Closing the Gap and the Sustainable Development Goals: listening to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

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Despite efforts to reduce the disadvantage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, some indicators of health, education and employment are flatlining or going backwards. The 2018 end date for the initial targets of the Closing the Gap framework has passed, and the possibility of new relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other Australians generated through Prime Minister Rudd's apology to the stolen generations is fading.[1] The 2019 Closing the Gap Report calls for refreshment of the framework and confirms the Australian Government's commitment to achieving equality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in health and life expectancy.[2]

The Australian Government has also committed to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).[3] The 17 SDGs are the core of the United Nations 2030 Agenda, and reflect recognition that human wellbeing and dignity depend on the health of planet earth and redirection of development trajectories of every nation.[4] The SDGs include goals for healthy lives and wellbeing, equitable and quality education, productive employment and decent work. These goals, together with the over-arching concern of leaving no one behind, align with those of the Closing the Gap framework.[3]

As with the Closing the Gap aspirations, Australia's stated commitment and institutional responses to the SDGs appear inadequate to meet our undertakings, and in 2019 we are on track to meet only one of the 17 SDGs, SDG 3: good health and wellbeing.[5] Our SDG ranking has declined with each measurement of progress: we ranked 18th in 2015, 26th in 2017 and 38th of 193 nations in 2019.[5,6]

Target-setting as an approach to policy implementation for social development

Both the Closing the Gap framework and the SDGs use goals represented by sets of statistical targets to drive policy and behaviour change. These targets and their trajectories become performance indicators, guiding resource allocation and service provision.[7]

Statistical indicators give the impression of objectivity and rationality. However, their use to quantify complex and diverse circumstances can create simplistic explanations of the concept they were established to measure. For example, measuring education through school attendance uses convenient and readily available data with the unstated assumption that school attendance will lead to desired educational outcomes. For Aboriginal children in remote regions, there is conflicting evidence about the association between school attendance and educational outcomes because schooling does not consistently contribute to learning and educational success.[8]

Another common feature of the Closing the Gap framework and the SDGs is the use of targets calculated for whole populations, obscuring regional, community and individual characteristics. While these targets can focus governments and service providers on measurable outcomes, they present limited perspectives of people's lives.[7] The focus on differences between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other Australians contributes to a discourse of deficiency and deficit, and negative stereotypes.[9]

The appearance of neutrality of numbers used as indicators obscures the fact that the choice of indicators reflects particular values and decisions.[10] The Closing the Gap framework initially attempted to monitor complex Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage through only six indicators.[2] Both the Closing the Gap targets and the SDGs assume that people and nations aspire to increasing aggregate wealth through formal employment, based on assumptions about human progress being linked to and measured by increases in GDP.[10,11]

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and other indigenous peoples globally, the creation of SDGs provided opportunities for their needs to be considered in global development aspirations.[12] These opportunities included using government commitments to the SDGs to reduce the pervasive disadvantage and inequality faced by indigenous peoples.

Interpersonal relationships, connections to the environment and spirituality are key values for many indigenous peoples. In the development of the SDGs, indigenous communities drew attention to the contributions they can make to sustainability through their knowledge of sustainable practices, and their aspirations for development based on indigenous cultural norms and values.[12]

However, consultation with indigenous peoples in the development of the SDGs was limited, and although SDGs to improve health, education and employment may reduce disadvantage, the underlying approach to development promoted by the SDGs continues the historic relationships between powerful and poorer communities.[13]

Outside the SDG processes, indigenous people have developed indicators of development significant for themselves. One set of indicators is shown in Table 1,[14] together with SDGs that could address these indicators.

Colonisation, criminalisation and deculturation

In Australia, the development of the Closing the Gap framework has been described as a continuation of colonisation and assimilation through its top-down approach, and focus on reducing differences between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other Australians based on non-Indigenous norms.[10] Assuming

that differences represent deficits on the part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can draw attention away from their strengths and present people as stereotypes, limiting opportunities for alternative narratives.[9]

The Australian nation represents the colonisation of the lands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Non-Indigenous scholars may conceive that we are supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to become truly self-determining through a gradual process of decolonisation.[1] However, political realities such as the disappointing outcomes of the Closing the Gap strategy that emerged from Prime Minister Rudd's 2008 apology to the stolen generations and the summary dismissal of the Uluru statement show continuing colonisation.[1] Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars have no doubt that there is ongoing colonisation of Australia.[1,15]

Ongoing colonisation underlies Australia's extra-ordinary rates of imprisonment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, almost 2.5% of whom are in prison. Men aged between 20 and 39 years are imprisoned at the highest rate, and up to 14% of young

Table 1: Development indicators recognised by indigenous peoples and related SDGs.[14]	
Indigenous Development Indicator	**Related SDGs**
Security of Indigenous peoples' rights to territories, lands and natural resources	2 No hunger 11 Sustainable cities and communities 14 Life on land 15 Life below water 16 Peace, justice and strong institutions
Integrity of indigenous cultural heritage	4 Quality education 8 Decent work and economic growth 14 Life on land 15 Life below water 16 Peace, justice and strong institutions
Respect for identity and non-discrimination	4 Quality education 8 Decent work and economic growth 16 Peace, justice and strong institutions
Fate control; self-determination	4 Quality education 8 Decent work and economic growth 16 Peace, justice and strong institutions
Culturally-appropriate education	4 Quality education 16 Peace, justice and strong institutions
Full, informed and effective participation	4 Quality education 8 Decent work and economic growth 16 Peace, justice and strong institutions
Extent of external threats to indigenous livelihoods	14 Life on land 15 Life below water 16 Peace, justice and strong institutions

men from remote communities are away in prison.[16] Without these young men, communities lose economic and social stability, reducing community capacity to raise children and support community relationships and health. Imprisonment rates are increasing, despite the recommendations of the 1991 Royal Commission into Indigenous Deaths in Custody and the 2017 Inquiry into the Incarceration Rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.[17] Australia must reduce imprisonment rates to achieve SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions.

Imprisonment is a form of ongoing colonisation, mediated through child removal and detention; alcohol and other substance misuse; and difficulties in obtaining and holding driver's licences, compounding poverty, anger and frustration.[1] Costs of the high rates of imprisonment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people include its self-perpetuation, consuming resources that could be re-invested in alternative approaches to reduce crime. Each person in prison costs $103,000 per year.[17]

Colonisation is also leading to ongoing losses of Australian languages that disappear as remaining speakers pass away. Australia has one of the highest rates of language loss of any nation.[18] Of the 300 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages,[19] the most recent national language survey identified 79 spoken today. Only 15 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are passed onto children, which is essential for language survival; none are considered safe.[20]

While scarcity often increases value, for Australian languages, declining use appears to make the language less worthy of support. Australia's language policy and attitudes do not recognise the importance of languages for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's identity, culture and wellbeing, or the intrinsic value of Indigenous languages.[21,22] Government prioritisation of English literacy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children ignores evidence that literacy in one's primary language facilitates English literacy, and neglects opportunities to use community languages to improve school attendance and educational achievement.[23,24] While languages are not specifically addressed within the SDGs, Australia's inequitable language education is inconsistent with SDG 4: Quality Education and SDG 10: Reduced Inequality.

Loss of languages leads to loss of the

knowledge transmitted through those languages. Indigenous languages hold knowledge of ecosystems and their sustainable management and care accumulated over hundreds of generations. Language loss is associated with biodiversity loss, so Australia's rapid losses of both languages and biodiversity are interrelated manifestations of colonisation.[25] The removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from their Country and practices of land care contribute to ongoing losses of biodiversity.[26,27]

Protection of biodiversity constitutes SDG 14: Life on Land and SDG 15: Life below Water, which are affected by the loss of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's relationships with lands and waters.[28] Land management by indigenous people can ensure conservation of biodiversity at global, national and regional scales.[29] Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people currently manage about 4.02 million km^2 of Australia's 7.17 million km^2, including 930,000 km^2 of high-level protected land.[29] One of the main barriers to greater opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to care for Country is access to land, another impact of ongoing colonisation.[28]

Today most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live in cities and towns, speak English and have non-Indigenous ancestry.[1] These developments in people's heritage can increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community breadth of expertise, experience, cultural awareness and resilience. Despite systematic removal of people from their Country, most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people identify and visit their homelands, while changes in languages spoken by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people include development of distinctive English and new languages, reflecting contemporary communication needs.[19]

Transformational approaches

For Australia to overcome Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage and reach the SDGs will require transformation of current policies and practices. In health, this will demand recognition of the social determinants of health, which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have understood forever.[30] Social determinants of health for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, particularly education and employment, can entail opportunities for

learning on and caring for Country. These promote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander expertise in Australia's response to the SDGs and our environmental crises, such as loss of biodiversity and climate change.[28]

Leadership, monitoring and evaluation of progress and development by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are markers of decolonisation.[31] Non-Indigenous Australians have said enough: it is time to listen to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices.

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