and 2016 due to a combination of the CDEP scheme being phased out and poor labour market conditions. In other words, subsidised employment accounted for a notable proportion of total employment, and there was no movement into ‘real’ jobs to make up for the removal of subsidised positions. This raises a vital policy question: if remote employment programs have not succeeded in creating viable, non-subsidised labour markets, and if there are no ‘real’ jobs to be had, what is the purpose of remote labour market programs?

¹³ Note that this is not an exhaustive list and that labour market and community development programs may operate alongside programs such as Job Services Australia and the Indigenous Employment Program. See National Indigenous Australians Agency. (2021). *Indigenous Employment Program Evaluation – Final Report*.

¹⁴ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. (2018b). *Community Development Programme: Evaluation of participation and employment outcomes*

¹⁵ Fowkes, L., & Sanders, W.G. (2015). *A survey of Remote Jobs and Communities Program(me) providers: one year in*. Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University: Canberra

¹⁶ Altman, J. (2016) A most egregious transition: CDEP to CDP. In Jordan, K. and Fowkes, L. (eds.), *Job creation and income support in remote Indigenous Australia: moving forward with a better system*, CAEPR Topical Issue 2/2016, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University: Canberra, pp. 4-8.

¹⁷ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. (2018b); Fowkes, L., & Sanders, W.G. (2015)

¹⁸ See: <https://www.niaa.gov.au/our-work/employment-and-economic-development/job-trials-testing-new-approaches-remote-employment>

¹⁹ Venn, D. & Biddle, N. (2018). Recent Trends in Indigenous Employment. *Journal of Australian Political Economy*, 82, 37-56

Do we know what works to increase Aboriginal employment in remote locations?

There have been numerous reviews and evaluations of remote employment programs.²⁰ Many focus on a relatively narrow range of process- or output-oriented measures (such as whether the service was delivered in line with its funding agreement or whether a participant completed all program requirements).²¹ While there have been some positive findings about outcomes, these are typically negligible. A consistent finding is that programs have had little impact on improving long-term employment for Aboriginal Australians living in remote communities.²² Some program participants succeed in obtaining casual or short-term positions, but this only sometimes translates to ongoing, full-time employment.²³ Many program participants are long-term income support recipients who have moderate to extreme barriers to employment (such as poor literacy or significant health issues), which often remain unaddressed.²⁴

In some instances, negative program impacts have been reported, such as community members believing that their local labour market and community have worsened since the program was implemented.²⁵ Programs may be unsuccessful due to adopting a ‘one size fits all approach’ that does not consider the low availability of employment in most remote communities and different community needs across various locations.²⁶ It has also been suggested that poor employment outcomes for Aboriginal people living in remote areas are the result of not integrating Aboriginal Australians into mainstream society and the mainstream

economy and that government-led efforts to boost remote economies have often had little effect.²⁷

It is well established that Aboriginal Australians in remote communities do not move to geographic areas with more significant employment opportunities. This likely reflects a lack of human capital (lack of education, skills, or other capacity to be competitive in the mainstream labour market) and cultural factors.²⁸ For example, work may be seen as irrelevant to the daily lives of people living in remote communities, influential community members may not support employment programs, and cultural obligations may be incompatible with work attendance and employer expectations.²⁹ Also, well-intentioned measures that seek to preserve culture and connection to the country may have unintended consequences. Influences such as native title – incentivising individuals to remain in one location through benefits such as royalties – can affect prospects of engaging in broader labour markets.³⁰

What is the current policy context for remote employment programs?

There is a sufficient amount of documentation about barriers to employment in remote Australia. Despite this, the development phase of the new RJEDP involves work to “understand barriers to employment in very remote regions of Australia that are a significant distance from a regional centre.”³¹ It is not apparent what new information is being sought. Nor is it clear how this work may build on prior evaluations and policy discussions – mainly because there has been no concerted effort to collate past work and

²⁰ This mainly consists of work focussing specifically on the impacts of remote employment programs, but also includes work that has examined Aboriginal employment more broadly.

²¹ See for example Australian National Audit Office. (2017). *Design and Implementation of the Community Development Programme*. Commonwealth of Australia: Canberra

²² Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. (2018b)

²³ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. (2018a)

²⁴ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. (2018b)

²⁵ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. (2018a); Staines, Z. (2023). Work and wellbeing in remote Australia: Moving beyond punitive ‘workfare’. *Journal of Sociology*, 59(4), 808-827

²⁶ Staines, Z. (2018). Ground-level impacts of remote employment policy: social disadvantage under the Community Development Programme. *Journal of Australian Political Economy*, 82, 107-32

²⁷ Hughes, H., & Warin, J. (2005). *A new deal for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in remote communities*. Centre for Independent Studies: Sydney

²⁸ Gray, M., Hunter, B., & Lohar, S. (2012). *Increasing Indigenous employment rates. Issues paper no. 3*. Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, Australian Government: Canberra.

²⁹ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. (2018a)

³⁰ Hunter, B. (2009). A half-hearted defence of the CDEP scheme. *Family Matters*, 81, 43-54

³¹ National Indigenous Australians Agency. (2024). *Fact Sheet: Remote Jobs and Economic Development Program*. Available from: <https://www.niaa.gov.au/resource-centre/fact-sheet-remote-jobs-and-economic-development-program>

explore how our understanding of remote employment programs has developed and evolved over the past decades.

Overall, the RJEDP seeks to “create local, paid jobs with good conditions,” which it will do by asking communities to “identify the jobs they want and need.” The Government “will pay for these jobs to be created so community organisations and local government can hire local people.” This appears to represent a significant shift from earlier programs that emphasised the development of ‘real’ labour markets towards acknowledging that many remote labour markets can only exist with heavy government subsidisation. This again raises the question: what is the intended purpose of remote employment programs?

What do we need to know?

Improving Aboriginal employment in remote areas is a laudable goal. However, two essential questions must be answered before this goal can be translated into reality. The first is whether we have the information needed to identify what policies and programs work best at increasing employment for Aboriginal Australians in remote communities. This means identifying how employment, economic and community development outcomes have been defined and measured. The second is whether we have considered all possible policy options. This means assessing the high-level program goals, policy objectives, and overarching policy frameworks, whether those have shifted over time, and if so, in what ways.

This report does not revisit the extensive debate about past remote employment programs or present findings from past evaluations. Instead, it considers what measures past work has used (because the things a report looks for will necessarily shape what it finds) and what recommendations arose. This provides novel insight into two areas:

1. Have comprehensive evaluations informed prior debates about remote employment?
2. What policy options have been considered?

Methods

Searches were conducted using scholarly databases, government websites, and public search engines. The search terms were “Aboriginal employment,” “Indigenous employment,” “Remote employment,” “Remote labour market,” “Remote community development,” “Community Development Employment Projects,” “Community Development Program,” and “Remote Jobs and Communities Program.”³²

Older evaluations (up to the late 1990s) could not be sourced in total and were excluded in a few cases.³³ However, the historic nature of these works means their exclusion is unlikely to affect the overall results. Documents were excluded if they only presented general information (for example, comparing percentages of people employed by remoteness and Aboriginal status). This report is not concerned with operational issues such as administrative transition from one program to another, governance, compliance, and penalties or payment details.³⁴ The focus is on outcome measures and policy recommendations.

Fourteen evaluations containing program outcome measures were identified. Information about the design and data collection used in those evaluations was extracted, and policy recommendations were identified. Note that the policy recommendations relevant to this report did not include ‘operational’ matters (such as applying penalties, staff training, etc.). The focus was on high-level issues related to the overall objectives of remote employment programs.

³² While efforts were made to be as thorough as possible, factors such as the ‘visibility’ of documents to search engines may have affected document identification.

³³ E.g. Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu. (1993). *No Reverse Gear: A National Review of the Community Development Employment Projects Scheme*, Report to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission: Canberra; Office of Evaluation and

Audit. (1997). *Evaluation of the Community Development Employment Projects Program: Final Report*. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission: Canberra

³⁴ It is acknowledged that these matters can affect the findings obtained in past work. By focussing on the way in which findings were gathered rather than the findings themselves, this problem is avoided.

Results

What questions, measures, and data have informed prior debate about remote employment programs?

The questions, measures, and data that have informed debate about remote employment and community development programs have many areas for improvement. For example, the data used to measure program outcomes need to be more consistent, and without this, different programs cannot be directly compared. While using various data sources can be helpful for ‘triangulating’ findings—or seeing whether the results point in the same direction regardless of how those results are obtained—this nevertheless makes it challenging to examine trends over time or undertake before-and-after comparisons.

Programs often operate in all remote communities, meaning that a ‘comparison’ community without the program cannot be used to ascertain the counterfactual scenario (that is, what would have happened if the program had not operated).³⁵ However, relatively few evaluations have used groups such as program participants and non-program participants in the same communities or have controlled for different characteristics of communities where programs operate (such as communities with existing non-subsidised labour markets and those without).

Although many reports have sought to understand a wide range of socioeconomic outcomes, ranging from employment participation to economic circumstances to individual and community wellbeing, in practical terms, these have often been measured relatively superficially, using measures that shift between various program objectives (jobs, economic development or community development) and touch only lightly on those rather than exploring each different indicator in detail. Whether different program objectives are additive or whether they may compete with one another is generally not examined.

Outcomes are often captured using broad indicators, such as whether an individual obtained employment (regardless of what that employment was, how suitable it was to an individual, or whether it led to long-term employment). Whether programs bring about sustained improvements in local labour markets is rarely considered.

Little attention has been given to evaluating program impacts on community development (such as whether there were reductions in antisocial behaviour or other community well-being indicators). Clear definitions and measures of community development should be provided. The value created by activities relative to their cost, and whether that value interacts with ‘real’ economies within or outside communities, is not routinely assessed.³⁶ There has been scant appraisal of relationships between community development and labour market development. Thus, the assumption that community development drives economic development, which drives the creation of ‘real’ jobs, remains largely untested.

Employment programs intersect with other justice, health and economic systems that can vary between communities. This makes it challenging to determine program impacts or assess whether employment programs are only suitable for a subsection of the community (such as those with relatively less disadvantage and lower support needs). Only some evaluations have attempted to gather data about the possible impacts of other services/programs that may have been operating in the same locations simultaneously.³⁷ There needs to be more effort to incorporate trends in other measures (such as health or crime) into analyses. Without this there is no way of disentangling the potential effects of, for example, specific education or health services from those of employment and community development programs.

Table 1 summarises the objectives, measures, samples, data source/s and other characteristics of the papers reviewed.

³⁵ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. (2018b); Staines, Z. (2018)

³⁶ Department of Finance and Deregulation. (2009). *Evaluation of the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) Program*. Commonwealth of Australia: Canberra

³⁷ Given that those are typically government-run or government-funded, it is not unreasonable to expect that such information should be available.

Table 1: Summary of past evaluations

Author (year)	Objective/s and focus	Measures	Sample/s	Data source(s)	Comparison group/s	Factors controlled for
Spicer (1997)³⁸	Assess the economic, community development and social outcomes achieved through CDEP. Report on the operation and objectives of the CDEP Scheme for Indigenous Australians paying particular attention to the effectiveness of CDEP in equipping participants to transfer to other employment.	Ability to achieve unsubsidised employment outcomes; Establishment of businesses; Cost of administering program); Sources of income for CDEP organisations; Effectiveness of community administration of the scheme; Community development (community cohesion, cultural maintenance, education, health and law and order, alcohol and substance abuse, provision of essential services).	N/A	Previous reviews and reports; Submissions from stakeholders; Visitations and consultations with CDEP communities, zone meetings, Regional Councils, ATSI State Management Teams and other agencies; Contracted research into technical issues; Data on wage rates for CDEP participants and program funding, held by departments.	N/A	N/A

³⁸ Spicer, I. (1997). Independent Review of the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) Scheme. Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra

Author (year)	Objective/s and focus	Measures	Sample/s	Data source(s)	Comparison group/s	Factors controlled for
Altman & Grey (2000) ³⁹	Analyse the effects of CDEP employment on the economic status of Indigenous individuals in rural, remote, and other urban areas.	Personal income; Hours worked; employment, labour force participation and unemployment in the CDEP communities with those in non-CDEP communities	Census respondents	Census	CDEP vs non-CDEP recipients	Nil
Altman, Grey & Sanders (2000) ⁴⁰	Explore what difference it makes to the socioeconomic status of Indigenous Australians to be participating in the CDEP scheme; Compare the incomes of the CDEP employed with Indigenous people in 'mainstream' employment, the indigenous unemployed and those not in the labour force; Examine hours worked for the CDEP employed compared to the mainstream employed; Explore whether there are any noticeable labour market differences between Indigenous	Income; Hours worked; Labour characteristics of areas with and without CDEP.	NATSIS (n = 17,000) and Census (SIPF, n = 10,948) respondents	NATSIS (a nationally representative survey of indigenous people's social and economic circumstances); Census (Special Indigenous Personal Form (SIPF, used in a limited geographic area in	CDEP employed vs mainstream employed, unemployed, not in labour force; Areas with and without CDEP	Nil

³⁹ Altman, J. C. & Gray, M. C. (2000). The effects of the CDEP scheme on the economic status of indigenous Australians: Some analyses using the 1996 Census. Discussion Paper no. 195. Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University: Canberra

⁴⁰ Altman, J. C., Gray, M. C. and Sanders, W. G. (2000). Indigenous Australians working for welfare: what difference does it make? *The Australian Economic Review*, 33(4), 355-62

Author (year)	Objective/s and focus	Measures	Sample/s	Data source(s)	Comparison group/s	Factors controlled for
	communities with and without CDEP.			northern and central Australia).		
Misko (2004) ⁴¹	Describe the role of the CDEP scheme in rural and remote communities in Australia and to evaluate the effectiveness of the scheme; Identify skill requirements and other needs that have been identified by Indigenous regional communities; Identify the extent to which the Community Development Employment Projects program helps to meet these needs.	Stakeholder perceptions of needs for their communities and benefits of CDEP for their communities (e.g., lower unemployment, lower incarceration rates, positive role modelling, increased self-esteem for participants); Types of work activities undertaken; Types of enterprises established; Training and education.	Stakeholders from Tennant Creek and Roma regions. Further details about participants not given.	Interviews Program information Unit record data from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services database, and information from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission annual reports Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data on	Nil	Nil

⁴¹ Misko, J. (2004). The role of Community Development Employment Projects in rural and remote communities. National Centre for Vocational Education Research: Adelaide

Author (year)	Objective/s and focus	Measures	Sample/s	Data source(s)	Comparison group/s	Factors controlled for
				Indigenous students in schools		
Altman & Grey (2005) ⁴²	Present new evidence on the impact of the CDEP scheme on economic and social outcomes for Indigenous people in remote/very remote areas; Compare a range of economic and social outcomes of CDEP participants and those in other labour force states.	Labour force status; income and working hours; Participation in the customary economy and cultural activities (Recreational or cultural group activities; Community or special interest group activities; Funerals, ceremonies or festivals; Fishing or hunting in a group).	NATSIS respondents	2002 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey (NATSIS)	Nil	Nil
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait	Inquire into positive factors and examples amongst Indigenous communities and individuals, which have improved employment outcomes in both the public and private sectors; Recommend to the government ways this can inform future policy	N/A	N/A	Submissions and witnesses	Nil	Nil

⁴² Altman, J., & Gray, M. (2005). The economic and social impacts of the CDEP scheme in remote Australia. *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 40(3), 399-410

Author (year)	Objective/s and focus	Measures	Sample/s	Data source(s)	Comparison group/s	Factors controlled for
Islander Affairs (2007) ⁴³	development; Assess what significant factors have contributed to those positive outcomes identified, including what contribution practical reconciliation has made.					
Australian Government Department of Finance and Deregulation (2009) ⁴⁴	<p>Assess the efficiency, effectiveness and appropriateness of the CDEP program to Indigenous participants and communities in achieving the outcomes of real jobs and viable business enterprises, in remote and regional areas where the labour market was underdeveloped; Consider the efficiency and effectiveness of CDEP in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> preparing participants for mainstream employment 	<p>Number of CDEP Participants who move into non-CDEP employment; Activities have a relationship to community priorities and improve employability skills; Number of commercially viable businesses created; Number of commercially viable businesses being progressed;</p> <p>Number of non-CDEP jobs created in those businesses; Age of participant; Duration of participation; Remoteness of the CDEP; Participant 'community satisfaction' surveys and contract managers' assessment against the provider's statement made in their</p>	N/A	<p>Program/ administrative data</p> <p>Case studies</p> <p>Interviews</p> <p>Surveys</p>	Nil	Varied by analysis - some controlled for individual (e.g., age, sex, remoteness, attendance at programs, work history, access to transport, criminal history, etc) and labour market characteristics.

⁴³ House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs. (2007). *Indigenous Australians at work Successful Initiatives in Indigenous Employment*. Commonwealth of Australia: Canberra

⁴⁴ Department of Finance and Deregulation. (2009).

Author (year)	Objective/s and focus	Measures	Sample/s	Data source(s)	Comparison group/s	Factors controlled for
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • developing skills that enable participants to gain off-CDEP employment • creating incentives for participants to complete education and training • establishing and maintaining linkages to mainstream employment • programs to promote job outcomes • incubating businesses to become viable; 	<p>submission for contract against an internal evaluation criterion (demonstrated need for CDEP activities and benefits to the participants); The cost of outcomes (commencement, placement (to non-CDEP employment), after 13 weeks, and after 26 weeks); What CDEP providers saw as the community benefits flowing from the operation of CDEP; Per cent of 'Host Agreements' based in community, government, and private sector.</p>				
	<p>The extent to which CDEP substituted or displaced business and service provision in communities; The extent to which CDEP cross-subsidised the provision of government services;</p>					
	<p>Conversion of CDEP positions providing government services into real jobs.</p>					

Author (year)	Objective/s and focus	Measures	Sample/s	Data source(s)	Comparison group/s	Factors controlled for
Hunter (2009) ⁴⁵	To replicate/update Office of Evaluation and Audit (1997) findings, which used 1994 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey (NATSIS), by adding more recent data.	Victim of violence; Arrested; Financial stress; Studying; Disability; Self-assessed health status; Substance abuse; violent neighbourhood.	NATSIS respondents	NATSIS	Nil	Sex, age, households with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents, sole-parent families, multi-family households, taken from natural family, state, the standard ABS remoteness classification, difficulty in speaking English, highest qualification, and speaking an Indigenous language
Hunter & Gray (2013) ⁴⁶	Describe the nature of CDEP employment in 2008 and the extent to which it changed between 1994 and 2008; Compare a selection of economic	Number of CDEP participants; Characteristics of CDEP jobs; Hours worked; Under-employment and multiple jobs; Ability to meet cultural obligations; Personal income' Duration	NATSIS respondents	NATSIS	Non-CDEP sample	Regression analyses included age, dependent children,

⁴⁵ Hunter, B. (2009).

⁴⁶ Hunter, B., & Gray, M. (2013). Continuity and change in the Community Development Employment Projects Scheme (CDEP). *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 48(1), 35-56

Author (year)	Objective/s and focus	Measures	Sample/s	Data source(s)	Comparison group/s	Factors controlled for
	and social outcomes of CDEP participants with those of persons who were employed outside of CDEP, unemployed and not in the labour force in 2008 and the extent to which these associations changed between 1994 and 2008; Assess the extent to which CDEP participation is consistent with the community development objectives of the scheme.	on CDEP and permanency of CDEP jobs; Occupations of CDEP participants and the non-CDEP employed; Selected social characteristics of CDEP participants and community development (participation in cultural activities and connection to culture, experience of discrimination, whether had 'little or no say within community on important issues').				education, English language proficiency.
Fowkes & Sanders (2015) ⁴⁷	To examine: Basic arrangements and characteristics of RJCP provider organisations; Ideas about joblessness in remote areas and welfare conditionality; Provider relationships with government officials; Program delivery and details about money, staffing and operational challenges; Broader	Provider perceptions about the program and its participants. Questions included: Where there aren't other jobs available locally, government should have programs that allow people to do paid work that benefits their communities; Government is too focused on getting individuals to comply and not focused enough on community development;	49 senior managers within 45 RJCP provider organisations in 58 out of 60 RJCP regions	Survey	Nil	Nil

⁴⁷ Fowkes, L., & Sanders, W. (2015).

Author (year)	Objective/s and focus	Measures	Sample/s	Data source(s)	Comparison group/s	Factors controlled for
	influences shaping program delivery.	Cultural and family obligations are frequently used to avoid reasonable participation obligations; More flexibility is needed in what people can do to meet their participation obligations; Government should be tougher on people who fail to meet their participation obligations; participation requirements of people in remote communities are often unrealistic given their circumstances; Participation obligations often fail to take enough account of Indigenous peoples' cultural and family obligations; Government should provide funding to enable some people in community to earn a living practising their culture; Government has a responsibility to make sure that everyone has access to paid employment at a reasonable wage; If people can't find work in their own community, they should be required to move or lose income support				
Finance and Public Administration	Inquire into and report on the: Appropriateness and effectiveness of the objectives,	N/A	N/A	Submissions	N/A	N/A

Author (year)	Objective/s and focus	Measures	Sample/s	Data source(s)	Comparison group/s	Factors controlled for
References Committee (2017) ⁴⁸	<p>design, implementation and evaluation of the CDP; Adequacy of the policy process that led to the design of the CDP; Nature and underlying causes of joblessness in remote communities; Ability of the CDP to provide long-term solutions to joblessness, and to achieve social, economic and cultural outcomes that meet the needs and aspirations of remote Indigenous people; Impact of the CDP on the rights of participants and their communities, including the appropriateness of the payments and penalties systems;</p> <p>Funding of the CDP, including the use of unspent funds in the program; Extent of consultation</p>			Witnesses		

⁴⁸ Finance and Public Administration References Committee. (2017). Appropriateness and effectiveness of the objectives, design, implementation and evaluation of the Community Development Program (CDP). Commonwealth of Australia: Canberra

Author (year)	Objective/s and focus	Measures	Sample/s	Data source(s)	Comparison group/s	Factors controlled for
	<p>and engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the design and implementation of the CDP, and the role for local decision making within the program; Alternative approaches to addressing joblessness and community development in remote Indigenous communities;</p> <p>Any other related matters</p>					
<p>Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (2018a)⁴⁹</p>	<p>Increase understanding of the effectiveness of the CDP, with a focus on job seeker participation, engagement and job readiness, the quality of activities, short-term outcomes, and what needs to change to achieve long-term outcomes.</p>	<p>Outcome data from administration data (Average number of penalties, Average placed in a job, Average number of placements); Communication skills (English proficiency); Identification as indigenous; Personal barriers (age, disability, work capacity, personal factors that may have a high impact on their ability to work including anger</p>	<p>115 stakeholders</p> <p>936 community members</p> <p>24 CDP providers in</p>	<p>Qualitative discussions</p> <p>Surveys</p>	<p>Nil</p>	<p>Nil</p>

⁴⁹ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. (2018a)

Author (year)	Objective/s and focus	Measures	Sample/s	Data source(s)	Comparison group/s	Factors controlled for
	<p>Key questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Does the programme work as expected? · In what circumstances is change occurring and why? · What is influencing success and how can implementation be improved? 	<p>issues/temper/violence, caring responsibilities, domestic violence and a drug treatment program, carer for an adult person/dependent children, unstable residence, no access to transport); History (long term income support, education, work experience/labour market attachment); Economic environment (lives in disadvantaged employment region, lives in rural/remote location); Attitudes to work.</p>	<p>eight remote communities</p>	<p>Administrative data</p>		
<p>Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (2018b)⁵⁰</p>	<p>Examine whether the CDP has been effective in achieving its key objectives of increasing participation and employment outcomes in remote communities;</p> <p>Consider the change in recorded levels of participation in Work for the Dole and other program</p>	<p>Participant characteristics; Enrolment in activities; Attendance at Work for the Dole; Participation in activities; Suspensions and penalties; Employment outcomes</p>	<p>N/A</p>	<p>Administrative data</p>	<p>Pre-CDP administrative data</p>	<p>Some analyses controlled for participant characteristics</p>

⁵⁰ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. (2018b)

Author (year)	Objective/s and focus	Measures	Sample/s	Data source(s)	Comparison group/s	Factors controlled for
Staines (2018) ⁵¹	<p>activities since the CDP commenced.</p> <p>Illuminate how individuals in different circumstances are affected by CDP.</p>	None specified	<p>24 case studies from CDP participants in Far North Queensland and the Top End of the Northern Territory, based on second-hand information contained in administrative files, case notes and case managers' accounts. 11 case studies developed by the North Australian Aboriginal</p>	Case studies	Nil	Nil

⁵¹ Staines, Z. (2018).

Author (year)	Objective/s and focus	Measures	Sample/s	Data source(s)	Comparison group/s	Factors controlled for
			Justice Agency (NAAJA) and published in its submission to the 2017 Australian senate inquiry into CDP			

Suppose remote employment programs prepare people for real jobs, support economic development in remote locations, and improve communities to drive further individuals' personal, social, and financial prospects. In that case, it seems logical that information about how best to bring about these outcomes would be desirable. Given that remote employment programs have been running for decades, it is peculiar that no overarching evaluation framework has been developed to support the systematic collection of such knowledge. Based on the strengths and limits of existing work, we suggest that any future evaluation framework include a standard minimum set of measures. These are in Appendix A.⁵²

However, refinement of measurement means little if the 'right' things are not being considered or if there is little connection between evidence and policy. A noteworthy omission from many previous reports – and one our suggested evaluation framework considers - has been the lack of serious consideration of the characteristics of the people participating in programs. Unless this is known, it is potentially misleading to suggest that programs have performed poorly in boosting employment due mainly to design features (such as lack of consultation with communities or onerous administrative requirements). Instead, programs may be ineffective partly because participants face significant personal, social, and cultural barriers to employment. It is unrealistic to expect an employment program to make them competitive for 'real' jobs in the mainstream labour market unless those barriers are addressed first. Have policy recommendations taken these points into account?

What policy options have been considered?

Most papers reviewed for this project contain a wide range of 'low level' (e.g., cultural sensitivity training for Centrelink staff) or operationally focussed suggestions.⁵³ Table 2 summarises only the high-level policy recommendations for remote employment schemes' overall objectives and focus.⁵⁴

⁵² Note that this refers to an overall program evaluation framework, that in practice would likely consist of several different, separate data-collection projects feeding into that overall framework.

⁵³ E.g., compliance/penalty imposition, interaction between programs and the taxation or superannuation systems, creation of 'streams' within a program, etc.

⁵⁴ Not all papers shown in Table 1 contain discernible policy recommendations.

Table 2: Timeline of policy recommendations

Year	Policy recommendations
1997	<p>The objective for CDEP should be to provide work for unemployed indigenous persons in community managed activities which assist the individual in acquiring skills which benefit the community, develop business enterprises and/or lead to unsubsidised employment.</p> <p>The scheme should focus on: Enhancement of skills which will lead to enhanced community outcomes and/or other employment; Providing work for unemployed indigenous persons in community managed activities which assist the individual in acquiring skills which benefit the community, develop business enterprises and/or lead to unsubsidised employment.</p> <p>While work that facilitates community development must remain an important part of CDEP, greater attention in the future must be given to meeting the needs of the individual participants in order that they acquire new skills to access new employment opportunities, where they exist. Consequently, future policy must recognise the fundamental importance of work and the development of individual skills.</p> <p>While there is a need, from time to time, to undertake an assessment on a national basis, greater benefit might be achieved in assessing the scheme's outcomes on a regional basis, measured against clearly defined regional goals and plans.⁵⁵</p>
2000	<p>In the absence of mainstream employment opportunities in [rural and remote] regions, it must be asked if the marginal cost of the CDEP scheme (at an estimated \$4,075 per participant, that is the amount above welfare entitlements) represents good value for money for government. The answer to this important question is contingent on several factors.</p> <p>First, the broad-brush statistical analysis undertaken here does not allow any assessment of intra-community organisation differences. Indeed, our analysis was not even able to assess differences in the additional CDEP scheme resources provided to different communities. Nevertheless, it seems likely that if some communities can demonstrate better outcomes from additional administrative and capital resourcing than others, then there is a possibility that resources will flow to such communities to support economic development projects and associated employment and income spin-offs for the CDEP employed.</p> <p>Second, no distinction is possible on a scheme-by-scheme basis on the differing impacts of variable rates of CDEP employment as distinct from CDEP scheme participation. In other words, it is possible that communities with a high number of scheme participants but a relatively low number of CDEP-employed, may benefit disproportionately from the scheme. This in turn depends on the criteria used by ATSIC Regional Councils in providing communities with discretionary administrative and capital funding. Now at the start of the 21st century, with government focusing increasingly on mutual</p>

⁵⁵ Spicer, I. (1997)

Year Policy recommendations

obligation social policy concerns, it might be timely for new community-based research to investigate those fine-grained questions that census data cannot address.⁵⁶

2004 Increased decision-making power is essential to community development. The scheme has been shown to have an important role in increasing this power by providing communities with the funding required to mount and maintain a variety of community development programs.

There needs to be a stronger focus on developing the literacy and numeracy skills of Indigenous Australians if they are to participate in further training. This means that, if more Indigenous Australians are to be able to enter courses such as teaching or other professions, substantial efforts need to be applied to increasing school participation and high school completion.

Major changes in the way we think about the types of economic development activities that can be implemented in the 'bush' to help to provide employment for those in rural and remote areas are essential.⁵⁷

2005 Indigenous people mainly choose to live in remote areas for non-market reasons—because of continuing links with country. While it is sometimes argued that Indigenous residents of such communities should migrate elsewhere to engage with the market economy, it is highly doubtful that they would be able to effectively compete for mainstream employment. We contend that policy should enhance investment in what is working. The CDEP scheme has been operating for 28 years and is a proven means of providing workfare in remote areas with limited mainstream opportunities for Indigenous Australians.⁵⁸

2007 The best practice models within industries like the mining industry be understood, promoted and encouraged by Government as one of the best models to achieve greater Indigenous participation in the workforce.⁵⁹

2009 From a program efficiency and effectiveness perspective, CDEP would be better recognised as a labour market program and be intimately connected to other labour market programs. CDEP can be improved and become more appropriate to the goals of real jobs and viable business enterprises if the following are addressed:

- providers focussed on preparing participants for real jobs, wherever these are offered by the labour market
- CDEP is sufficiently intense to overcome entrenched poor behaviour

⁵⁶ Altman, J., & Gray, M. (2000)

⁵⁷ Misko, J. (2004)

⁵⁸ Altman, J., & Gray, M. (2005)

⁵⁹ House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs. (2007)

Year Policy recommendations

- CDEP addresses intergenerational unemployment in remote communities by assisting participants to experience workplaces outside of the communities in which they operate.

CDEP is not as well suited to address community development issues or economic development issues as these are not the same as labour market preparation issues and should be pursued separately.

Improve performance information and measurement systems to enable better identification of the program's impact by including CDEP in future DEEWR surveys of post program outcomes and collecting data on the educational and employment characteristics of participants.

Lack of mobility in some communities [is] a significant impediment to searching for a non-CDEP job, especially bearing in mind that those who are job ready may well leave of their own accord. There was no evidence to suggest that CDEP was addressing the mobility issue.

Review the current 'stream' structure of CDEP and consider the potential gains in effectiveness and efficiency that could be achieved in both the employment outcomes and the community development outcomes by delivering the community development element separately from the labour market preparation element so that the incentive structures in each of these can be used to maximum effect.

CDEP can assist labour market adjustment when it is focussed on the labour market, rather than internally on supporting the local community. For example, 'It is recognised that at some point Government positions will be saturated' so those providers who are internally focussed will come up against the limit of internal opportunities. When that point is reached, providers will need to search farther afield.

The intergenerational and cultural aspects and context of CDEP in remote communities make adjustment to the labour market very difficult. CDEP must address these challenges directly if it is to improve.

The issue that CDEP faces is to on the one hand maintain the intensity of the job readiness experience and on the other to minimise the opportunity cost implied in creating activities that hold participants out of the labour market. In the latter respect, Job Network programs concentrate on job search activities, which are less intense and rely on mobility for real jobs.⁶⁰

2009

While enhanced mobility might be [an] option for moving Indigenous people to where the jobs are, it is not clear that the people living in remote areas will always get the jobs that are available in such areas. The existence of labour market discrimination, rational or otherwise, provides a distortion against which the CDEP scheme provides a buffer in the short run.

The failure to resolve native title or fundamental issues related to Indigenous rights means that people are not truly free to leave their traditional lands (even if they wanted to), lest they prejudice their bargaining position for the native title and other rights associated with the fact of their prior

⁶⁰ Department of Finance and Deregulation. (2009)

Year Policy recommendations

Indigenous occupancy of the land. Clearly there is a need for policy makers to pursue creative policies that attempt to create sustainable jobs in remote and regional Australia.⁶¹

2013 While the data presented in this paper are consistent with the hypothesis that CDEP participation has some small positive social and health impacts, it equally could be the case that the slightly better social outcomes for CDEP participants compared to the unemployed are because those who participate in CDEP have better outcomes prior to commencing on CDEP (that is, there may be selection effects on unobservable characteristics of individuals).

While it is not possible to disentangle these alternative hypotheses using the available data, it is the case that the CDEP employed have only slightly better outcomes for most measures than the unemployed and generally much worse than for the non-CDEP employed.

These findings confirm the findings of earlier research that CDEP positions are very different both in terms of 'job characteristics' and the social and economic outcomes associated with participation, compared to non-CDEP employment and therefore should not be treated as equivalent to mainstream employment.⁶²

2017 CDP participants must have the same legal rights and other responsibilities as other income support participants, considering special circumstances such as remote locations and cultural obligations. CDP requirements should be adjusted to ensure that participants are able to meet them for the majority of the time and are more closely aligned with the requirements of other income support participants.

The reform process for any new program should be focussed on the goal of community empowerment. The establishment of an indigenous-led board and local governance committees should be considered.

Communities must be given a greater say in how a community development program is delivered in their area including the prioritisation of projects and the nature of approved work activities. Greater community control should harness the skills, experiences and knowledge of local community and Indigenous organisations.

The definition of work activities under the revised CDP program should be expanded to include cultural transmission activities that are prioritised by the local community in their local jobs plans.

There should be a move away from the compliance and penalty model towards the provision of a basic income with a wage-like structure to incentivise participation. Furthermore, the program should be driven and owned by the local community ensuring appropriate community development

⁶¹ Hunter, B. (2009)

⁶² Hunter, B., & Gray, M. (2013)

Year Policy recommendations

consistent with the unique requirements of each community, whilst remaining culturally appropriate and flexible.

A jobseeker program must create and sustain real local jobs. The committee acknowledges that it is not possible to reach full employment in many remote communities. Notwithstanding this, there is ample scope for remote job creation through a targeted pipeline of infrastructure funding and mandated local Indigenous employment targets; transferring fly-in fly-out service delivery to one of local delivery; expansion of successful cultural interface employment initiatives such as Indigenous Ranger programs; and ensuring that more funding from programs "hit the ground" in communities to drive local economies and job creation.⁶³

2018 Design training to be on-the-job, to help job seekers to gain real skills and qualifications. Training should be linked with hosted placement and work experience to provide opportunities for long term on-the-job training and accreditation (contributing towards apprenticeships in particular).

Set up more hosted placements through community development initiatives that make CDP feel like a real job. The hosted placement should have the same positive feelings as working or being employed, including full-time hours if suitable for the employer and financial incentives for the job seeker when they work more than 25 hours per week. Hosted placements should be a pathway to real jobs in the community.

Work towards a strengths-based model that rewards engagement, effort and achievement of individual job seeker goals. Treat job seekers with respect and dignity and build their resilience so they have the motivation to participate in the CDP and the confidence to improve their job readiness.

Empower communities to participate in the economic decisions made in their communities through community development. Strengthening the capacity for more local jobs to run the community would assist in creating a local labour demand. Involving local community in the decision-making process for government contracts would help communities have more say in how contractors work with the local community.⁶⁴

2018 Better assessments of CDP participants in remote areas – including increased access to medical assessments – could help to ensure that participants' attendance requirements match their abilities, and that potential barriers to participation are identified.

Developing and reporting on measures of the quality of activities – including measures of skills attainment, employment outcomes, and participant perceptions of quality – could identify the types of activities that best support participation in the program and outcomes for participants.

⁶³ Finance and Public Administration References Committee. (2017)

⁶⁴ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. (2018a)

Year **Policy recommendations**

Employment outcomes over the long term could be improved by modifying provider payments for employment outcomes to better reflect local labour market conditions and opportunities (including seasonal work), and by increasing incentives for providers to place those with high barriers into employment.

Designing measures of employment outcomes that match local labour market conditions could improve incentives for CDP providers to make the most of current and emerging opportunities and ultimately, to improve the long-term employment outcomes and wellbeing of participants. To be effective, the implementation of this would need to ensure that the employment measures used lead to a genuine improvement in the lives of participants.

Employment outcomes could better reflect the local labour market conditions and opportunities. In locations where seasonal work is a key driver of work, providers could have scope to alter the requirement for outcomes to be obtained over a consecutive time period.

Participants may also benefit from increasing the incentive for providers to place those with high employment barriers into employment. One way to strengthen incentives would be to stream employment outcome payments based on the barriers faced by individual participants.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. (2018b)

There has been an apparent change in expectations about what remote employment schemes can deliver over time. For example, in 1997, the program intent was articulated as:

*Enhancement of skills which will lead to enhanced community outcomes and other employment; Providing work for unemployed indigenous persons in community managed activities which assist the individual in acquiring skills which benefit the community, develop business enterprises and lead to unsubsidised employment.*⁶⁶

By 2017, however, policy dialogue moved away from expectations about skills enhancement and community development as drivers of unsubsidised employment outcomes to focus on imposing mandatory requirements on existing businesses, turning ‘cultural activities’ into government-funded employment, and providing more government funding overall, to advance the objective of job creation:

A jobseeker program must create and sustain real, local jobs... there is ample scope for remote job creation through a targeted pipeline of infrastructure funding and mandated local Indigenous employment targets; transferring fly-in fly-out service delivery to one of local delivery; expansion of successful cultural interface employment initiatives such as Indigenous Ranger programs; and ensuring that more funding from programs “hit the ground” in communities to drive local economies and job creation.⁶⁷

Policy consideration is also characterised by an increased propensity to use vague ‘motherhood’ statements. In 2000, for example, a cost-benefit analysis was suggested:

*In the absence of mainstream employment opportunities in [rural and remote] regions, it must be asked if the marginal cost of the CDEP scheme (at an estimated \$4,075 per participant, that is the amount above welfare entitlements) represents good value for money for government.*⁶⁸

In 2004, some of the root causes of unemployment were openly acknowledged:

*There needs to be a stronger focus on developing the literacy and numeracy skills of Indigenous Australians if they are to participate in further training.*⁶⁹

In 2009, the need for policy attention on mobility was noted, with a need to address:

*...intergenerational unemployment in remote communities by assisting participants to experience workplaces outside of the communities in which they operate.*⁷⁰

Less than 20 years later, this type of highly focussed recommendation has been replaced by statements such as:

*Set up more hosted placements through community development initiatives that make CDP feel like a real job. The hosted placement should have the same positive feelings as working or being employed...*⁷¹

*The reform process for any new program should be focussed on the goal of community empowerment.*⁷²

Empower communities to participate in the economic decisions made in their communities through community development. Strengthening the capacity for more local jobs to run the community would assist in creating a local labour demand.⁷³

There is a noticeable shift towards encouraging changes in how outcomes are measured, such as by “[d]esigning measures of employment outcomes that match local labour market conditions.”⁷⁴ This represents a change from objective, standardised measures of success to poorly defined, subjective indicators that are unlikely to be comparable over time or between locations.

A (potentially considerable) proportion of remote community residents are not so much unemployed than

⁶⁶ Spicer, I. (1997)

⁶⁷ Finance and Public Administration References Committee. (2017)

⁶⁸ Altman, J., & Gray, M. (2000)

⁶⁹ Misko, J. (2004)

⁷⁰ Department of Finance and Deregulation. (2009)

⁷¹ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. (2018a)

⁷² Finance and Public Administration References Committee. (2017)

⁷³ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. (2018a)

⁷⁴ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. (2018b), p.68

unemployable,⁷⁵ with serious personal, social and cultural barriers to participating in the mainstream labour market. In addition, factors such as neighbourhood crime, violence, overall well-being, population characteristics, and service availability all affect a person's prospects and local labour markets. Yet it appears that policy recognition of these issues is now limited to brief acknowledgements such as “[b]etter assessments of CDP participants in remote areas – including increased access to medical assessments – could help to ensure that participants’ attendance requirements match their abilities and that potential barriers to participation are identified.”⁷⁶

Discussion

This paper set out to do two things: examine what questions, measures, and data have informed prior debate about remote employment programs and identify what policy options have been considered and whether/how policy dialogue has changed over time. There has been a noticeable shift in evaluation focus and policy dialogue from around the late 2010s. Before that time, emphasis was placed on clear and objective measures of employment and, albeit to a lesser extent, measures of community functioning such as health, service provision, crime, substance use issues, etc. Significant policy questions were raised about whether remote employment and community development programs could achieve tangible results. After that point, the emphasis slowly shifted towards subjective, qualitative measures (such as service provider and community perceptions) and redefining what should be categorised as employment.

Since the 2010s, there has been little effort to build on and improve the scope of past evaluations. While individual programs (e.g., CDP) have been singled out as unsuccessful, overall, there needs to be more consideration of whether remote employment and community development programs are worthwhile investments. There has been little

The only policy suggestions to address these problems are, for example, to use a strengths-based approach that builds a person's resilience or that employers should be paid more if they employ people with more barriers to working. Indeed, policy discourse seems increasingly inclined to avoid an obvious conclusion: the gap in remote employment between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians reflects characteristics not just of place but of people and culture.

apparent desire to gather sufficient information about individuals and communities to say whether the people who remain in those communities have the health, education, and capacity to have any genuine hope of obtaining ‘real’ jobs’—let alone whether ‘community development’ has any bearing on creating ‘real’ jobs. On the balance of existing evidence, the answer to both questions seems to be ‘no’. If people have no genuine prospect of gaining ‘real’ jobs even in instances where those exist – such as in mining or as rangers, to use two oft-cited examples – then this points to a glaring need for new approaches. However, although program ‘tweaks’ are constantly recommended, there has been little critical consideration of serious alternatives to those programs, such as massive upscaling of boarding school offerings and outmigration.

There appears to be a growing chasm between data collection, policy recommendations, and reality, such as a tendency towards advocating policies that have previously—and continue to be—acknowledged as simply unrealistic due to factors such as unemployability within communities with no viable labour markets. For example, recommendations that industries such as mining should

⁷⁵ House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs. (2007)

⁷⁶ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. (2018b), p.28

replace fly-in, fly-out workers with local employees have arisen in response to findings that, in some instances, Aboriginal workforces in remote locations consist mainly of fly-in, fly-out labour from elsewhere.⁷⁷ While it sounds reasonable to replace these workers with local labour, this suggestion sits uneasily with evidence that employers in remote areas cannot meet their workforce needs through local Aboriginal labour hire due to persistent education barriers and related cultural issues.⁷⁸

While it is easy to suggest that if mainstream businesses wish to access government funds, then those businesses must employ a particular quota of Aboriginal staff or create 'cultural' roles, that does not equate to those positions providing genuinely meaningful employment or – most importantly – improving Aboriginal Australians' ability to access other types of positions, or positions in different locations. Nor does turning cultural activities into government-subsidised jobs equate to creating jobs independently of government support. Making actual job outcomes secondary to the 'cultural economy' can even be seen to reflect a soft racism that assumes Aboriginal Australians have nothing else to offer and cannot be expected to aspire to compete in the labour market on even terms and with the same skills as non-Aboriginal Australians.

These observations do not mean there is no place for remote employment and community development programs. However, despite decades of such programs, it is apparent that labour markets in many remote communities remain non-existent, and human capital remains low. This points to the need to openly admit that entrenched, multigenerational individual, social and cultural problems in remote communities persist. If unaddressed, those problems will continue to render people unable to participate in the same opportunities that other Australians take for granted. Instead of seeking ways to address these problems' impacts on employment, policy discourse has instead moved towards loosely defined concepts such as

'community-identified priorities.' These should not be used to deflect attention from the stark realities of life in many remote communities.

Summary

Employment programs can only be expected to be effective in stable and functional communities that have the population base and other characteristics necessary to create and sustain employment prospects.⁷⁹ Even then, programs must be intensive, comprehensive, and closely coupled with education, health, and other services – which may not be viable in remote communities. Despite this, there are few indicators of any willingness within policy discourse to seriously consider options such as how to support and encourage movement to areas with better opportunities and – most crucially – how to tackle the ongoing social and cultural problems that prevent people from being able to do this. Policy recommendations have focussed, by and large, on maintaining the status quo: using government money to keep Aboriginal people in communities that have very little to offer in the way of prospects. To justify this, the program goalposts have slowly shifted away from improving participants' job readiness and building human capital and towards the assumption that government-subsidised jobs are a sustainable and entirely appropriate response to remote unemployment.

Many remote non-Aboriginal communities, such as those that were once based around agriculture, have been characterised for decades by people leaving, services withdrawing, businesses shutting, and jobs disappearing. Even though some residents wish to remain in those communities and have strong emotional and cultural ties to the land on which they live, comparatively few government efforts have been made to sustain such communities. Most attention has focussed on equipping people to move on, transition to different lifestyles, and build their lives

⁷⁷ Centre for Social Responsibility in Mining. (2004). *Aboriginal Employment at Century Mine Research Paper No. 3*. Centre for Social Responsibility in Mining, University of Queensland: Queensland

⁷⁸ Daff, S., & Pearson, C.A.L. (2009). *Indigenous Employment: The Rio Tinto Alcan Initiative in Northern Australia*. *Journal of Contemporary Issues in Business and Government*, 15(1), 1-20; Pearson, C.A.L., & Daff, S. (2010). *Education and Employment Issues for Indigenous Australians in Remote*

Regions: A Case Study of a Mining Company Initiative. *Journal of Human Values*, 16(1), 21-35

⁷⁹ Campbell, S., & Schwab, J. (2001). *Training by doing: Pathways through CDEP*. In F. Morphy and W.G. Sanders (Eds.), *The Indigenous Welfare Economy and the CDEP Scheme. Research Monograph No. 20*. Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, The Australian National University: Canberra. pp.109-122

elsewhere. Why, then, are Aboriginal communities treated differently?

Perhaps this question is best answered by Hunter, who observes:

The failure to resolve native title or fundamental issues related to Indigenous rights means that people are not truly free to leave their traditional lands (even if they wanted to), lest they prejudice their bargaining position for the native title and other rights associated with the fact of their prior Indigenous occupancy of the land.⁸⁰

It seems that well-meaning measures intended to compensate for the undeniable past wrongs done to Aboriginal Australians have instead created a system of incentives to remain 'on country', 'in culture' and out of sight of mainstream Australia – no matter the cost to individuals in those communities.

It appears that the goal of remote employment and community development programs has become nothing more than to foster slow, intergenerational change in remote communities by instilling simple expectations about

routine and responsibility, regardless of any relationship that may have to real jobs and human capital. However, it is hard to see what good can come from entrenching reliance on government spending, even if that comes not under the overt banner of welfare but through 'manufactured' jobs whose only purpose is to employ Aboriginal people who cannot compete in open labour markets.

Closing the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians means far more than using programs as a backdoor way of making employment statistics look more favourable. It means genuinely addressing the challenges that prevent Aboriginal Australians from accessing the same opportunities as other Australians on a level playing field. Why not turn serious policy focus onto changing the circumstances that render people unemployable in the mainstream labour market rather than merely providing a closed system in which the impacts of those circumstances can be conveniently downplayed? And why fund jobs in remote communities with no prospects other than permanent reliance on government largesse? As long as policy deliberations neglect these uncomfortable questions, it remains unlikely that remote employment programs will help to close the gap.

⁸⁰ Hunter, B. (2009), p.52

Appendix A: Recommended minimum evaluation measures

Individual measures	Location measures	Employment measures	Community measures	Other measures	Comparative measures
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age • Sex • English proficiency • Education • Work experience/ Labour market attachment • Long term income support • Household composition (e.g., size, Aboriginal-only, etc) • Dependent children/carer responsibilities • Disability • Health status • Substance use problems • Housing circumstances • Transport access • Criminal history • Victim/perpetrator of violence (incl. domestic and family violence) • Attitudes to work • Cultural obligations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional characteristics (e.g., demographics, level of remoteness, overall unemployment) • Existing labour market characteristics • Labour market viability (e.g., growing, contracting, stagnant, stable) • Composition of government, private, and community sector jobs • Native title status and related indicators (e.g., royalty receipt) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal income • Hours worked • Duration on program (incl. repeat participation) • Improvement in employability skills • Number of program participants who move into non-subsidised employment ('real jobs') • Duration, type, and permanency of 'real jobs' • Types of enterprises established • Number of commercially viable businesses created • Number of commercially viable businesses progressed • Number of non-CDEP jobs created in those businesses • Per cent of 'Host Agreements' based in community, government, and private sector 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education levels • Health/disability levels • Provision of essential services • Cultural maintenance and cultural activities • Residents' perceptions about/pride in their community • Unemployment rates • Substance use rates • Criminal justice system contact/incarceration rates • Neighbourhood crime and violence rates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number, type, duration and impact/s of other programs operating in community • Other programs' relationship to employment and community development • Migration out of community (numbers, demographics, etc) • Migration into community (numbers, demographics, etc) • Cost of administering program • Cost of outcomes (commencement, placement (to non-CDEP employment), after 13 weeks, and after 26 weeks) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-program data • Comparison of communities with and without the program • Comparison of program participants and non-participants (incl. demographics, occupation, hours worked, etc) • Comparison of migrants into community with existing community members • Comparison of migrants out of community with existing community members

