The Indigenous Welfare Economy and the CDEP Scheme

Edited by F. Morphy and W.G. Sanders
Foreword

The Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) is an independent research centre within The Australian National University (ANU). Its funding comes from four sources: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), ANU, Department of Family and Community Services (DFACS) and its own consultancy activities. CAEPR’s mission, as defined in its strategic plan, is to contribute to better outcomes for Indigenous people by independently monitoring changes in socio-economic status, influencing policy formation, and informing constructive debate. CAEPR does this through research that combines academic excellence of the highest standards with policy relevance, objectivity, and realism. Its two principal aims are to enhance CAEPR’s role in research which leads to constructive policy debates and improved outcomes for Indigenous Australians, and to broaden Indigenous engagement with CAEPR’s research and improve dissemination of CAEPR’s research findings.

In November 2000 CAEPR, in conjunction with the Reshaping Australian Institutions (RAI) project of ANU’s Research School of Social Sciences, organised a conference, ‘The Indigenous Welfare Economy and the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) Scheme: Autonomy, Dependence, Self Determination and Mutual Obligation’. Convened in part to mark CAEPR’s tenth anniversary, it was a wonderfully diverse gathering of delegates from Indigenous communities and organisations from all over Australia, from the bureaucracy, from key agencies and from academia. This CAEPR Research Monograph is one of the outcomes, and its contents reflect all that diversity of perspective and opinion. Professor Frank Castles, convener of the RAI project, welcomed delegates to the conference and I would personally like to thank him for his enthusiastic support for the conference. The cost of producing the monograph has been assisted in part by the financial support provided by Professor Castles and the RAI project.

In its early planning phase the conference was to focus on the CDEP scheme as a unique Indigenous institution, but in the light of the government’s agenda to reform and reshape the institutions of Australian welfare, it seemed critical to broaden the focus of the conference to engage both the Indigenous welfare economy and the CDEP scheme, and their interrelationships. That broader focus will be evident to the reader of the monograph.

A blueprint for Australian welfare reform has recently been provided to the Howard government by the Reference Group on Welfare Reform, chaired by Patrick McClure. At the centre of the McClure vision is the principle of ‘mutual obligation’, which calls for a new relationship between welfare recipients and the state. Much of the language associated with this ‘new’ concept suggests that this will be a more caring and sensitive engagement, but at this early stage it seems that many of the proposals being considered by government, especially where they include compulsion, do not support this rhetoric.

This publication is timely because the debate is well under way, yet the marginal and diverse circumstances of Indigenous Australia, while very well documented, have not been adequately considered by the proponents of radical change. It is difficult to reconcile the rhetoric of mutual obligation as a vehicle for enhanced economic and social participation
for those at risk of exclusion, with government’s avowed policy embrace of the market and globalisation (although as this foreword is being penned that embrace, in an election year, seems to be loosening somewhat). It is of great concern that, to date, there has been so little active engagement between Indigenous Australians and proponents of welfare reform, and that what little engagement there has been has tended primarily to favour, rather than challenge, the reform agenda.

If poverty and social exclusion are complex and multidimensional problems in mainstream Australian society, how much more complex and multidimensional are these issues for Indigenous Australian individuals, families, and communities that are often remotely located, socio-economically disadvantaged, and in tense, ambivalent relations with the Australian state? Put another way, how reconciled are Indigenous and other Australians in our society and how similar are their visions for Australia’s future?

In the early 1960s, universalist assumptions were embedded in a policy called ‘assimilation’. Its definition, paraphrased a little so as not to cause offence, was as follows:

The policy of assimilation means that all Indigenous Australians are expected eventually to attain the same manner of living as other Australians, to live as members of a single Australian community, enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities, observing the same customs and influenced by the same beliefs as other Australians.

It could be said that there are some worrying resonances here with McClure’s communitarian vision.

In many situations, especially in the rural and remote areas where the CDEP scheme is widespread, Indigenous Australians have very different cultural values from the majority values that underpin key emerging notions like mutual obligation, social partnerships, and participation support. In other situations, Indigenous Australians can be partially or fully linked to the wider society, even if only by marriage or residential integration. While the McClure Report calls for sensitivity to cultural difference, it unfortunately says very little that is substantive about how it is to be accommodated in the new welfare paradigm of mutual obligation.

The subtitle of the conference, ‘Autonomy, Dependence, Self Determination and Mutual Obligation’, captures elements of this tension. In the final two decades of the twentieth century, many Indigenous communities enjoyed unprecedented levels of autonomy, underwritten by high levels of dependence. At times this was ‘active’ as in the CDEP, at other times ‘passive’ as with the dole. This is one manifestation of self determination. The crucial issue, addressed by many papers at the conference and now in this volume, is how Indigenous self determination and the rights agenda, which argues for the unique and inherent rights of Indigenous Australians, will sit with (or in opposition to) the proposed ‘mutual obligation’ of welfare reform. This is an issue of ongoing debate in Australian social policy arena.

As this monograph is being completed, the Howard government has made its first tentative steps to reform the CDEP scheme in the May 2001 Budget and with its ‘new’ policy
framework *Australians Working Together*. The emphasis now, in regions where there are ‘viable’ labour markets, is on CDEP as a stepping stone to mainstream employment; in areas where there is no viable labour market, resources have been earmarked for Community Participation Agreements and community capacity building to ensure that CDEP participation generates outcomes of benefit to each participating community. These policy changes are to be tentatively piloted in the 2001–02 financial year, and the outcomes of these changes will require careful evaluation.

All the full written papers submitted for the volume were refereed by a specialist CAEPR editorial committee.

Professor Jon Altman  
Director, CAEPR  
August 2001
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<tr>
<td>ABS</td>
<td>Australian Bureau of Statistics</td>
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<tr>
<td>ABSTUDY</td>
<td>Aboriginal Study Assistance Scheme</td>
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<tr>
<td>AFDC</td>
<td>Aid to Families with Dependent Children (USA)</td>
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<td>AGPS</td>
<td>Australian Government Publishing Service</td>
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<tr>
<td>AIAS</td>
<td>Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (now AIATSIS)</td>
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<td>AIATSIS</td>
<td>Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>AIFS</td>
<td>Australian Institute of Family Studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>ANTA</td>
<td>Australian National Training Authority</td>
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<td>ANTARAC</td>
<td>Australian National Training Authority Research Advisory Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>ANU</td>
<td>The Australian National University</td>
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<tr>
<td>ATM</td>
<td>Automatic Teller Machine</td>
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<tr>
<td>ATSIC</td>
<td>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATSICOEA</td>
<td>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Office of Evaluation and Audit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATSIPTAC</td>
<td>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Training Advisory Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>AWA</td>
<td>Australian Workplace Agreement</td>
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<tr>
<td>CA</td>
<td>Certified Agreement</td>
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<tr>
<td>CAEPR</td>
<td>Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (ANU)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CAR</td>
<td>Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation</td>
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<tr>
<td>CDEP</td>
<td>Community Development Employment Projects</td>
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<tr>
<td>CDFI</td>
<td>Community Development Financial Institutions Fund (USA)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CEO</td>
<td>Chief Executive Officer</td>
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<tr>
<td>ICERD</td>
<td>International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination</td>
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<tr>
<td>CES</td>
<td>Commonwealth Employment Service</td>
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<td>CESCR</td>
<td>Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights</td>
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</table>
CGC  Commonwealth Grants Commission
CHIP  Community Housing and Infrastructure Program
CPS  CDEP Participant Supplement
CRA  *Community Reinvestment Act (USA)*
CRCAP  Canadian Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples
CRES  Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies (ANU)
CSIRO  Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation
DEET  Department of Employment, Education and Training
DEETYA  Department of Employment, Education, Training, and Youth Affairs
DETYA  Department of Education, Training, and Youth Affairs
DEWRSB  Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business
DFACS  Department of Family and Community Services
DSS  Department of Social Security
EITC  Earned Income Tax Credit (USA)
ESRA  Employment Services Regulatory Agency
GST  Goods and Services Tax
HREOC  Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission
IDA  Individual Development Account (USA)
IEC  Indigenous Employment Centre
ICESCR  *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*
IEP  Indigenous Employment Policy
ILO  International Labour Organisation
ILOC  Indigenous Local Area
LFS  Labour Force Survey
NARU  North Australia Research Unit (ANU)
NATSIS  National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey
NEIS  New Enterprise Incentive Scheme
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<td>NSA</td>
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<td>OEA</td>
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<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>PRC</td>
<td>Papunya Regional Council</td>
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<td>RAI</td>
<td>Reshaping Australian Institutions project (RSSS, ANU)</td>
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<td>R&amp;M</td>
<td>Repair and Maintenance</td>
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<tr>
<td>RDC</td>
<td>Racial Discrimination Commissioner</td>
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<td>RTC</td>
<td>Rural Transaction Centre</td>
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<td>RTO</td>
<td>Registered Training Organisation</td>
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<td>SD</td>
<td>Statistical Division</td>
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<td>SES</td>
<td>Specialised Enumeration Strategy</td>
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<td>SIPF</td>
<td>Special Indigenous Personal Form</td>
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<tr>
<td>SPRC</td>
<td>Social Policy Research Centre (UNSW)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSD</td>
<td>Statistical Sub-Division</td>
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<tr>
<td>STEP</td>
<td>Structured Training and Employment Projects</td>
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<td>TAFE</td>
<td>Technical and Further Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>TANF</td>
<td>Temporary Aid for Needy Families (USA)</td>
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<tr>
<td>TCU</td>
<td>Traditional Credit Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>UB</td>
<td>Unemployment Benefit</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNSW</td>
<td>University of New South Wales</td>
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<tr>
<td>WFTC</td>
<td>Working Families Tax Credit (UK)</td>
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