

*The Conversation has asked 20 academics to examine the big ideas facing Australia for the 2016 federal election and beyond. The [20-piece series](#) examines, among others, the state of democracy, health, education, environment, equality, freedom of speech, federation and economic reform.*

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The significance of government services and funding to the livelihoods of Indigenous people goes well beyond the experience of other Australians. Australian townships and developing communities overseas are generally underpinned by a market economy. By contrast, most remote Aboriginal communities are characterised by the very lack of one.

Government programs and services are largely how the outside world and economy interfaces with remote communities. Pragmatically, this translates for many as their main entry point for “closing the gap”. And the dominance of public finances gives government a level of power that it does not enjoy elsewhere in Australia.

Faced with intractable disadvantage and international scrutiny of the plight of Australian First Peoples, Australian governments have responded on a massive scale, often in partnership with private sector and NGO providers. Indigenous affairs has become a highly crowded space.

Remote Indigenous communities of fewer than 1000 people can be supported by more than 80 [programs and services](#)

. The ratio of programs to people served is arguably one of the highest in the world. Somehow, among this, some people are not reached and remain underserved.

## **The measurement problem**

Each program and service typically has a rationale and evidence base that it works. Most maintain a story of success, with a support base in community and government. Each operates under public finance rules to ensure it performs to outcomes and money is not misappropriated.

Yet, with so many programs operating, how does the relative disadvantage of Indigenous people remain so acute?

To their credit, successive Australian governments have remained steadfast in their commitment to closing the gap, since the [COAG agreement](#) in 2008 and first progress report in 2009. The measures aggregate at a level that supersedes the effects of any single government program.

And while [gains are being made in some areas](#) , progress is slow and the [situation is deteriorating in other areas](#)

We need to look to the sheer number of programs in operation. A single 15-year-old “disengaged youth” can have six different programs with different “theories of change” jostling for their attention. In the one week, they may be coerced, persuaded, mentored, incentivised, case-managed and focus-grouped.

As these programs typically neither collaborate nor consider the effects of each other, what they individually measure is of highly questionable accuracy. They combine into complex hybrids – how their individual efforts add or subtract from others is unknown. As similar numbers of programs serve almost all Indigenous communities, a valid control for comparison can be impossible to find.

An obvious solution is to reduce the number of programs, but prior efforts to streamline the system have largely failed. The number of programs keep growing. Efforts are ongoing, including the troubled [Indigenous Advancement Strategy](#) .

There are strong drivers maintaining the current status quo. On the supply side is the quantum of government funding and the way the machinery of government divides itself between departments and programs. On the demand side, Indigenous disadvantage is multifaceted, as are the many Indigenous interest groups and organisations.

## Taking a developmental approach

We still live in hope of the elusive ingenious policy solution, as the Commonwealth and Northern Territory governments promised with the [NT Intervention](#) and the [Super Shires](#) .

The benefits from these reforms – as always the report card was mixed – have to be weighed against what was lost. Many people left and Indigenous organisations ceased to exist as they were cast as the discredited past.

Policy solutions themselves can have massive impacts. But do the gains they realise justify wiping the slate clean, erasing the progress of prior reforms?

The nature of social policy and service provision is that a problem or deficit is identified, the service or program designed, KPIs established, contracts vertically implemented, and the Toyotas and providers arrive. But there is another approach operating in Indigenous affairs, where community leaders and trusted outsiders are finding ways to their own solutions. This alternative can be described as working developmentally.

Taking a development approach, you begin with context: understanding the history, the strengths, the many problems. Every place is different. You need the skills of arriving at a place and working it out.

Rather than implementing a predetermined solution, you enable local leadership and governance, forming the long-term relationships that are everything. Sophisticated stakeholder management skills are then needed to broker solutions and on occasion advocate to get the system to respond.

New arrivals would receive handovers and build on the progress of their predecessors, rather than starting anew and discrediting all before them. There would be processes and structures to share lessons, and opportunities for reflection and reward, as exists among all professional cohorts.

To close the gap, government must overcome its internal implementation problem. Many programs and training activities exist to tackle the capability deficits and leadership development

of Indigenous people and their organisations, but we have a major capability deficit in the skills of outsiders coming into communities.

In addition to the many outsiders implementing a multitude of programs and delivering services, we need capable development workers. Most Australian universities offer tertiary education to prepare students to work in international development, but no equivalent for remote Indigenous communities. Why is this so, when the contexts are only more complex and challenging?

Working developmentally isn't about finding best practice, packaging it into universal policy and then transplanting it uncritically into other places. It's about understanding the conditions of success.

Success involves place-based factors like cultural fit, connection to country, gendered leadership, stability, technical expertise, longevity of relationships, and stability of core funding. When these conditions are described, capable leaders and workers in other places can then interpret and adapt them to their context and work through their own unique solutions.

No one in Indigenous affairs can be confident that they have the solution. Whatever evidence they claim, having so many programs in such small places questions its veracity.

More humbly, there are places, people, the under-the-radar initiatives where something is working. These are the building blocks for long-term progress. We need to shine a light on them, rather than waiting for the policymaking machine to churn out the next top-down "solution" that wipes out any progress.

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*You can read other articles in the series [here](#).*

*Mark Moran is the author of [Serious Whitefella Stuff: When solutions became the problem in Indigenous affairs](#), which is out now.*

## Ideas for Australia: Closing the gap is proving hard, but we can do better by working developmentally

Written by The Conversation USA

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*Mark Moran does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.*

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