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Towards a conceptual understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and community functioning

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Abstract.

This paper reports on research to build concepts about Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and community functioning that might be useful in community development. Three groups of inter-related concepts are presented in this paper; achieving social cohesion, managing community affairs, and imaging a community future. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander understandings differ from Western understandings of community life and there is an imperative to use this knowledge if we are to properly address the serious challenges facing communities' development. The concepts outlined in this paper are a first step in advancing community wellbeing indicators that are embedded in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander understandings.

Introduction

The need for a better understanding of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community functioning has never been more critical. If we are to close the life expectancy gap between Australian

Indigenous¹ and non Indigenous people and overcome the grave social and emotional wellbeing issues in Australia's Indigenous communities' a community development approach, underpinned by Indigenous understandings of community life, must inform social policy. Key contemporary Indigenous policies, such as the Northern Territory Emergency Response, do not incorporate a community development approach and have been strongly critiqued on this and other counts (ACOSS 2010). Policies resting on concepts of 'shared responsibility' and 'mutual obligation' are responses to highly visible problems such as non school attendance, high levels of violence, and alcohol and illicit drug use. While no one would deny the very real threat to community life posed by these problems, initiatives to overcome them have as their primary intent to change individual behaviour. Contemporary initiatives such as Shared Responsibility Agreements between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and Australian governments reduce, fragment, and break down issues in order to construct target groups and interventions. (Mendes 2009) This stands in stark contrast to Australian Indigenous perspectives that understand all aspects of spiritual and social life are inter-related.

Holistic knowledge is the cornerstone of a unified Aboriginal worldview and the starting and end point for improving health and wellbeing. All knowledge in this worldview is inseparable from land, place, spirit, language, kin, law, and story (Yunkaporta 2009). Family relationships are at the core of an interpretation of community (Cummins et. al 2008). While contemporary Australian community development approaches (Tesoriero 2010; Kenny 2006) acknowledge Indigenous community culture, current policy approaches are often at odds with this interpretation. The wealth of literature by Indigenous scholars about Indigenous social life is absent from policy underpinning interventions.

It is essential that communities can demonstrate their strengths, assess changes over time, and argue against the strongly deficit thinking that characterises most of the reporting about communities in the popular press (Chong et al. 2009). While there are community assessment tools available, (for example Cheers et al. 2007: 69-73) these are for measuring wellbeing in a 'community of place'. A community of place is a locality that is bounded geographically and includes social interactions amongst people who live in the area and have common social, economic, and other interests that are met through a local society (Wilkinson 1991:2). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities may not always be place-based and the family relationship or kinship system may not be confined to a geographic territory. Furthermore, even when genuine community level variables are available they may not be readily applicable to Indigenous settings where understandings can differ substantially from traditional Western concepts (Chino & DeBruyn 2006). As Peters-Little (2000) argues, it is crucial that Indigenous people themselves identify and define what community and community functioning mean for them.

¹ In this paper the terms Australian Indigenous and Indigenous refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

The aim of this paper is to present concepts that can be used to help understand community and community functioning in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. We present Indigenous understandings of community and three inter-related themes about community life: achieving social cohesion, managing community affairs, and imagining a community future.

Methodology

Our methodology had three components: an inductive workshop to construct a preliminary framework, a literature review, and interviews with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experienced in, and commenting upon, Indigenous social life. Ethics approval for this study was granted by two institutional human research ethics committees in 2007. Based on our experience (Champion et al. 2008; Cheers et al. 2006), the multidisciplinary team of three Aboriginal and six non Aboriginal researchers constructed a preliminary framework of eleven constructs. We were mindful that we should respond to the multiple meanings that the term 'community' holds for Indigenous Australians.

The constructs identified through the workshop process were modified after a literature review. A limitation of the study was that the review could not be exhaustive because of the breadth of the relevant themes. However, we agreed that twelve concepts were central and the third stage of the research was to discuss these themes with members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community². Aboriginal members of the research team nominated nineteen potential participants of different ages and backgrounds living in various remote, regional, and urban locations in Australia, including both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Qualitative in depth interviews were held with five men and seven women, three of whom lived in capital cities, six lived in regional centres, and one lived in a remote location. Three interviewers, one Aboriginal and two non Aboriginal, conducted interviews using a topic guide which was adapted after a pilot interview with an Aboriginal colleague.

De-identified transcripts of interviews were returned to participants for their comments and then data were coded and deductively analysed using QSR N6. The analysis enabled us to identify how participants understood the meaning of the concepts and whether they thought they were relevant and appropriate in understanding community functioning.

'Community' from an Indigenous perspective

From the literature and our interviews we found that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives on community refer almost exclusively to the subjective experience of social relationships and connections to country or place. The Indigenous concept of belonging to land and the metaphysical connection between land, water, and spirit is often encapsulated by the word 'country' rather than

² Members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community is the term Aboriginal team members prefer in identifying interviewees

'community'. According to Burgess and Morrison (2007: 177), in contemporary Indigenous³ Australia, many Indigenous people identify themselves as coming from their ancestral country or their place. Individuals may identify places in both a geophysical and biophysical sense as parts of themselves and as identity made up of the land-sea-spirit, culture, and people. Therefore, for Indigenous Australians, there is a metaphysical connection between body, mind, land, and sea.

For many Indigenous people this metaphysical connection is not well expressed by using the term 'community'. Some people may be living distant from their country and be part of several places and communities. For example, Palm Island (an island off the coast of North Queensland) residents (those who are not traditional owners of Palms⁴), describe themselves as 'Bwgcolman' although they are also members of one of the many different cultural groups who were removed from their traditional countries to Mission Beach and then to Palm Island in the early 1900s. Palm Island is an example of a majority 'historical community' made up of people from different kinship networks who were forcibly relocated by mainstream society. (Watson 2010)

A culture community

A definition of community as being tied to a particular place does not fit with Indigenous understandings of community. Cummins et al. (2008:47) use the term 'culture community' with relationships at the core of this interpretation. The term refers to a group of people, connected through family relationships or kinship system, who share a cultural identity. It refers to the world of relationships which connects and verifies links across generations; between people and their traditional country; between the physical and non-physical world. Family relationships give a particular place within the kinship system and this maintains social order. One's family and position within family determine responsibility and obligations and there are important ramifications when kinship connections are disrupted. When people are removed from their relationships, are unaware of whom their family is, they may struggle to experience their place in any society. This is so for many Aboriginal people who have been denied their Aboriginality and their connection to their country, and for those who have chosen to deny their Aboriginality. (Cummins et al. 2008)

Community, service delivery, and planning

According to some scholars (Cummins et al. 2008; Burgess & Morrison 2007; Peters-Little 2000), the concept 'Aboriginal community' or 'Indigenous community' has been constructed by non-Indigenous society for the purposes of implementing policy and locating services. Cummins et al. (2008) note that Indigenous people usually identify with this construction to obtain services:

I think there needs to be another term for what is termed the Aboriginal 'community'. What has happened is that over the last three generations we have had to use the term 'community' to identify with a specific location in order to get services. Therefore it has become the pattern to refer to an Aboriginal community as a specific town or place where a group of people live

³ When other writing uses the term Indigenous, or Aboriginal, or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, we use the same term. We follow this practice when quoting from interviews.

⁴ Palm Island is often referred to locally as 'Palms'.

and work. People say, 'Oh, but why do you travel from here to here? We can't keep track of you all the time.' But we say, 'Well hang on, this is where I come from. This town is only the place where I go to get services; where I live is out here in the bush (or wherever), in the place of my people. (Cummins et al. 2008: 51)

The 'community' constructed for service delivery is usually a place-based 'community' – ex-reserves or ex-missions and the 'community' is perceived as a discrete place composed of interconnected family groups. This perception is inaccurate as there are 'communities' made up of people living in a place who may not have cultural or historical links and family groups may not be interconnected (Champion et al. 2008). Peters-Little (2000) argues that many Indigenous people play what she terms 'the community game'. That is, they recognise that they are seen as a place-based community by government agencies, and so have learned to employ this notion of 'community' to get the resources and services they require. Indeed, Peters-Little (2000) suggests that policies which do not take into account the differences between family groups may well entrench socio-economic inequality by making access to services difficult for some family groups. Indigenous people assert that this is a core deficiency in government policy frameworks.

The reliance on a place-based understanding of community serves Western ways of framing policy and delivering services. It originated in, and is overwhelmingly the most commonly used concept of community in Western research and theory focused on communities (Wilkinson 1991: 2). It was, in other words, developed from the experiences of, by, and for the purposes of non-Indigenous people and subsequently imposed on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

Key aspects of Indigenous community functioning

Our participants noted that most aspects of community functioning overlap whether they were talking about culture communities or communities in a specific place. For example, people thought that a sense of community identity involved community participation and caring for people and that all of these processes are interwoven. As one research participant explained 'our wellbeing within community and our community wellbeing are intrinsically linked'. This, of course, is in keeping with their holistic perspective.

Achieving social cohesion

The first theme is 'achieving social cohesion', which encompasses 'community identity', 'participation in local, cultural, country, and family connections', 'cultural and social norms', 'sharing', 'networks' and 'reciprocity', and 'caring for people'. Participants thought that a cohesive community is one where people are connected through a similar way of knowing and a similar culture and that this is not necessarily dependent on living in the same geographic place. One participant reported that he still kept his place in his culture community even though he had relocated interstate:

Our place in our community is established as soon as we are born. We have our status within that community and a say in what happens there. It doesn't matter if we're living in the community or not we're still a part of that community. Even though you're 3,000km away you still have this sense of belonging to a community even though you're not [living] there.

A sense of community identity

Participants talked about community identity both at the individual and community level. They thought it important that people feel connected to a community and that the community as a whole has a sense of identity. They thought that community identity is influenced by the reasons which bring people together. For example, participants referred to the forcible relocation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to 'communities' where they were co-located with other language groups and felt little sense of affinity or belonging to the 'community'. This is supported in the literature about forcible relocation. For example, Morrissey (2006: 236-7) suggests that there are instances, notably ex-mission settlements, where the very mobilisation of 'community' rested on the extinguishment of identity, culture, and agency.

However, a sense of community may emerge even when people are forcibly brought together across different family groups as a participant from a remote area notes:

We are all [name] people – even if we are from different areas but now we describe ourselves as [name]. When people travel away they pick others out much in the same way they do with their traditional connections. People know they are from different areas but right now they are [name] people. In greeting they will say Hey [name] are you ok? And just a little wave– just a little acknowledgement of who you are as belonging to the one new community and sharing the same history and experiences.

Some participants mentioned the issues facing some urban Aboriginal young people who are unable to connect to a culture community. One participant familiar with young Aboriginal adults' experiences put it this way – 'they ask who am I and where do I belong - there is no belonging'. These complexities about belonging and identity are comprehensively examined in the literature. The nexus between 'community', 'identity', and 'place' is reported to be problematic for Indigenous people as the notions of 'place' and 'identity' that are very important to them do not neatly align with the place-based concept of community. Oxenham et al. (1999) make it clear that the politics of identity is central to contemporary Indigenous experience and that Indigenous Australians continue to try to define their own identity in contradistinction to a past colonial regime which defined them in relation to restrictive or negative images. However as the authors also point out, contemporary white society often defines Indigenous society in relation to traditional cultural practices rather than accepting and engaging with the complexity of contemporary Indigenous experience (Oxenham et al. 1999).

Participation in local, cultural, country, and family connections

Participation and a sense of community identity are inseparable and when talking about this topic distinctions made in the literature between various types of participation are difficult to make in Indigenous communities. For instance, the notion of participation expressed in what Black and Hughes (2001) call 'social' and 'civic' participation does not adequately reflect the nature of family and kinship in Indigenous settings. In accordance with concepts such as these participation is usually measured as involvement in community, service, or civic organisations rather than in family activities. However, in Indigenous settings, participation in family and kinship networks and social or civic groups are intertwined. Participants confirmed that there is both formal, or observable, participation and hidden participation in community affairs. One participant expressed it in this way:

But there is more to community participation that is not so obvious – it is also people taking an interest and telling each other about what is happening and these people bring their strengths and the information forward but they are not out there at the front line. This is the strength in our communities.

While also recognising its value, one participant who had moved to a city from interstate explained that participation in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisations can be difficult.

Because we're in different country, and this is mainly [name of tribe] country, we're sort of excluded from participating with them; even though we've been here for a long time we're accepted socially but not into family kinship ties or clubs. We are sort of ostracised from their own particular things. All the different groups have their own ties and they don't really interact much.

Community norms

All participants referred in some way to social and cultural norms as the belief systems, protocols, and values that are handed down and are associated with connectedness with each other and country and that promote social order. A participant from a city explained this:

I think it [*social norms*] has to be the belief system and lore associated with connectedness with each other and to country – this still happens in [regional city]. Relationships to family and to country and the structures that support this are still happening. There is an order that is being played out in the community.

This view is consistent with a definition of norms as 'shared assumptions about how one should act in various circumstances' (Black & Hughes 2001: 61). Norms also regulate people because breaching them entails the application of sanctions ensuring appropriate behaviour (Coleman 1994). However, participants noted that some Indigenous people are not aware of the shared assumptions about how they should act. Colonisation, dispossession, and the forcible removal of children have resulted in some people growing up not knowing cultural norms. One participant explains this:

Like the impact of the stolen generation and the inter-generational effect of that may mean that for some people they probably don't know the cultural norms. In order to follow them they need to know them.

If Indigenous people are to know and experience social and cultural norms then there is a need for structures to support them. For example, a participant reported how city-dwelling Aboriginal people are interested in accessing cultural practices:

You hear people say that they want to be able to access culture and so it's about having those structures for that to happen. Access to traditional healing is a big issue and when people know the traditional healers are coming they line up.

On the other hand, a participant reported that some cultural norms are currently being compromised:

A lot of the older generations of Aboriginals are brought up with the idea of wherever you are you've still got to respect the Elders. But with the clashes between the Western and traditional ways, the younger people have become Americanized with all the distractions from the Western style of living and people really don't respect any Elders or their parents now. So the cultural structure has really fallen down because of the influence of the Western culture.

Sharing, networks, reciprocity, and caring for people

Participants saw a relationship between reciprocity, participation, and social and cultural norms.

People told us that reciprocity, as an underlying principle of Aboriginal society, is a social norm. While it operated traditionally, most participants thought that it is still operating even in the face of material poverty. For example, one participant commented: 'That [reciprocity] has always been there in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life'. Another explained how she saw reciprocity:

Reciprocity is about giving and getting in return as many Aboriginal people lack access to things. Really for me it is intertwined because reciprocity is also about culture as people help each other out because of their family relations.

The mainstream concept 'social capital' (Putnam 1993: 35) involves references to norms of trust, reciprocity, and participation that facilitate action and cooperation for mutual benefit. Social capital can also be seen as a resource enabling access to financial and social support (Black & Hughes 2001). When constructing the preliminary framework for the study, Aboriginal team members had serious problems with the notion of social relationships as a resource. They explained that, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, relationships embody connections, obligations, and responsibilities to family, kin networks, spiritual connections to land, and that they are fundamental to all aspects of their life. Therefore conceiving of them as a utilitarian phenomenon is unthinkable. They were more comfortable with describing ways that reciprocity and sharing play out in community life.

Caring for people, the final concept in this theme, relates to reciprocity and sharing. The concept of 'hidden care' mentioned by participants is evident in the Indigenous literature about caring for people. Collard and Palmer (2006: 27) point out that lots of 'youth work' is done by aunties, uncles, grandparents, and other community members. They take young people back to country, re-immersing

them in old stories and conventions, which gets young people out of unhealthy environments and moves them into Indigenous cultural domains.

Several participants noted that the ways they care for people are often inconsistent with formal wellbeing initiatives and the implementation of some initiatives, such as parenting programs, undermines Indigenous ways of doing things. Another problem with the introduction of well intentioned programs is that there is an implication that Indigenous ways of doing things are inadequate. A participant explains this as follows:

It is always white fellas telling you how to do things and it should be having the power to solve our own problems. It should be our mob caring for our mob, but being told that our way is no good destroys our hope.

Managing Community Affairs

This second theme focuses on the processes and structures by which an Indigenous community makes decisions, distributes resources, and exercises authority and power. This involves understanding the processes involved in bringing groups together to develop community-wide solutions to development issues, the presence of community control of resources and organisations, maintaining external relationships, and caring for the environment. Participants were referring primarily to place-based communities in this discussion. It is beyond the scope of this paper to review the extensive literature about Indigenous governance, which, of course, is highly relevant to managing community affairs. Useful references of this topic are Aggarwal et al. 2008 and Maddison 2009.

Bringing community together

Participants thought that the processes of bringing people together across interest and family lines to make decisions on behalf of the community as a whole are fundamental to managing community affairs. Effective decision making requires a communal process rather than just one or two voices, even though it was thought to be difficult to bring together different family groups with different interests and issues. One participant reflected that getting together only occurs for sad occasions: 'Often people can only come together like if it's a funeral or things like that which is sad you know – getting together in a sad way rather than good things which are bringing people together'.

Having places and events in the community where everyone can meet together informally to facilitate relationships was regarded as one way to overcome difficulties in bringing people together. For instance, sporting events or celebrations such as NAIDOC⁵ day provide opportunities to strengthen relationships. There are a myriad of factors operating at the community level that may facilitate, or work against, the emergence of a 'community field' (Wilkinson 1991:2). The notion of a community field, as an unbounded whole with a constantly changing structure, which brings people together across interest lines is a useful one.

⁵ National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee

Community infrastructure and resources

Managing community affairs depends upon having resources, organisations, and community structures through which planning, decision-making, and implementation can occur. Formal structures were regarded by participants as essential to the process of managing affairs and several examples were given of structures that had worked or were working. There was consensus that local Indigenous community organisations are vital for community functioning and this view is supported by the extensive literature on the benefits and challenges of community management of services.

Community management of services in Australia is a practical expression of self-determination, autonomy, and self-sufficiency. In addition, community-controlled organisations, because they are at the interface of Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures, act as a link between the social, family and organisational domains of community life and can provide resources to be used on behalf of the community. They are an important component of infrastructure because of these factors (Hill et al. 2001).

However, some participants thought that community control is not an absolute requirement and that a range of organisations are required to cover socio-emotional and economic needs. Quality services are a priority and the provider should be determined according to who can provide appropriate services.

Community leadership

Participants suggested that the presence of people in the community who are able to exercise influence over other community members in order to work together towards a future is critical. A participant thought that a shared vision should be just that – a shared vision:

To move on it [a vision] it has to be something that everyone wants. The leader may want something and the community are struggling to get by day by day. In communities where there are divisions between family groups then this should be understood.

It was noted that the extent to which community leaders have an influence depends on the number and commitment of 'followers' and how influential leaders are can be detected from the outcomes achieved from their leadership. It was thought that people might appear to be leading, without open disagreements about leadership, but people still may not follow. This phenomenon is consistent with the concept 'relational leadership' from the sociological literature. Accordingly, influence relationships emerge from a culture of trust and involve the unified action of leaders and followers. It is not about what is 'done' to followers by leaders but rather it is a process of mutual influence (Pigg 1999: 200).

Caring for the environment

Caring for the environment - the land, water, and biodiversity - for the wellbeing of current and future generations has always been part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life. Indigenous Australians have a strong relationship with the physical environment, which manifests itself through spirituality, cultural responsibilities, and practical interactions with the physical environment (Smyth et al. 2004).

There are also public health aspects of caring for the immediate environment, including proper disposal of rubbish and adequate maintenance of buildings. Some participants thought that this aspect of caring for the environment is related to how people think about themselves and their community:

In a strict sort of new age way of looking at things there is the CDEP (Community Development Employment Program) here that goes around and picks up the rubbish. But now the place is different – there is no rubbish, there are flowers, because people are feeling better about themselves. The environment has to be linked with community functioning and families – this is so clear to me. If people are able to bother about the rubbish then they must be better able to function.

Understanding how communities care for the environment was considered by participants to be critical because as one participant described: 'It is important because of the thinking of future generations'. The literature about natural resource management (NRM) is relevant here. The term 'NRM' describes the practicalities involved in managing the land, water, and biodiversity of a place. Indigenous Australians have traditionally managed natural resources in a variety of ways such as burning native vegetation to promote seed germination (Horton 1982). More recently, with the introduction of land ownership, Indigenous Australians have a statutory obligation to undertake NRM on lands which they own or are managed for their benefit. Therefore, it is important to distinguish culturally based environmental management or caring for country from those activities that are required to be undertaken because of legislation.

The interviews conducted in this study and the literature reviewed indicates that we need to consider the following points about caring for the environment. Pearson (2007a) suggests that the wider Australian community expects Indigenous Australians living on country to live a traditional lifestyle. However, many Indigenous people want the ability to develop commercial interests on their land and some of these may in fact have adverse environmental outcomes. Low environmental impact industries, such as bush food production and ecotourism, are emerging but some communities want to weigh up the costs and benefits of development across the triple bottom line (social, economic, and environment impact) and make informed decisions about how to proceed without assumptions being made about which aspect will be privileged. Inevitably, there are occasions when business opportunities and caring for the environment may not fit comfortably together. In addition, many Indigenous people do not live on their 'country' and the cultural importance of 'country' may not be carried to the location where they usually live. Consequently they are not subjected to the cultural imperative to manage the environment in the community in which they live. Furthermore, caring for the environment and engaging with NRM projects in the community may be less of a priority than resolving other pressing community issues.

Imagining a community future

The final theme is about the importance of a culture community and/or a place-based community having some hope that a positive future is possible and then having the energy and the capability to plan rather than be suffocated by the negatives and the problems. Pearson (2007b: 28) argues that this ability is fundamental to community development in isolated Aboriginal communities in Australia:

There is a disconnection between the life and society of our remote communities and the life and society of the wider world – which our people see through the media and the permeation of popular culture. And our problem does involve a lack of imagination about the possibilities for our people. We cannot seem to imagine how a successful biculturalism or bilingualism could work for us. We cannot seem to imagine how we could maintain our cultures and engage successfully in the wider world. We cannot seem to imagine how our children could move between the two worlds creatively and successfully, without leaving home and identity forever, or without being confined to life in remote communities...There is almost no imagination that is free (and ambitious) about our social future as a people.

The socio-economic circumstances of a community will affect the degree to which future planning is possible. Some Indigenous communities exhibit high levels of concentrated and entrenched social and economic stress. These stresses result in people focusing on getting by on a daily basis, rather than getting involved in future orientated planning. In these circumstances the future is not an immediate priority and in situations of extreme stress the community is uncertain if there is going to be a future at all. An example of this comes from an Aboriginal community with a history of community organisations failing for a multiplicity of reasons. In 2006, during community consultations for a new health program, people expressed that they had lost hope – lost the ability to imagine a future. There were feelings of helplessness and that ‘people just don’t care’. This was described by Aboriginal people as a lack of trust in everyday things. (Taylor et al. 2007)

Concluding Remarks

At the core of an Indigenous understanding of community are relationships, and the term ‘culture community’ has been used in this paper to refer to a group of people connected through family relationships or kinship system and who share a cultural identity. In addition, community identity, community participation, cultural and social norms, sharing and reciprocity, managing community affairs, caring for the environment, and being able to imagine a community future are understood by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as key aspects of community functioning and inseparable from each other.

Understandings of community, community functioning, and the interrelationships between aspects of these that are congruent with Indigenous understandings are important in facilitating productive engagement of policy makers with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their communities. These shared understandings should enable the development of community based, community level indicators, and eventually measures, of community functioning based on more balanced accounts of

Indigenous social life. These will contribute tools needed to help us move beyond individual measures that have often painted negative, or deficit pictures of Indigenous community life. Perhaps we will then be better placed to develop and implement contextualised and localised policies, programs, and interventions that, because they make sense to Indigenous people, might contribute to closing the gap with respect to their health and wellbeing.

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