

# Preface

This monograph had its genesis at an annual Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) strategic research planning retreat at Kialoa on the NSW south coast, way back in November 2009. As I recall, I had just informed my colleagues at CAEPR that I was stepping aside as director and feeling somewhat liberated to focus more on research. At the same time, Kirrily Jordan was increasingly focusing her research interests on Indigenous employment and the major changes to policy in that field that were underway.

Kirrily and I saw a strategic opportunity to collaborate with a number of others at CAEPR to apply for an Australian Research Discovery (ARC) grant that would do two things. First, document a policy history of the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme from a number of perspectives, including from communities and regions that had participated in the scheme. Second, ask the question how good is CDEP compared with welfare and what might be at risk if CDEP is abolished, bearing in mind that at that time CDEP was still operating.

At that particular moment, CDEP was in the midst of a series of reforms that had begun in earnest in 2005. And there was a lot more reform to come, even though late in 2009 CDEP still existed as a government program not yet subsumed into the broader frame of the Remote Jobs and Communities Program (RJCP). Nevertheless, CDEP was already a shadow of its former self as an Indigenous-specific program, only available now in remote Australia and cleaved into two forms, those 'grandfathered' as employed wage earners and new entrants deemed unemployed and paid Newstart Allowance from Centrelink.

The project proposal was open to other interested academic colleagues at CAEPR and two others indicated interest: political scientist Will Sanders and labour economist Boyd Hunter. To add to these disciplinary perspectives, I would deploy the lenses of anthropology and economics. Kirrily Jordan, a political economist, undertook the lead research role in the project. A pleasing aspect of this proposed collaboration was that we all had past experience researching and writing about CDEP; and I had actually collaborated in writing about CDEP with all the proposed collaborators, as long ago as 1991 with Will Sanders.

We developed an ARC Discovery Project proposal ‘From welfare to work, or work to welfare?: Will reform of the Community Development Employment Program help close the employment gap?’ with three of us as chief investigators and Kirrily Jordan named as the dedicated research fellow. We were fortuitously successful in securing funding for a three-year project starting in 2011.

It transpired that due to major illness the project had to be delayed on two occasions for a total of two years. We would like to thank the ARC for its willingness to allow us to extend our completion date owing to these unanticipated circumstances.

From a research perspective, these delays brought successive governments’ incremental changes to the scheme to an end point where finally the remnant of CDEP—lingering on as an appendage to the new RJCP—was killed off by the Abbott Government as one of only a few recommendations implemented from the Forrest Review of Indigenous Training and Employment completed in August 2014. Even before the term CDEP was doomed to extinguishment from the policy lexicon from 1 July 2015, it was replaced in December 2014 by the term CDP (Community Development Programme) that was to subsume RJCP inclusive of CDEP. Experimental change was coming thick and fast in the difficult Indigenous employment policy field—indeed, the speed in reform of programs appears to be occurring in a directly inverse relationship to the delivery of successful employment outcomes.

The seven chapters in this monograph are divided between three that provide policy and statistical analysis, mainly from secondary sources, and four chapters that are community-based case studies.

These latter are based on primary data collected on a transect that runs from the south coast of NSW, through the Pitjantjatjara lands and central Australia to the Top End of the Northern Territory. This transect is far from random, it is based on research work that we as academic researchers have undertaken in and with members of selected communities over many years.

As will become apparent to readers, both here and in the past we have observed and documented what we believe were the many positive elements of CDEP, while also recognising that the scheme had shortcomings that needed to be addressed. What has surprised us as this project has progressed is how little ongoing and critical debate there has been, especially among policy academics, about the exceptional resilience of CDEP as an Indigenous-specific program and its demise. And so our intention is to provide some coverage for the historical record of what the abolition of CDEP looked like in some places; and to provide critical engagement with the governmental process that oversaw this abolition irrespective of the wishes of participating communities and community-based organisations. In an academic sense, we are looking to give voice to some of those who have borne the brunt of these reforms, but who lack effective channels to communicate their perspectives, which are far from uniform.

Some of the authors in this volume have made particular acknowledgements to research collaborators. Here, I would just like to acknowledge the wonderful assistance provided by Dr Bree Blakeman as the monograph neared completion; and to the research-supportive environment of CAEPR where the research was undertaken and where many of the ideas in this monograph were discussed and debated, formally at public seminars, less formally in the cafes and corridors with colleagues.

Over a decade ago when I was director of CAEPR, a decision was made to publish our research monograph series with what was then the fledgling ANU E Press; in 2004, the co-edited volume *The Indigenous Welfare Economy and the CDEP Scheme* was one of the first we released in this new arrangement. From the perspective of this monograph, that volume serves as a nice bookend to what we present here in *Better than Welfare? Work and Livelihoods for Indigenous Australians after CDEP*. I would like to take this opportunity to sincerely thank the team at the new ANU Press for all their support, and for making their

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publications available open access and online as well as in print-on-demand hard copy. This progressive approach certainly makes research outputs readily available to a diversity of stakeholders, including Indigenous Australians sometimes residing very remotely.

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