REGIONAL PLANNING BY ATSIC COUNCILS: PURPOSE, PROCESS, PRODUCT & PROBLEMS

Jackie Wolfe

No. 18 June 1993

ISSN 1037 5112
ISBN 0 7315 1574 9
NORTH AUSTRALIA RESEARCH UNIT

DISCUSSION PAPER

REGIONAL PLANNING BY ATSIC COUNCILS: PURPOSE, PROCESS, PRODUCT & PROBLEMS

Jackie Wolfe

No. 18
June 1993

ISSN 1037 5112
ISBN 0 7315 1574 9
In 1973 the Australian National University created the North Australia Research Unit for two purposes: to carry out a research program of its own and to provide a base and logistic support for research workers, from ANU and from other Australian or overseas research institutions. The Unit is part of the Research School of Pacific Studies.

The Unit's activities range well beyond its base in Darwin in the Northern Territory to research localities in central Australia and the north and west of Queensland and north Western Australia.

The Unit's academic work is interdisciplinary and principally in the social sciences. An overall aim is to initiate research on problems of development in the north, little studied by other institutions. At present, emphasis is being given to four main research areas:

- Environmental management and planning
- Governance and policymaking structures
- Economic development and social equity
- Quality of community life

The future prospects and present needs of the Aboriginal and Islander communities remain a major theme in our work as are ecological and economic sustainability.

NARU Discussion Papers are intended to invite comment and to stimulate debate. Interested parties and others are encouraged to respond to any paper in whatever way is appropriate. This could be by offering comments, entering into debate or correspondence with the author, or by responding in public fora or even by offering a manuscript for another discussion paper.
Each paper will be short (see guidelines below). They will often deal with controversial topics. While the Unit takes pride in, and legal responsibility for, its publications, these papers reflect views of authors and not those of the Australian National University or the North Australia Research Unit.

The Unit is willing to publish discussion papers written by authors who are not members of ANU or NARU. However, NARU retains the right to use referees or to reject manuscripts. Non-NARU contributors may be expected to make some financial contribution towards publication.

We hope that this series will open up discussion about some issues of northern development and the inevitable conflicts that arise from change, culture contacts and diversity of values.

Information about the Unit's activities and publications can be obtained from:

The Publications Officer
North Australia Research Unit
PO Box 41321
Casuarina NT 0811

Telephone: (089) 275 688
Facsimile: (089) 450 752
EMail: NARU_ANU@vax1.ntu.edu.au

Guidelines for contributors:

Papers should not exceed eleven thousand words. The Harvard system of referencing is used. Authors are asked to follow the styling used in this paper. Originals of illustrative material should be supplied. Authors are requested to submit their papers on floppy disk and as hard copy. Papers will be accepted in MS Word in IBM or Mac format and in WordPerfect. Papers may be refereed before publication. An abstract of about three hundred words and a short résumé about the author(s) should also be supplied with the manuscript.
Acknowledgments

There are so many people to thank that it is hard to know where to begin, so I will first offer my apologies to all those who are not mentioned by name, but who have assisted in the development of these papers by giving so generously of their materials, their time, and most importantly, of their ideas and thoughts. Across northern Australia people in many Aboriginal communities and organisations have offered their ideas, their comments and their guidance over the years that I have been interested in community and area planning and development issues. The staff of the ATSIC regional offices generously assisted with their files, their recollections and observations, as did those from DEET regional offices. In particular the staff of the Cairns ATSIC regional office, and members of the Peninsula, and Cairns and Region, regional councils, have given unstintingly of their experience and their ideas. Bill Sheldon, community and regional planner, and Geoff Richardson, regional manager at Cairns have provided assistance, new insights, critiques, and support. Staff of the ATSIC central office Regional Support Branch, which sponsored the initial report, have been very helpful with travel and other arrangements. Special thanks to branch head Shane Hoffman, and to members of the Community and Regional Planning section, most particularly Herb Grant and Russ Taylor, for guidance while I was writing up the reports and for critique of the report and papers. Others with whom I have had lengthy discussions which have helped shape my ideas and to whom I owe so much include Cath Elderton and others associated with the Kimberley Land Council and Warringari Resource Centre, Barbara Flick and staff of Mamabulanjin Community Development Unit in Broome, members of the West Kimberley CDUs in Derby, Geoff Barker who also works with communities in the Kimberley, Brian Burkett and David Riley of the Northern Territory Open College Community Development Planning Program in Alice Springs, staff of the South Australia TAFE system Community Management Training Unit, and Alan Dale of Griffith University in Brisbane. I hope I have done justice to your experience, your contributions, your ideas, and your ideals. Here at NARU all the staff give so generously of their time to visiting researchers like myself.
To Mardy Aye, Nicki Hanssen, Jann King, Colleen Pyne, Sally Roberts, Janet Sincock, Ann Webb and Meriel Weir — my gratitude for your help and your friendship. Special thanks to Dr Nugget Coombs whose life, mind, and ideas are an inspiration. To NARU Director David Lea, my appreciation for his support and hours of discussion and critical reading. I know there are more, but I am running out of space. It shows that these papers belong to a lot of people, though I take full responsibility for what is in this version.

Financial Support

This paper draws on data gathered through a consultancy for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission. The travel and accommodation costs directly related to the research were covered by ATSIC. This support is much appreciated.

Disclaimer

The views expressed by the author are not necessarily the views of the Commission.

Notes on contributor

Jackie Wolfe is a geographer and Associate Professor in the University School of Rural Planning and Development at the University of Guelph in Ontario, Canada (1967–present). She has worked in community planning and development with Indian and Inuit groups in Canada. Since 1986 she has spent several months each year as a Visiting Fellow at NARU, researching and writing on Aboriginal community government, conditions in town-camps, and, for the last three years, on Aboriginal community and regional development planning.
ABSTRACT

Aboriginal elected Regional Councils across Australia are required by ATSIC legislation to prepare, revise and work to implement Aboriginal regional plans. This paper, the second of two NARU discussion papers on Aboriginal regional planning, argues that effective planning by regional councils has a number of requisites. Four are particularly important: decision-making authority; recognition; adequate and appropriate resources; and legitimacy. The paper discusses Aboriginal regional councils in these terms. It then draws on case material compiled for a 1992 review of community and regional planning being undertaken through eight ATSIC offices in northern Australia (Wolfe 1992a) to examine the context, processes, interim products and potential outcomes and emerging problems associated with ATSIC regional planning and plans.

Many regional councils in northern Australia have taken on the task with great seriousness and have devoted considerable time and energy to it. The regional planning process has often not been smooth. Some councils have had professional planning consultants do most of the job. Some have had the assistance of professional facilitators or ATSIC regional staff to guide the activity in which councillors have played a major role in community and agency consultations, and in identifying a regional vision, goals and strategies. A few have done most or all of the plan-making for themselves with paid assistance from within the local Aboriginal community. Plans vary from being data-filled weighty documents to relatively short 'plain language' statements of major issues in the region and proposed strategies to deal with them. Some include strategies for only a few priority goals. Others are regarded as the 'final' plan.

The paper concludes that a combination of Aboriginal regional and community or organisation level planning has the potential to invert the current system of planning for Aboriginal people. It could shift it from a top-down system determined by external interpretations and decisions about what is best for Aboriginal people, to a system through which local
needs are identified locally and addressed through Aboriginal controlled and Aboriginal run agencies at the regional, sub-regional and local level; and regional and Australia-wide Aboriginal issues are maintained at the forefront of the national agenda and dealt with to the benefit of Aboriginal people. However, the potential is continually in jeopardy. The current emphasis is important, but it is only a first step.

What effective Aboriginal regional planning needs now is patience and time, and commitment: patience on the part of critics and supporters of planning alike to deal with the changes in relationships and the emergence of structures that new ways of planning sets in motion; time, to get into place the support systems that were not carefully considered and developed prior to initiation of regional planning; and real commitment of all parties to support all aspects of the process which encourage regions to take their own course. Patience, time and commitment are essentially cost free. All three are apparently in limited or uncertain supply.
REGIONAL PLANNING BY ATSIC COUNCILS: PURPOSE, PROCESS, PRODUCT AND PROBLEMS

Jackie Wolfe

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ACT of 1989 requires that the Aboriginal elected regional councils must:

formulate, and revise from time to time, a regional plan for improving the economic, social and cultural status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents of the region (ATSIC Act 1989, 94 [1a]);

assist, advise and co-operate with the Commission, other Commonwealth bodies and State, Territory and local government bodies in relation to the implementation of the regional plan (ATSIC Act 1989, 94 [1b]);

make proposals, in accordance with section 97, for Commission expenditure to the region (ATSIC Act 1989, 94 [1c]);

receive, and pass on to the Commission, the views of Aboriginal persons and Torres Strait Islanders about the activities, in the region, of the Commission, other Commonwealth bodies and State, Territory and local government bodies (ATSIC Act 1989, 94 [1d]); and

represent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents of the region and act as an advocate of their interests (ATSIC Act, 94 [1c]).

A recent paper (Wolfe 1993b), which examined the experiences of regional planning and regional development in Australia, Canada and developing areas, for lessons relevant for Aboriginal regional planning in Australia, found that they offer little guidance, but many cautionary lessons. For example, international regional development planning experience suggests the necessity to take simultaneous account of local, regional and central levels of planning. If not, the weakest levels, which tend to be the local and regional, tend to receive the burdens — in this case, the responsibility for planning — that the upper and more powerful levels cannot cope with (Quarles van Ufford 1988, 43). Canada has a long
history of using regional development approaches to deal with the regional disparities which characterise the country. It also has, over the last decade, gradually responded to aboriginal demands for inclusion as equal partners in landuse decision-making and co-managers of renewable resources by including aboriginal representatives in key regional decision-making bodies. Australia, despite its international work in integrated rural development, has had little domestic experience with regional development planning in either non-Aboriginal or Aboriginal contexts, and has little in the way of relevant expertise. The paper concluded that:

there are no precedents in regional development or regional planning anywhere (as far as I have been able to discern) of an impoverished, relatively powerless and poorly educated minority being expected to plan for itself under the auspices of an elected council whose limited authority is derived not from its constituents but from its creators: a council which, moreover, has been granted very limited financial and human resources to bring to bear on the task (Wolfe 1993b).

The current paper first examines ATSIC regional councils in terms of their authority, the recognition given to them, the resources available to them, and their legitimacy in the eyes of their Aboriginal constituents. It then draws on case material compiled for a 1992 review of community and regional planning being undertaken through eight ATSIC offices in northern Australia (Wolfe 1992a) to examine the context, processes, interim products and potential outcomes and emerging problems associated with ATSIC regional planning and plans.

As the paper on lessons from regional planning and development in Canada and Australia commented, some existing and emerging Aboriginal interests and organisations, in the form of land councils, special purpose Aboriginal organisations and service providing resource centres with local or regional legitimacy, challenge the delegated decision-making authority and planning responsibility of the ATSIC regional councils. The ability of regional councils, and the array of Commonwealth, State, Territory and Local Government agencies, to use the plans to negotiate more effective service delivery is equally problematic. ATSIC regional council planning is an ambiguous activity at best: the likelihood that it will do anything more than shift formal
responsibility for difficult decisions about allocation of scarce funding resources from public servants to a small group of elected Aborigines is as yet unproven (Wolfe 1993b).

**Authority, recognition, resources and legitimacy**

The ability of ATSIC regional councils to plan effectively can only be understood within the context of Commonwealth, State and Territory and Aboriginal organisation politics, policy and administration and legitimation (see also Mitchell 1990; Smith 1993), and the rhetoric and reality of greater Aboriginal self-determination. As Charles Perkins recently observed, numbers of Commonwealth departments dabble in Aboriginal affairs, complemented by a myriad of state, local and Aboriginal organisations. This multi-level policy and administration of Aboriginal affairs is confusing to Aboriginal people, not cost effective, and actual service delivery to Aboriginal clients is not adequate. Furthermore the Commission (ATSIC) has little influence in all these vital areas of Aboriginal affairs (Perkins 1991, 12).

Effective planning by any agency is inevitably a political activity, and has a number of political requisites. Four are particularly worthy of consideration given the constitution of ATSIC regional councils: decision-making authority, recognition by other decision-making bodies, adequate and appropriate resources and legitimacy (Wolfe 1991).

To function effectively a planning body must have decision-making authority for matters that are of central importance to its constituents, and authority to gain a degree of compliance by outside agencies with those decisions. Nominal authority without power to carry out the decisions that really matter, or responsibility only to implement the decisions of others, are limiting factors. A decision-making body must also be recognised as authentic by bodies external to it, with which it must interact. Recognition alone is not sufficient. The body must have some authority to gain cooperation and a degree of compliance with its plans from external
agencies. The body must have adequate and appropriate resources to draw up plans and to implement its strategic decisions. Without these it is pointless to contemplate planning. And most importantly, for without it the body is an alien artifice, it must have legitimacy — it must have the support and respect of its constituents and be recognised by them as being properly and legitimately constituted (some use the term authority to include both external and internal authority — in the present context I believe it is useful to draw a sharper distinction). A critical element in legitimacy is the application of decision-making which combines appropriateness (in this case cultural appropriateness) with fairness.

How do ATSIC and its regional councils fare in terms of authority, recognition, resources and legitimacy? Some of the limitations of ATSIC have been identified above. Coombs (1990), Rowse (1991, 1992a&b), Crough (1993, 109–118) and its own consultants (Coopers and Lybrand 1991) have all examined ATSIC and found it wanting in several areas.

**Authority and recognition**

The elected arm of the Commission is constituted through Commonwealth legislation as an instrument for greater Aboriginal self-determination. It is, however, the creature of this legislation (lack of independent or separate authority of regional councils is illustrated by the April 1993 Commonwealth proposal to reduce the number of councils from sixty to thirty-six, after only minimal consultation with Aboriginal people), and is limited in its legal authority to the powers delegated to it by the federal parliament. Such a system was proposed by Canada's federal government in the 1960s and was firmly rejected by Aboriginal people in favour of the pursuit of constitutionally recognised and entrenched inherent rights (see also Scott 1992, 32).

The delegated powers of ATSIC regional councils are limited. While councils are required to plan (ATSIC Act 1989, 94.1.a), their powers are limited to assisting, advising and co-operating with other government
bodies in the implementation of the plan (ATSIC Act 1989, 94.1.b.): they have no legislative authority to get any other agency or Aboriginal organisation to follow the plan. Consequently the scope of councils' effective decision-making authority is in serious doubt. It depends on the willingness of other parties to negotiate. Lea (1993) argues that the 'moral persuasion' implicit in requiring key bodies to negotiate with regional councils is 'overwhelming': others are sceptical that regional councils can exercise any significant power over state or territory agencies (Crough 1993).

The Commonwealth has encouraged other levels of government and their agencies to recognise the existence and roles of regional councils. At the same time, however, the Commonwealth and various nationally important reports, namely the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and the National Commitment to Improved Outcomes for Aboriginal Peoples and Torres Strait Islanders (AAAC 1991), have emphasised service delivery by Aboriginal organisations 'as a matter of preference' (Johnston 1991, Rec. 192). In Rec. 203, RCADC, Johnston also endorsed planning on a regional basis. ATSIC and the AAAC acknowledge that State and Territory governments have significant responsibility for provision of government services to Aboriginal people (see Crough 1993, 109–111 for a discussion on the implications for regional councils of the 1991 AAAC report, Achieving Greater Coordination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Programs and Services, for bilateral Joint Responsibility Agreements between Commonwealth and State and Territory governments).

Not surprisingly, therefore, Crough (1993), Coombs (1990) and Rowse (1991, 1992b) all question how much notice other governments will take of ATSIC regional plans.

Councils have had planning thrust upon them before they have had time to gain experience in any other policy or functional arena. However,
many regional councils are beginning to see planning as focus for their activities and a way for them to establish credibility with their constituents.

**Appropriateness and adequacy of resources**

The appropriateness and adequacy of resources are equally problematic for the general functioning of regional councils, and for their ability to undertake and implement regional planning; and are directly linked to the strict limits placed on councils' authority. First, both the administrative and the elected arms of ATSIC are part of the machinery of government, not independent from it. This has several important implications regarding whose interests the Commission serves. Dr Coombs pursued this point vigorously in an article in the *Canberra Times* saying:

> ... Aborigines should doubt whether the ATSIC proposals offer any significant transfer of authority or improvement in the political or economic power or bargaining capacity ... they provide no access to information, knowledge, research capacity or objective advice except through this existing bureaucracy (Coombs 1990).

As Rowse also points out (1992b, 22) Commissioners and councils cannot hire or fire staff, although, as a matter of policy they are represented on panels for hiring key ATSIC staff. Regional councils do not have their own local independent secretariat capable of working for the interests of regional council and Aboriginal people of that region. Further, no level of the bureaucracy has much internal expertise or experience in regional planning and development to offer to regional councils.

But the recommendation of the Deaths in Custody inquiry that 'consideration be given to constituting ATSIC ... independent of the Public Service (Johnston 1991, Rec.189) was the only one 'unequivocally rejected' by the government. Rowse (1992c, 171) suggests that the interests of public servants were placed above the interests of sovereignty
and independence of elected commissioners and councillors and their constituents. An alternative perspective is that ATSIC actually exercises significantly more independence than other government departments.

Second, the way ATSIC is constituted means that it is accountable financially to the Commonwealth parliament through the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, and not directly to its constituents. Parliamentarians, particularly from the opposition benches, but also from the government, demand particularly careful public scrutiny of expenditures on programs targeted to Aboriginal clients. This puts considerable pressure on the ATSIC central office which, in turn, pressures regional offices for strict adherence to program terms, careful acquittal of grants and application of input performance indicators. The general Australian public, while concerned for parliamentary and public service accountability for expenditure of public funds, expects to see improvements in Aboriginal conditions resulting from inputs of public monies. In other words, it expects improvements in outcomes. And, of course, the Aboriginal communities across Australia likewise anticipate improvements in their lives. However, ATSIC response to its financial accountability to parliament and public political scrutiny of its financial transactions has been to impose strict input performance indicators, reinforcing rigid application of rules and proliferation of specific programs rather than to develop careful and meaningful outcome performance measures.

One widely discussed change in the handling of at least part of ATSIC's finances is a move to block funding of Aboriginal communities and organisations (block funding has proved successful in Canadian Indian communities since it allows for transfers between agreed programs and roll-over of funds from year to year, see Wolfe 1992c). As Rowse has again pointed out, ATSIC has been resistant to the RCADC's recommendation (Johnston 1991, Rec. 190 and 191) for changes in the handling of funds, specifically a shift to block funding to Aboriginal organisations. ATSIC's response was:

... devolution of decision-making on funds allocations to ATSIC (with retention of Ministerial control) does not threaten lines of acceptability. The further devolution
of decision-making to autonomous Regional Councils (over which the Commission does not have any control) blurs the lines of acceptability by effectively removing from the Commission itself the capacity to manage program allocations. A further devolution to multi-program block grants to communities and organisations completes the process, and makes it difficult for the Commonwealth to hold the ATSIC Commission accountable for either program allocations or program outcomes. Management requires control. Control is contrary to self-determination (unpublished draft, National Responses, quoted in Rowse 1992b, 23; 1992c, 170-172).

Third, regional councils are responsible for allocating only a small portion of the ATSIC budget (which itself is only part of the total Commonwealth, State and Territory subvention for Aboriginal support services). In 1992–93, regional councils were responsible for 18–19% of ATSIC's total appropriation (Crough 1993, 109) or 46% of funds which can be regarded as discretionary (ATSIC 1992, 19). While proportionately small, this now means that regional councils have responsibility for allocating substantial real dollars between urgent competing demands from communities and organisations within their regions for continuing or new projects. However, a considerable part of this is transferred to state or territory agencies for pre-planned projects. To date, no guidelines or methods have been proposed by ATSIC to assist each council in making objective, fair and equitable assessments of the merits of funding applications, although one method is currently being developed.2

Fourth, as Dr Coombs was swift to point out in the early days of ATSIC, what the Commonwealth government has succeeded in doing is shifting the most unpleasant and politically contentious responsibility, of saying that funds are insufficient to meet demand, from the Commonwealth and its delegates to elected regional councillors (Coombs 1990). The nastiest political task has been devolved. Regional councils become the locus and focus for lobbying and political infighting for scarce dollars among competing local Aboriginal interests.

These issues aside, ATSIC has not allocated sufficient resources to regional offices to enable regional managers to deploy sufficient staff to adequately service the regional council secretariats. Difficult trade-offs
have to be made between staff support for projects, communities, or regional councils. The secretariat staff are overwhelmed with the accounting, correspondence and preparation of minutes, and have neither the time nor expertise to undertake developmental or research work with regional councils. Some regions are presently endeavouring to reorganise the secretariat so as to separate out the financial administration of regional councils. The magnitude of council business still requires more secretariat staff support. There are, however, dangers for councils in reliance on secretariat staff, who could take on roles as gatekeepers between council and other parts of the ATSIC administration and other agencies. Also, unless secretariat officers are scrupulous in presenting information to councils in unbiased fashion, the secretariat could develop into a hidden influence on council business and decisions. The position of ATSIC officers as public servants, not independent staff to regional councils, compounds this possibility.

The volume of council business has implications for the ability of regional councils to undertake the task of regional planning with any degree of effectiveness. Councils are overwhelmed with correspondence, requests for comment, and getting through the most routine business (business made doubly difficult by the limited numeracy, literacy and comprehension of English of some council members, especially those from the more remote regions). ATSIC has offered little assistance to councils or to secretariat staff to assist them discriminate between these tasks so that they can concentrate on the major issues rather than be swamped by bureaucratic demands and trivia. As a result councils have little time for major matters, such as regional planning. There is one exception to the lack of assistance. During 1992 the ATSIC CEO gave repeated instructions that key managers, in seeking views from regional councils, must include an Executive Summary of all documents in 'plain English' and must draw attention to those matters on which the Commission is seeking council input.

Despite their burden of work, many councils have taken hold of regional planning with considerable enthusiasm, seeing in it a way to bring
political focus to the big issues in their area or a way to strengthen and improve the quality and range of services to the region as a whole, or simply a way to share out financial resources. For these councils, it is offering them a valid role, and useful activity which many are convinced will serve the Aboriginal community well in the long term. Regional planning has given them a reason for existing which they had previously lacked.

The one free resource that ATSIC could have offered to regional councils, namely time, has not been generously given. ATSIC has insisted that councils complete the first regional plans in time for the 1993 budget estimates, with potentially serious consequences for the quality and usefulness of the plans themselves. The rationale was to enable Commissioners to take account of regional plan priorities when developing the 1992–93 budget.

**Legitimacy**

And what of the legitimacy of ATSIC regional councils? Are they respected and supported by their constituents. If voter turnout is any indication, support is limited. In the 1990 elections only one third of the expected voters turned out, with lowest participation in the capital cities and very high in remote areas. But ATSIC was new and this was the first election. There has also been a high turnover of councillors. Many have resigned — disillusioned by the high level of infighting within many councils, and between councils and other Aboriginal organisations — or simply worn down by the weight of regional council work.

Although establishment of ATSIC received overt or tacit support from many existing major Aboriginal organisations, the legitimacy of ATSIC regional councils, as defined above, is questionable, since their existence and whatever authority they have does not come from Aboriginal people but from parliament. Establishment of national level Commissioners and regional level councils has added yet another highly politicised strand to
the already complex web of the Aboriginal domain. It sets up a potentially important counter-force (because of the money it has responsibility to allocate) to the Aboriginal land councils and the major Aboriginal legal, medical and other service organisations and resourcing centres, which, powerful as they are, have to solicit and search for funds, often from regional councils.

The position of regional councillors with respect to their constituents, the Aboriginal people in their region, has been further clouded in controversy because of the structure of ATSIC within the public service. Councillors early on were given to understand that the deliberations of the Commission should be treated as confidential (Rowse 1992b). This instruction was later withdrawn; but, as a result, many councillors continue to be uncertain as to their relationship with people in the community they themselves come from, let alone people from other communities.

The question of legitimacy is compounded by two contradictory conventions: one, that in elected 'democratic' governments, elected representatives speak for their constituents; and two, the conventions of Aboriginal traditional politics — that no individual speaks on behalf of others — except on matters that they have traditional authority and clearance to do so. Even then the constituency is highly localised. As Rowse (1991, 11) notes: 'local solidarities are felt to be more important than overarching structures of decision-making and representation'. Therefore, the presumption made by other levels of government and by government agencies, that regional councillors and councils can and will listen to and speak on behalf of Aboriginal people of the region, and are their 'representatives' is out of step with the role that some councillors themselves feel they can legitimately play.
Initiation of ATSIC regional planning

Coopers and Lybrand Report and guidelines and initial ATSIC responses

In response to the legislative requirements for formulation and revision of regional plans by regional councils, ATSIC central office in Canberra began to prepare for regional planning. ATSIC hired consultants Coopers and Lybrand to develop a model approach for regional planning, and to prepare a guidebook detailing the steps of the model, for distribution to staff, regional councillors and consultants hired to assist councils in plan preparation (ATSIC c.1991). The consultants undertook an elaborate consultation process with agency staff, regional councillors and Commissioners and Aboriginal leaders.

The consultants produced a final report (Coopers and Lybrand 1991) which not only outlined ideal outcomes from a planning process, but also critiqued the current ability of ATSIC to undertake regional planning, and recommended a number of significant steps and changes which ATSIC needed to take for regional planning to be effective.

According to the consultants, ideal outcomes from a regional planning process include: providing a strategic and fair basis for allocation of ATSIC budgets; informing the Commission on regional priorities for incorporation into policies and the ATSIC corporate plan; providing a framework and mechanisms for informing State, Territory and local governments and other agencies of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander priorities, needs and aspirations; integrating the planning and delivery processes of all the service agencies and facilitating a co-ordinated approach to service delivery; influencing the policies and programs of other Commonwealth agencies; and providing opportunities for community self-development, ownership, active learning and skills transfer.
Regional planning, they said,

is a step by step process to improve the overall cultural, social and economic well-being and quality of life of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of the region through — identifying their needs, aspirations and priorities; — developing and guiding the implementation of appropriate strategies that reflect regional priorities; — integrating the planning capacities and responsibilities of service providers, both government and others; — (and) establishing the basis for the allocation of government resources (Commonwealth, State, Territory and Local) at the regional level (Coopers and Lybrand 1991, Definition and Ideal of Regional Planning).

The report identified numerous constraints to achievement of these ideal outcomes, including lack of acceptance of ATSIC itself, unclear purpose for regional councils, low level of motivation for planning amongst some councils and communities, political factionalism, and the vested interests of established organisations. Little was said in the report about how they might be addressed.

According to Coopers and Lybrand, the success of regional planning will also depend on the extent to which the planning, policy making and program/project delivery process of State/Territory and Commonwealth agencies respond to and are in concert with the vision and goals of ATSIC regional plans. Such agencies were, therefore, included in proposed communications strategies and in the consultation and negotiation processes. No further discussion was offered on how regional councils would be assisted to negotiate from a position of equality or strength.

The report was frank about the internal and external management issues which ATSIC needed to address for effective regional planning, and advised that a Task Force should be established to oversee the following initiatives: a communication strategy to familiarise all stakeholders with the concept and process of regional planning; putting appropriate human resources in place to support planning; development and delivery of training programs; funding of regional councils to undertake planning.
The report also stated that the Commission needed to move away from budgeting and funding which is program-focused, submission driven and an annual budget cycle which encourages a short-term perspective, and move towards three year, rolling, global budgets (Coopers and Lybrand 1991, Support Arrangements — Funding and External Relationships).

Realistically, the consultants drew ATSIC's attention to the fact that most regional councils and regional offices have neither the expertise or resources to formulate regional plans, and emphasised the need for financial and other planning support particularly in the first two or three years.

Coopers and Lybrand therefore advised ATSIC to establish, maintain and update small regional data bases (for a detailed discussion on demographic data needs for regional planning see Altman & Gaminiratne 1992). They emphasised the need for staff to support, oversee, implement and monitor regional plans at regional, state and central offices and the need for specialised training for staff directly involved in planning. The report set out a detailed Implementation Timetable for Support Arrangements which included the organisation and delivery of planning awareness workshops by central office for Commissioners and council chairpersons, and state and regional staff; development of course material for regional planning training; and appointment and training of regional planning officers. The proposed 'regional planning officer' was identified as a key player in the planning process, being the only player with a role in every step of the planning process (Coopers and Lybrand 1991, Assistance and Delegation During Planning).

A small regional and community planning section was set up at central office within the Regional Support Branch, to track and monitor regional and community planning. Awareness workshops were developed and carried out for Commissioners, Council chairpersons, and selected central office and state and regional staff. Some state offices developed and delivered specially prepared regional planning workshops. Many regions
have now nominated a staff member to oversee regional and community planning, though few regions reassigned staff as community and regional planning officers or hired specialist planners.

Coopers and Lybrand set out, in a specially prepared guidebook, a six phase, eighteen step process for regional planning (Figure 1). The six phases are Get Started, Gather Information, Analyse Information, Prepare Draft Regional Plan, Consult and Negotiate, and Implement and Monitor. The eighteen steps (most with one or more sub-steps) specify what must be done to complete each phase. In its expanded form in the Guidelines for Developing Regional Plans (ATSIC c.1991, 12–23) it provides a detailed guide with potential usefulness for the agency and, maybe, a useful checklist for planning consultants. Some of the regional planning consultants working for regional councils report using the 'Guidelines' and steps.

The limitations of the eighteen step model for practical planning are obvious. Few 'on-the-ground' planners, let alone regional councillors or members of the public, are likely to be able to handle so detailed a planning process. As one councillor commented: 'Many people I know have great difficulty with the ten or twelve steps that organisations like Alcoholics Anonymous use — four or five steps is more than enough.'

Also, the process is presented as being linear, with a beginning and an end. In reality, planning is not a series of discrete steps. It is a loose, repetitive, adaptive, flexible, interactive process (Lea & Wolfe 1993). To work effectively it must be recursive — to use planning jargon, it must have many 'feedback loops'.

Some steps present serious problems. For example, Step 2 requires that regional councils, or those assisting them with planning, or both together, 'identify aspirations, key regional issues, broad draft goals, planning framework and principles/policies, and desired outcomes'. The accompanying notes emphasise that it is important early on for regional councils to identify and agree upon aspirations, draft key regional issues, and broad goals.
A Planning Process for

1. **Get Started**
   - Agree:
     - timetable
     - participants
     - roles and responsibilities
     - resources and involvement
     - budget for plan
     - information program
   - Develop timetable to communicate and consult on the process.
   - Inform all participants.

2. **Identify:**
   - aspirations;
   - key regional issues;
   - broad draft goals;
   - planning framework and principles/policies;
   - desired outcomes.

3. **Identify existing and planned services to the region through ongoing discussion with service providers.**

4. **Consult with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to identify community and regional goals.**

5. **Consider Community Plans.**

6. **Integrate and analyse information on regional situation:**
   - existing services
   - planned services
   - regional views and needs
   - cultural and social needs.

7. **Prepare Regional Profile:**
   - picture of the region
   - opportunities and constraints.

8. **Assess Region’s preparedness/capacity for achieving regional aspirations.**

---

**Figure 1. A planning process for ATSIC regional councils**

*Source: ATSIC c.1991, 10–11*
**ATSIC Regional Councils**

**Prepare Draft Regional Plan**
- Develop regional vision and finalise goals.
- List goals in order of importance.
- Identify desired outcomes.
- Develop strategies to meet priority goals.
- Consider planning principles/policies.
- Select preferred strategies.
- Match chosen strategies to service providers.
- Revise strategies if necessary.
- Assess broad implications for ATSIC budget.

**Consult and Negotiate**
- Distribute and provide information on draft regional plan.
- Consult and negotiate with funding agencies, service providers and communities.
- Finalise and agree with service providers and funding agencies:
  - strategies;
  - 3-5 year implementation timetable;
  - performance targets/standards.
- Revise strategies and finalise Regional Plan.

**Implement and Monitor**
- Allocate budget available to Regional Council on the basis of the Regional Plan.
- Distribute plan to all the relevant people involved.
- Establish mechanisms to oversee and monitor implementation of the plan.
- Monitor and assess progress against performance targets/standards and timetable.
- Review and amend on a regular basis.
- Prepare information for Annual Report.
Step 4 then says 'consult with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to identify community and regional goals', and 'consider community plans'. Regrettably, this gives the impression that the consultation process is to be used to confirm or even impose regional councillors views about regional priorities. Furthermore, it condenses what must be a slow and carefully considered back and forth process into a brief exercise in 'consultation'.

Coopers and Lybrand recognised that 'ultimately' the planning process must link into the budget process, but 'anticipated' that the first plans would take over a year to be developed. The consultants recommended a two year time frame for completion of the first regional plans with completion of the first stage (Framework for the Development of the Plan) by September 1992, submission of a first-cut Draft Plan by November 1992, first Plan by April 1993, and a Full Plan by April 1994. In the first year the consultants suggested that some councils might choose to concentrate on developing a vision and goals. Others might concentrate on developing strategies for priority goals.

Implementation of a staff training strategy began in late 1991. Plan preparation at the regional level began in June 1992, with the decision by the ATSIC administration in Canberra, contrary to the two year time frame proposed by Coopers and Lybrand, that the first stage (Framework for the Development of the Regional Plan) would be completed by September 1992, the second stage Draft Plan by November 1992, and the first regional plan completed by April 1993. Funds were made available for plan preparation through the community and regional planning program during 1991–92 and 1992–93. Depending on the type of planning support requested, regional councils and their planning consultants received anywhere from $35,000 to close to $140,000 for regional plan preparation. Regional councillor sitting fees for planning meetings and their claims for travel to communities were additional expenses.
**ATSIC's adjustment of the time frame and its impact**

The change to the time frame prompts speculation that, at the start-up and despite the cautions and recommendations in the Coopers and Lybrand report, some in the ATSIC administration expected the making of a regional plan to be a simple, one-off activity, which could then be adjusted annually and locked in to the annual ATSIC budget cycle, specifically the Board of Commissioners consideration of national priorities and programs in November, and the budget estimates process in March and April.

In August 1992 I had completed a review of regional planning in three ATSIC regional offices — Kununurra, Derby/Broome and Katherine — and had been made acutely aware of the impact that the shortened time frame was having on regional councils and regional staff (Wolfe 1992a). Both groups had presumed from the briefing or training they had been receiving that sufficient time would be allowed for a careful planning process and plan-making activity to be carried out. They had been told that the process would 'provide opportunities for community self-development, ownership, active learning and skills transfer' (Coopers and Lybrand 1991, Definition and Ideal of Regional Planning). But they were immediately confronted by what they all knew to be an unrealistic time frame.

**Differences between corporate or organisation planning and Aboriginal regional planning: a commentary**

As I prepared the regional reports I became increasingly concerned that the new timetable set for Aboriginal regional planning was more consistent with corporate or organisation planning than the needs of ATSIC regional councils and their regions. In the report (Wolfe 1992a) I commented that:

People within businesses and agencies which do corporate or organisation planning are paid, and are employed 7-8 hours a day, 5 days a week. They are formally educated. They share a corporate language. They have had prior experience with
formal planning in several different parts of their lives. They can be put into a pressure cooker atmosphere and told to come up with priorities, strategies and an action plan. The business or agency has a distinct identity and purpose. Corporate planning is a matter of reconfirming these, making course corrections, and so on. Even so, developing a corporate plan can be a difficult, divisive and time-consuming activity.

Regional councillors and community councillors are not full-time paid staff (in response to this issue ATSIC proposed in April 1993 to establish more full-time positions within the elected wing). Many do not have a great deal of formal education. For some, English is a second language. Some are not functionally literate or numerate. They have experience, knowledge and wisdom in other areas.

While needs, concerns and priorities may be broadly similar across a region, local differences matter most to each community. Councillors, council members and community members have many other duties and priorities. Most particularly, family matters, ceremonies and funerals take precedence over all other business. Most are not familiar with the formal language of planning (aspirations, goals, objectives, strategies, action and implementation).

The short time frame is resented by regional councillors. Some are convinced that they are, yet again, being set up to fail. As one said: 'how can we regional councillors be talking to communities (about regional planning) when we don't understand it ourselves'. Some think it does not make sense to do regional planning before community planning. Community plans should come first, they say.

Responsibility for understanding planning and for doing planning is being placed on regional councils and on communities (where indeed it should be). But these people, generally, have the least experience and understanding of formal planning. ATSIC, which should have experience and skills in planning, has not recognised that it has a significant role to play in making planning work, beyond that which it has presently prescribed for itself.5

Many ATSIC regional staff also regarded the time frame as an imposed urgency which made all aspects of their job (with regional councils and with communities) more difficult.

A more positive view of this round of regional planning will regard it as only a start. What comes out of it will have to be re-visited, and revised, as part of an ongoing process. The question arises whether central office regards this regional planning activity as a one-off end in itself, or an initial step in an on-going process of regional planning. If the latter, than various sorts of supports will have to be provided to regional councils to assist them in continuing with the process, and with using the plans as they evolve (Wolfe 1992a, Katherine District Regional Planning: Concerns and Lessons to Heed).
Aboriginal regional planning in northern Australia

ATSIC regional councils across Australia have been engaged during 1992–93 in the preparation of regional plans. As part of a review for the Community and Regional Planning Section of the ATSIC Regional Support Branch in Canberra, of community and regional planning in northern Australia, I visited ATSIC offices in Kununurra and Derby/Broome in Western Australia, Darwin, Katherine, Tennant Creek, and Alice Springs in the Northern Territory, and Mount Isa and Cairns in Queensland, and discussed the approach being taken to regional planning with ATSIC regional staff, regional councils in the area, and, where possible, other Aboriginal leaders and staff of Aboriginal organisations.

The review was not designed as an in-depth study: rather, it was intended to be a preliminary overview of the context, processes and likely outcomes (Smith 1983) of Aboriginal regional planning as a way of identifying approaches which were working and highlighting problem areas. By context, I mean the external and internal circumstances which affect regional planning in the area, many of which were discussed in the examination of authority, recognition, resources and legitimacy and in the examination of the nature of ATSIC regions in the preceding paper (Wolfe 1993b) and in other recent papers on Aboriginal community development planning (Wolfe 1993a&c).

The processes of particular concern are the ways in which regional planning is being carried out, with emphasis on the involvement of councillors, area Aboriginal communities and organisations, and those providing professional planning or facilitation support. These are examined by looking at the way regional planning has been approached by specific councils. Since, despite (or because of) the shortened time frame, many of the plans are still in preparation, outcomes will focus on stated visions, goals and strategies in the interim products, and on potential outcomes. Finally, problem areas are identified, and some ways of dealing with them discussed.
NT Regional Planning Training Program

ATSIC took the advice of the Coopers and Lybrand report and prepared and implemented a strategy for staff training and plan preparation.

Despite striking differences between, and within, the ATSIC regional council regions in the Northern Territory, it became apparent during the course of data collection that there was some consistency in language and approach to the regional planning process being applied by several NT ATSIC regional councils. This is attributable, in part, to the training program which the Darwin State Office ran for regional staff and regional councillors across the Territory. In the East Kimberley regional councils participated in training sessions held by the ATSIC training branch. No doubt the pattern was repeated elsewhere across the country.

In the NT two senior officers, one from the Darwin State Office and the other the Senior Training Officer from the Alice Springs Office, attended the training workshop on regional planning put on by Coopers and Lybrand, using the 'guidelines'. On their return they presented briefings and workshops for Regional Managers and staff from other agencies. Two senior-level training officers were instructed to develop a training package on regional planning, based on the Coopers and Lybrand 'guidelines', but adapted for regional councillors.

The training method adopted in the NT had three components: explain, demonstrate, practise. For example, at each regional council workshop planning concepts were introduced and examples given. The planning process was presented in a limited number of steps. Planning jargon, such as goals, or priorities or strategies, was 'translated' into clear unambiguous plain English phrases which could in turn be readily translated into Aboriginal language. The steps used were: a vision for the region's future; what the region wants (goals); which are most important (priorities); how to achieve the goals (strategies); who should implement the strategies; when they should be implemented (timetable, of short and long-term priorities); and how to know when goals have been achieved.
Using worksheets provided in the package, councillors worked as a group to decide on the steps and actions for Getting Started. The ATSIC officers delivered the training package to eleven of the twelve regional councils in the Territory. The exception was Alice Springs Regional Council, which was not holding meetings at the time.

The training package achieved considerable initial success in promoting the participation of regional councillors in regional planning, and in increasing their overall awareness of a planning process and their own roles and responsibilities in it. By combining education, training and decision-making, it was frequently the first step in regional planning in which a council worked through decisions about what sort of a planning process it should adopt. Some decided that the whole council should be involved throughout and some established a Planning Advisory Subcommittee. Most councils decided to employ consultants; a few councils chose to do the job themselves; and the occasional council sought the assistance of ATSIC regional office staff.

Councillors expressed concern that the process of regional planning should be carried out carefully, and particularly emphasised the importance of sufficient consultation with communities and region organisations. In part, this is why so many councillors expressed their concern over the shortening of the planning time frame. They were well aware that the amount of community consultation possible according to the original timetable was less than they and the communities knew was desirable, and necessary. The new abbreviated timetable was a constant source of frustration. Where consultants were used, council members were usually delegated to accompany consultants on community visits, where schedules permitted. In other situations, council held region-wide or local meetings.

It would have been useful if consultants hired to assist with regional planning had either had access to the training materials or had participated as observers in the training, particularly the sections which set out the planning steps in clear unambiguous terms. This would assist
councillors and agency staff as well as consultants, by reducing the variety of planning terms in use. Different consultants use different terms to mean essentially the same thing. There is, for example, a tendency for consultants to adopt planning terminologies different from those used by other consultants, in order to ensure that their process and products can be differentiated from the competition, and readily identified.

Planning and planning terminology needs de-mystifying, not re-mystifying.

**Using consultants or going it alone: case studies from northern Australia**

Across the north, and no doubt elsewhere in Australia, one of the first planning decisions which regional councils had to take concerned their own role in plan preparation. Some hired professional planners to do much of the data collection and writing (Papunya and Arltarlpilta in the Alice Springs ATSIC region, Yapakurlangu in the Tennant Creek ATSIC region, and Mulgan and Victoria River in the Katherine ATSIC region); other councils used professional facilitators to assist them in developing their vision and goals (Mount Isa and Gulf Regional Councils in the Mount Isa ATSIC region and Bandaral Ngardu and Jayida Buru in the West Kimberley); some requested assistance from ATSIC regional staff (Peninsula and Cairns and District Regional Councils in northern Queensland and Mayali Council in the Darwin ATSIC region); and a very few decided that they would do it themselves (Impiyara in the Alice Springs ATSIC region and Yilli-Rreung in the Darwin area).

The following cases illustrate some of the differences in processes and the strengths, limitations and consequences which were emerging early in the regional planning activity in northern Australia. The case material is drawn from information collected between June and mid-September 1992 and reported to ATSIC Regional Support Branch in October (Wolfe 1992a), with updates where possible.
Payunya Regional Councils gets assistance from professional planning consultants

Payunya Regional Council area is located to the west and north-west of Alice Springs. It has an Aboriginal population estimated at 4,250. Forty-two percent or so of the population is under the age of fifteen. There are a number of language groups including Warlpiri, Pitjantjatjarra, Western Arrente, Luritja and Pintupi.

Larger communities include the long established former Lutheran mission of Hermannsburg (now Ntaria) and government established settlements like Yuendumu. Other larger communities of several hundred people include Payunya, Walungurru (Kintore) and Willowra. A few like Willowra are pastoral acquisitions. There are around 180 outstations, in many cases established on land transferred to Aboriginal title under the Aboriginal Land Rights Act (NT). For example, the Tjuwanpa outstation council covers 35 Ntaria outstations.

Some well established communities have substantially developed infrastructure, although housing continues to be insufficient and substandard. Outstations vary from having only a windmill, water tank and shed, to more elaborate facilities and several houses. Some may be occupied for only a few months of the year; others are occupied year-round. The capability of outstation resource centres to provide an adequate level of servicing to this large number of outstations varies from centre to centre and time to time.

A few communities receive royalties from the Palm Valley and Mereenie oil and gas developments. Many communities derive income from arts and crafts, and the sale of traditional tools and weapons to tourist outlets. In several communities bush tucker continues to be an important component of many people's diet.

The Payunya Regional Council hired professional planning consultants to prepare a regional plan. The documents produced indicate that the
consultants are adhering to the Coopers and Lybrand planning steps as far as possible. A substantial amount of regional and community information has been compiled and presented in a regional profile. Information was obtained from several Aboriginal and government agencies about the services they provide to the Papunya region communities.

The interim planning report listed and discussed opportunities, that is, things which are helpful for future regional planning. The consultants particularly noted recent improvements in living conditions and level of services in some communities. The interim report also listed obstacles, or problems which were considered not helpful for future regional planning and development. These included: a lack of regional perspective, because communities are used to thinking and acting locally; inequitable distribution and share of financial resources between communities in the region; increase in the number of outstations and pressure on scarce resources; absence of proper planning through either community business plans or community development plans; and lack of effective coordination between government service providers, and between providers and communities. The report advocated that major communities like Ntaria, Yuendumu and Willowra need to develop and follow community business and community development plans.

It was not clear, though, whether the matters discussed were identified by community members and/or regional councillors, or were identified through analysis by the professional consultants. Reference was made to community consultation, but this was in the larger communities and was, of necessity, due to the time pressure, very limited. The report had a strong orientation to physical infrastructure, housing and social service delivery. There was little discussion of 'what we can and must do for ourselves' to complement what government and service providers can do for the region and its communities. Overall, with the exceptions noted above, the plan in preparation had the style, documentation and content of solid conventional plans.
Assistance from professional planning consultants:
Yapakurlangu, NT concern for the quality of consultation

Yapakurlangu Regional Council has to plan for the most extensive Aboriginal council region in the NT, with an area of approximately 301,110 sq. kms., and a 1991 estimated Aboriginal population of 2642. There are two urban centres, Tennant Creek (Aboriginal population nearly 900) and Elliott (Aboriginal population 400 or more), with Aboriginal people living in town and in town camps. Most of the non-urban Aboriginal population lives to the east of the north-south Stuart Highway on the Barkly Tableland, where there are two or three communities of a few hundred people, like Ali Curung (formerly know as Warrabri), and Alpurrurulum (Lake Nash). There are also smaller communities of a hundred or so people, such as Wilora, and Canteen Creek (Owaitilla) established in 1984 and already a thriving community. And there are numerous outstations on pastoral excisions and other small parcels of land which have recently been returned to traditional owners and Aboriginal title under the NT Land Rights Act. People move in and out of the towns and larger communities for ceremonies, to work (when there is any) on pastoral stations, and to spend time with kin on outstations on traditional lands.

Several major Aboriginal organisations, located in Tennant Creek, provide services to communities of the region. These include Julalikari Council Aboriginal Corporation which administers town camp leases, builds and maintains housing, and runs the Tennant Creek town camp CDEP; and Anyinginyi Congress Aboriginal Corporation, which provides a range of health services. Commonwealth agencies based in Tennant Creek (ATSIC, DEET and DSS) meet on a regular basis in an endeavour to coordinate their services, particularly in relation to AEDP (Aboriginal Employment Development Program). Territory departments such as NT Education, NT Health are also invited, as are Julalikari and Anyinginyi. The Territory, through the Department of Lands and Housing, coordinates AES (Aboriginal Essential Services) meetings to which Commonwealth departments may be invited.
The Yapakurlangu Regional Council decided that it needed professional assistance to prepare a regional plan, and hired the same consulting firm as Papunya Regional Council. The firm has an Aboriginal principal and has prior experience in preparing plans for Aboriginal communities. It engages staff with professional experience, and, whenever possible, Aboriginal community experience.

The planning consultants visited the major Aboriginal service agencies, all of the larger communities and several but not all of the smaller communities, accompanied by a regional councillor whenever schedules allowed. Where possible meetings were held with community councillors, other leaders and community members, but time did not permit full consultation with all sections of local communities, nor for return visits for follow-up and confirmation of needs identified.

The emerging plan documents deal not only with physical infrastructure and civil works, but also with meeting the needs of special interest groups. The consultants sought to have a female councillor (there are two on regional council) visit the communities with a female consultant and spend time listening to women in the communities. Concerns were expressed by consultants and regional councillors that there was not enough time to consider community needs in depth, establish regional priorities, and consider and establish region-wide and sub-regional strategies. The fact that several different Aboriginal languages are used in the communities, and that several councillors are not fully literate in English, means that all consultative processes take a great deal of time. Some councillors were very aware that some major communities, notably Alpurrurulum, do not have a person from the community on regional council, and also that the region's outstations are not represented in proportion to their numbers. They expressed concern that needs of several communities and groups could be overlooked or misinterpreted when consultants and regional council consider regional priorities and strategies.
Building the foundation for regional planning: Kimberley councils plan

There are a growing number of active Aboriginal organisations in the Kimberley (as indeed there are across Australia), including Mamabulanjin Resource Centre (in Broome), Marra Worra Worra (in Fitzroy Crossing), Wanang Ngari (in Derby), and Waringarri (in Kununurra). As the report *Our Future Our Selves* noted (Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs 1990, 78), Aboriginal organisations play an increasing role in service delivery in large part as a consequence of the continuing mainstreaming of services by state, territory and Commonwealth governments and their agencies. The Aboriginal organisations enable culturally appropriate service delivery which mainstream agencies are not designed for, and are often legislatively prevented from carrying out. They fill the gaps in delivery of urgently needed services, and they attempt to do what large government agencies continue to be unable to do: coordinate services from a variety of sources. Furthermore, the three resources centres in the West Kimberley now have community development planning units (CDUs) as an integral resource to the region each serves (Wolfe 1993a).

Establishment of ATSIC regional councils and the mandate of those councils to plan regionally has sometimes been viewed as a threat to local Aboriginal organisations; it can also be an opportunity. For example, some tension is evident between one regional council in the Kimberley and an existing Aboriginal organisation over the responsibility each has for community and area development and the way funding is allocated.

In contrast, in another part of the West Kimberley some Aboriginal organisations have seen an opportunity and have moved to take control of the local ATSIC Regional Council. An example is the relationship between Marra Worra Worra Aboriginal Corporation, the outstation resource centre in Fitzroy Crossing, and the Bandaral Ngadu Regional Council which covers the Fitzroy Valley, the same area serviced by Marra Worra Worra. The executive of the resource centre was elected as the regional council (Crough 1993, 113).
This move has effectively brought together the elected regional council (which derives its authority externally from the Commonwealth ATSIC Act), the locally legitimised and popularly supported political structure (the executive of the resource centre), and the means to effect planning (the experienced and increasingly Aboriginal-staffed Community Development Planning Unit or CDU, attached to Marra Worra Worra).

Two of the Kimberley regional councils, Bandaral Ngadu (Fitzroy Crossing area) and Jayida Buru (Derby area) chose a consultant who had lengthy experience in community development planning with Kimberley communities and resource centres to work with them.

The councils sought assistance from the consultant to link the effective operation of council and its ability to manage and plan its own affairs with the development of a regional plan. One of the draft plans talks, for example, about the importance of Managing Relationships, Managing Resources, Managing Information, and Managing Our Organisation (that is, council itself). Throughout, council members were actively involved in a doing and learning process facilitated by the consultant using community development planning processes which have been used and continually reshaped with use by Aboriginal communities and organisations in the West Kimberley for many years.

Bandaral Ngadu Council was resistant to work to the shortened timetable imposed by ATSIC, but recognised the advantage of meeting administrative requirements whenever possible. Council felt that regional plans should ideally be based on community plans, but was well aware that community plans are far from being fully developed and formalised in the area. Consequently council agreed that the consultant should work with council members to identify broad elements of a regional plan.

Region-wide concerns which emerged are very much associated with land. Land rights, including security of land title, protection of land from degradation, land rehabilitation, the activities of the mining, pastoral and tourism industries and their economic and other impacts, and the
implications of the High Court decision in the Mabo case which recognised native title of Torres Strait Islanders and decreed the legal concept of Australia as *Terra Nullius* to be invalid, are all pressing regional issues. Closely related issues are the maintenance and 'thrival' of Aboriginal language and culture.

Bandaral Ngadu Council is also concerned for developing a regional and subregional approach to the location of Aboriginal service delivery as a way to make more effective use of scarce resources. For example consideration is being given to establishing an Aboriginal medical service in Fitzroy Crossing. Planning documents include some guidance for allocation of funds, as expected by ATSIC regional and central offices, but that is not the major focus of the plan document. Regional Council intends to reproduce key pages in a poster-sized format so that they can be displayed and so council, and the ATSIC regional office can use them to track activities and implementation.

There are some features of regional activities and concerns which are notable by their exclusion from the regional plan. It is not clear to an outsider whether this is a consequence of a deliberate and strategic decision on the part of council, or an oversight. For example, some activities are ongoing and council may not feel the need to include them, because they are simply part of what is already underway. Some activities may have reached a critical stage in a negotiation process. Some important matters may be too sensitive to include or are not for public display. Some issues are not publicised, but are worked on quietly. Even the best plans and planning documents should not be expected to be all inclusive.

**Relationship between Aboriginal regional planning and plans and planning by other agencies**

Other agencies are also planning in the Kimberley. The Kimberley Regional Plan Study, 1986–1988, was carried out by the West Australia Department of Planning and Urban Development, as one of six in the
state dealing with regions with special problems requiring a coordinated governmental approach. According to Holmes, Aborigines were mentioned only once in the issues chapter in the context of mining, and Aboriginal matters occupy less than five percent of the space in the report (Holmes 1992, 17–18). Holmes comments that the study is well informed on certain regional attributes and poorly informed on others, notably Aboriginal issues, despite the availability of relevant information in the East Kimberley Impact assessment Study (Coombs et al 1989), saying

there is no parallel regional appraisal from an Aboriginal perspective, dealing with such matters as resource values; traditional contemporary and prospective resource use; resource rights; areas of cultural significance; socio-economic needs and aspirations ... This neglect cannot be attributed to lack of information, given the rapid expansion of region-specific knowledge on Aboriginal matters (Holmes 1992, 19).

The almost total lack of reference to the existence of Aboriginal people in the Kimberley in a government planning study of the region is all the more troubling given the proposal by the West Australia Aboriginal Affairs Planning Authority that it play a major coordinating role in regional planning. The WA AAPA, which has an Aboriginal Affairs Coordinating Committee (AACC) established under the WA Aboriginal Affairs Planning Authority Act 1972, proposed that it chair Regional Planning Forums, with membership including representatives from ATSIC regional councils, a number of WA state departments, and ATSIC and DEET as key Commonwealth agencies. Unquestionably a coordinated approach to planning the full array of services needed by large and small Aboriginal communities is long overdue. ATSIC regional planning is a step towards provision of services which will meet Aboriginal local and regional priorities, rather than the priorities determined by external authorities. The proposal by AAAP demonstrates, however, the continuing reluctance of state agencies and the state government to accord ATSIC regional councils recognition as authoritative planning bodies in their own right.
Assistance from professional facilitators: Mount Isa and Gulf Councils strengthen their own ability to plan

Secretariat staff from the ATSIC Mount Isa office assisted each council to identify the approach it would take to regional planning, and then assisted in the hiring of an appropriate facilitator. Gulf Regional Council used a consulting group which specialises in team building and facilitation and has considerable experience working with Aboriginal organisations. Mount Isa Regional Council used a consulting firm better known for its engineering and project management expertise; however, the facilitator had demonstrated expertise in assisting large and small groups to carry out a planning process.

Both facilitators took a similar approach. Each met with Council at several meetings spaced several weeks apart. Both facilitated councillors to identify an overall regional 'vision', and then to establish goals, and possible strategies. Gulf Council then set out a time frame, identified responsibilities, and other resources, and how monitoring would occur. Mount Isa Regional Council worked to develop an action plan, after identifying broad strategies.

Both facilitators have ensured that councillors are aware of each step of the planning process, and have input into how the step is accomplished before working on its specifics. Both have kept the process and the terminology clear and straightforward. Both made extensive use of recall, or retracing not only the content of the plan to date, but also the steps council took to get there. In other words, the facilitators have been consciously teaching, reworking, and re-incorporating councillors' ideas and skills so that councillors themselves can modify and apply the skills of planning with local organisations and communities, and so they can do all or part of plan continuation (for neither plan will be 'finished' in the time frame) or revision for themselves with little or no outside facilitation.
Both councils have drawn extensively on local community and organisation input into the regional plan. Since each of the Gulf Region communities are represented on regional council, council felt it could legitimately use its own knowledge to identify regional vision, goals and strategies. Mount Isa Regional Council was concerned that three communities in the region had no one from the community on council. Consequently at least two council members visited the three communities, as a fact finding and needs and issue identification team.

Mount Isa Council's 'vision' was to work to improve the community needs of housing, health, education, employment and social issues to raise the standards to a level acceptable to the communities represented. It places high importance on the regional planning process being driven from the 'grass roots' and in this respect expresses concern that communities have not been encouraged to develop individual community plans to feed into the regional plan.

When they met to review the first Draft Plan, Mount Isa council members were often concerned as much for local community and organisation issues as for region wide issues. The facilitator would ask what the regional implications or concerns were, and reminded councillors that, as members of regional council, they did not have the time, energy or the mandate to resolve local matters at a regional meeting: they needed to maintain a region-wide perspective. In part to deal with this relationship, councillors included a strong local role for themselves in their plan.

The Gulf Region Draft Plan had several strategic areas, each with a vision, goals, strategies and preliminary elements of an action plan. Strategic areas included: community courts recognised under state law; a real and viable choice of returning to homelands; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations' control of community CDEP; appropriate housing; better health care within communities; equal opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in community oriented
apprenticeships; improved quality of education and encouragement of attendance and enrolment in schools; and access to services of standards comparable with those available to residents of capital cities.

Unlike some councils, which have delayed discussion with area service agencies until they are further along in the planning process, both councils drew agencies into the plan-making process early on. They sent a copy of the interim Draft Plan to service agencies (Commonwealth and State and Aboriginal, local and regional) and invited them to send representatives to a joint agency/regional council meeting. At the meeting regional council explained its role and activities in developing a Draft Regional Plan, explained what was included in the vision, goals and strategies to date, and invited participants to make further suggestions for expansion or change. Most importantly the agencies were asked to indicate ways in which the agency would support the implementation of the plan and to present these at the next joint meeting. This is one way in which Aboriginal regional councils can play a pro-active role in getting greater responsiveness and cooperation from the array of local, state and commonwealth agencies involved in service delivery.

Facilitation by an ATSIC planning officer: Cairns and District and Peninsula Councils select their priorities

Cairns and District and Peninsula Regional Councils chose to get planning assistance from the community and regional planning staff officer in the Cairns ATSIC regional office.

Cairns and District includes Aboriginal people living in coastal and tablelands towns from Mossman north of Cairns to Innisfail to the south, and as far inland as Croydon, as well as the numerous Aboriginal organisations which serve the population of the district. Regional council has a large number of members who are very active workers in area Aboriginal organisations. All are experienced in working both within Aboriginal communities and organisations and working with and around non-Aboriginal agencies.
Regional council established a number of sub-committees for matters such as health and education, and recruited people from outside the elected council to sit on the sub-committees. These knowledgeable local people are drawn from Aboriginal organisations in their capacity as directors or staff, and from other service agencies. The sub-committees afford an opportunity, otherwise not readily available, for service support and delivery personnel to work together and establish understanding and trust on a personal level, and to work together to develop a regional and sub-regional approach to area issues.

Regional council requested each sub-committee to prepare a regional plan for its portfolio. The ATSIC staff planner helped to get each committee started on planning. Not all committees have been able to work at the same level and pace, due to the other heavy commitments of committee members and the demands on the staff planner. The health and education sub-committees have been able to establish a vision and a number of goals, objective and strategies. Other committees are continuing their planning work.

Overall, council has taken a regional perspective, rather than a local organisation or community perspective. Some sections of the emerging plan are more fully developed than others. The approach ensures that councillors and service deliverers are involved and well informed. The sub-committee approach, though, by dealing with what are essentially sectors, could have an unintended consequence. Unless attention is paid to the relationships between the sectors and plan elements, the potential that planning affords for a higher degree of linkage and integration could be missed.

The Peninsula Regional Council area includes communities from Hopevale and Cooktown on the east coast of far north Queensland, to Aurukun and Kowanyama on the west coast, and north to just south of the tip of the Cape York Peninsula. Peninsula Council operates for all its
business as a committee of the whole. In a series of planning meetings councillors, facilitated by the ATSIC planning officer, have generally followed a simplified Coopers and Lybrand sequence of steps.

Council identified a number of priority areas, with land, health and housing, community development and planning, regional council training, community training and reconciliation among them. Councillors are working to establish goals and strategies for the priority areas, but do not expect to have all completed in the first plan document. Councillors are particularly concerned for the issues in their own communities. From time to time they remind each other of the needs of other communities.

Peninsula Regional Council, during its regional planning work, have become increasingly aware of and concerned about the extent to which the planning by other agencies, such as those working on the Barrier Reef, the Wet Tropics, and CYPLUS (the Cape York Peninsula Land Use Study), impinges on Aboriginal people of the Peninsula, and the very limited or non-existent attention paid to Aboriginal consultation, input into issues, and participation in planning decision-making. Regional Council, along with Cape York Land Council, is working to ensure that Aboriginal people of the region play an full and proper role in area resource and land use planning and management.

Developing functional links between regional planning and the budget estimates process: Cairns and District and Peninsula Councils' pioneering effort

Regional councils have been delegated responsibility for advising ATSIC on decisions about what projects will be funded from financial resources which are quite insufficient to cover even half of the financial support requested. What is needed, therefore, is a fair, simple, consistent and objective way of assessing ongoing and proposed projects. In absence of such a method, councillors may base their decisions on what was funded in previous years, on limited personal knowledge of sponsoring organisations or communities, or on personal concerns. With the
development of community and regional planning, the assessment of projects should also take into account not only how well a project is conceived and planned, but also its relationship to community (or organisation) and regional priorities and plans.

Cairns and District and Peninsula Councils, with assistance from the Cairns ATSIC office and staff planner, have trialled a systematic method for linking planning with the budget estimates process.

The Cairns staff planner proposed a scheme for rating and weighting each project (Sheldon 1993). Each project would be rated by regional council on four sets of criteria: the quality of the project planning; the importance of the project to the community; the effectiveness of the organisation and the degree of fit between the project and regional policy. Since the four sets of criteria are not equally important, they can be weighted differently. In the initial proposal for the rating and weighting scheme, the quality of the project planning was allocated twice the weight (or importance) of the community and regional criteria. These in turn were allocated twice the weight of organisational effectiveness (in other words project planning would have four times the importance of organisational effectiveness). Each regional council decided on a slightly different weighting, a demonstration of the adaptability of the method to particular contexts. For example, Peninsula Council opted to give project criteria the greatest weight, followed by community importance, then regional importance, with organisation capability having the lowest weighting.

In the first attempt to rank projects using the scheme, ATSIC project and planning staff initially rated projects on project planning and organisation performance. These were subject to review, discussion, and revision by council as additional relevant information was forthcoming. Council and staff together ranked the importance to community. Regional councillors ranked projects on the basis of regional importance. The method was successfully trialled in the preparation for the 1993 budget estimates process. With further refinements and adaptations to specific area conditions the method has the potential to introduce a needed element of
consistency and fairness into regional council funding allocations. Clearly more information is needed on each project. Over time, project proponents could be required to be more specific in referring to the importance of the project to the community and whether regional policy supported the proposed project.

Some flexibility is also essential, so that new projects which respond to changes in community or regional needs, but are not yet reflected in a community or regional plan, are not dismissed. Consideration of new proposals during the budget estimates process could be one element in review and up-dating of regional plans.

**Assistance from ATSIC staff: Mayali Regional Council holds region-wide consultations**

Like other Darwin area regional councils, Mayali chose to prepare the regional plan itself, with assistance from field staff. The region stretches from east of Darwin to western Arnhem Land, and includes several large coastal communities and associated outstations, such as Maningrida and Milingimbi, and the inland community of Oenpelli. Council used a region-wide consultative process to bring together people from the communities and outstations to central meetings facilitated by ATSIC Darwin field staff. The first, in the small remote community of Murganella, was attended by regional councillors and about seventy to eighty community participants, many from the outstations. Community groups at the meeting were asked to identify needs of their community. Many produced 'shopping lists' of still unmet basic needs such as housing and water. A second meeting, especially for women, was held at Jabiru. Around eighty women, plus children and other family members, attended. In groups which kept women from the same area together, they identified basic needs and some overall regional needs. Most groups were concerned to establish a women's support centre for their own community, and to maintain and expand services already in place. Some of the women also talked about a role for women as police aides.
The elements of the regional plan, compiled from input from the meetings and from regional councillors by the ATSIC field staff, emphasise education, employment, health, living conditions, support to outstations, maintenance and further development of culture, and Aboriginalisation of service delivery.

Region-wide meetings were not widely used by other regional councils in northern Australia. They are one way to get people discussing the usefulness of regional planning, and region-wide issues. How well the approach works is likely to depend on participants' awareness and familiarity with planning and the degree of preparation and forethought by participants. It is worthy of consideration by other regions as part of the planning process, but cannot, however, be a substitute for community visits and consultations, or for community-level planning.

*Yilli-Rreung does its own planning*

Yilli-Rreung represents Aboriginal people residing in Darwin and area town camps, small rural and remote communities one hundred or more kilometres from Darwin, and Darwin-based Aboriginal organisations which serve this population and a much wider Aboriginal population across the Top End, the Northern Territory, and beyond.

Many councillors have been involved in Aboriginal organisations and government agencies, and are aware of the benefits of developing and using a plan. Yilli-Rreung Regional Council decided it would do its own regional planning with some assistance from ATSIC staff to organise meetings, pull some information together, and type up the planning documents.

Council decided it would conduct consultations before it developed a vision statement or tried to identify goals and strategies. Open meetings were held in suburban Darwin and Palmerston. Council members visited
the more remote communities in the region, none of which are represented on regional council, though they are linked to council members through kinship.

The meetings served a number of purposes. Aboriginal people aired their frustration with regional council and their lack of understanding of the activities and functions of ATSIC regional councils generally. The meetings afforded councillors an opportunity to open up a process of informing people about what regional council has the authority to do, and what the limits are to its authority. In part, the meetings acted as a legitimising mechanism for the activities of regional council. Councillors also were able to gather some information about community concerns which could be incorporated into the regional plan.

Council uses a sub-committee system to conduct its regular business, and organised workshop sessions for each of its portfolios in the evening and on weekends to work through the planning steps (most members are employed and are unable to take time off work to meet during the day). Workshop topics included law and justice, health, substance abuse, youth, aged and disabled, employment, education and training, enterprises, sports and recreation, women's issues, housing and infrastructure, land and environment, and family violence. Workshops were also held with government agencies and other service providers.

Council put a great deal of time and effort into regional planning, finding it to be a very time-consuming and difficult process. Yilli-Rreung has a huge task to develop a regional plan which deals with the highly varied needs and concerns of its constituents: rural communities; tiny rural town camps lacking many essential services; large Darwin town camps; town-dwellers, (many of whom come to Darwin from around the NT and interstate); members of organisations, their elected representatives and staff; and local Aboriginal traditional land owners. Councillors are very concerned about, and some directly involved with, Australia-wide issues of land rights, justice and civil rights, the reconciliation process, a Treaty process, and sovereignty and self-government. It is a very demanding task
to put together a regional vision statement, goals and strategies which incorporate to everyone satisfaction, the diversity of concerns and different levels of issues.

Local facilitation: Impiyara Regional Council plans for its own people

The Impiyara Regional Council area includes the three established settlements of Imanpa, Mutitjulu (near Uluru, otherwise know as Ayers Rock), and Kaltukutjara (Docker River), and numerous associated outstations south west of Alice Springs. While the three settlements are now quite well provided with physical infrastructure, the quality of outstation infrastructure and support agencies is highly variable. Pitjantjatjarra people are most numerous, but there are several other peoples in the area. A considerable part of the region is Aboriginal land transferred into legal Aboriginal title under the NT Land Rights Act.

The regional plan was prepared by Pitjantjatjarra Council Incorporated, with the assistance of two local residents and full participation of regional council. The planning process and emerging plan are, as the Stage One Report clearly stated, for Anangu, the people, not for government. According to the planning documents, consultation and information gathering involved speaking with people in language, and listening closely. Issues people were discussing were reported back to them and to other communities, so that everyone was informed. The emerging plan includes what is essentially the peoples' own analysis of 'where we are now, and what brought us to this situation', and a future 'road map' which places emphasis on religion, strong culture, law, social custom, nation, and pride. In addition to identifying the usual physical infrastructure and social service needs, people of the region were frank about such issues as substance abuse and poorly functioning decision-making at a community level. Issues were then discussed by regional councillors at a regional planning workshop.
The draft documents were presented in written form in English and also in an audio cassette version in English and language. It is the 'story that Anangu share and believe in'.

The Impiyara approach demonstrates the strengths of having local people very directly involved in the exploration of issues. The emphasis is one of balance between what people see they must, and can, do for themselves, and what they need outside agencies to contribute. The draft is blunt about the scarcity of outside resources for improvement of physical infrastructure and social programs, and emphasises the need, therefore, for Anangu to establish their own priorities. The issue of integration, and coordinating of the 'Aboriginal Service Industry', is also presented in tough and realistic terms. Now that Impiyara Regional Council has prepared a full planning document, it has placed its plan before the service delivery agencies in the area, and is requiring them to consult and follow the regional plan. This is indeed a planning approach for Anangu, not a plan simply to fulfil a government requirement.

Commentary on the start-up of Aboriginal regional planning

Content of regional plans

Some regional plans are very detailed and comprehensive documents with a great deal of detailed background information. One of the continuing problems with the inclusion of specific statistical data is that so little of that available from Australian Bureau of Statistics or other sources is either relevant or detailed enough to be useful in describing, or forecasting needs, of very small communities with often highly mobile populations. Absence of accurate and appropriate statistical information makes regional, intra-regional and local level planning and forecasting very difficult. (See Crough 1993, 52–54 for some suggestions on the sort of data needed.)
Some plans present numerous goals, strategies and action or implementation proposals, and carry the title 'final' plan. Whether these are planners' plans, that is, the ideal of what ought to happen from a professional perspective; whether they are a sort of expanded regional 'wish-list' which planners have compiled and councillors have endorsed; or whether they are carefully thought through by councillors and their implications understood by councillors working from a sound base of knowledge and understanding, is not clear from the documents alone. Other plan documents are slender and simple papers. Some emphasise community needs, others focus on region-wide issues. Some identify only a limited number of goals, strategies and proposed actions (as indeed the Coopers and Lybrand Report, 1991, had suggested was all that would be possible for many councils in 1993) which are within the ability of council to work on in the foreseeable future, rather than a great array of issues which council feels unable to address. While this approach enables councillors to play a significant role in strategy development, it may mean that integration across issues and strategies becomes difficult to achieve.

It is possible, at this early stage in regional planning, that a plain English statement (with Aboriginal language audio tape or written translation) with a limited number of goals, or a plan in which the strategies and actions are not well developed for some goals, is more a product of the care, wisdom and understanding of regional council, than one in which vision, goals, strategies and actions are tightly linked and more fully developed.

**Substance of regional plans**

Review of twenty draft regional plans from around the country found that they deal with three different, though related levels of issues: national Aboriginal 'big issues' such as justice, land rights, resource access and control, sovereignty, and 'reconciliation'; regional issues, the development of a regional perspective, and planning and funding allocation for region-
wide or sub-regional Aboriginal-controlled facilities and services specifically targeted to Aboriginal clients; and local community and organisation issues, priorities and projects.

A major challenge for regional councils is to work out, on the one hand, a regional perspective on national issues, and on the other, the relationship between local level and regional and sub-regional planning and plans, while satisfying the administrative requirement of advising on ATSIC funding allocations. In addressing the big issues at the regional level, regional councils inevitably enter policy arenas which are currently occupied by other Aboriginal organisations, such as the Land Councils and Aboriginal legal aid agencies. When dealing with regional and sub-regional facility and service location issues, regional councils enter realms occupied by health agencies and resource centres. Some tension between councils and these agencies is virtually inevitable in the short term. Tensions are heightened by the increasing responsibility for funding decisions which the government has devolved to regional councils.

While some of the plan documents discuss the relationship between Aboriginal living conditions and problems with life quality, few plans, at this stage, have been able to address the relationships in strategic terms between, for example, cultural vitality, health and housing; or land rights, resource use, management and control, environmental degradation and rehabilitation and traditional ecological knowledge.

Assessing regional plans

ATSIC central office and regional staff, consultants, professional planners, academics and Aboriginal leaders need to be very cautious, though, in exercising judgement about the content and quality of the plans. One consultant working on a regional plan said, 'the regional plan is a waste of time and council doesn't need it'. Many other individuals have expectations about what they think should be the focus of a plan, or what should be included, and are judgemental when they find no mention
of their particular concern. What about the land and resource management issues, the funding issues, the problems with state delivery of services, the growth of the private sector non-Aboriginal servicing industry, the environmental degradation, they ask?

This is the beginning of Aboriginal regional planning. The key questions at this early stage should be: how do we ensure that Aboriginal planning is not judged, found wanting, and cancelled on the basis of performance in this, the first year of the program? How do we identify and build on those things that are working, and correct those that are not?

Neither ATSIC administration at the central office or regional levels, or regional councils and Commissioners, have given much careful consideration to criteria for judgement of Aboriginal regional planning in the short or longer term.

Worthy of consideration in the short term are: do regional councillors know the contents of the plan, endorse it and work to implement it? Did local communities have significant input? Are local communities and organisations aware and supportive of the contents, directions and strategies of the plan? Is council developing and using ways of verifying, revising and up-dating the vision, goals and strategies? Are regional councils (and ATSIC) putting in place systems both for informing relevant agencies of the directions and implementation strategies of the plan, and for tracking their responsiveness. And, over the longer term, what progress, after six months, a year, two years, five years, has there been in achieving any of the stated goals? Which strategies have proved successful and which are failing? Are agencies using the regional plan. Or are they ignoring it, or subverting it by giving it token lip-service? To use the performance indicator terminology, the latter criteria are outcome criteria, rather than the input criteria (such as how much has been spent on planning, has it been properly acquitted, what is in the plan), which are currently emphasised.
Protection for councils which choose not to release their plan documents for general distribution

ATSIC administrative arm has very properly asked each regional council whether it permits general release and public distribution of plan documents. Most councils have given permission. A few have either withheld permission or have not responded. There are several reasons which people offer for exercising what they regard as protection for their plan. For example, the information in the plan is theirs, to guide them and their people. Some of the information could be used, deliberately or inadvertently, by outside interests in ways which disadvantage rather than benefit Aboriginal people of the region. Another reason offered is that council is already working to implement the plan, and will reveal its strategies when and in ways which it feels will best serve local interests. It is vital that this deeply held concern on the part of some councils continues to be respected, and that it be understood as part of a planning strategy.

Protection for regions, communities and organisations which choose not to engage in formal planning

There are likely to be a few regions, and many more communities and organisations, which do not wish to engage in formal planning. Many of their reasons are likely to be negative. Some are struggling with such high levels of social disorder that they feel they are not in a position, at this time, to think far ahead because of the demands of daily crisis management (even though outsiders, and some insiders are convinced this is the only way out of the present chaos). Some do not have a leadership that sees advantage in opting in to a planning process. Some do not have the social or political coherence or internal conditions which allow them to take the initial decision. Many have had prior bad experiences with planning and choose not to try it again. They feel they have put a lot of energy into it before, with little or no support or with inappropriate interventions from outside, and choose not to put their energy there again.
A few communities choose not to engage in formalised planning or prepare written plans from deliberate and positive choice. They feel they have sufficiently successful informal processes going on, or feel they have important agendas and do not want to reveal them to other groups and agencies at this time. And a few communities and organisations choose not to engage in formal planning or share their plans with government agencies because they are deliberately avoiding dependence on government funding and what they regard as the intrusive restrictions of government programs and financial accountability requirements.

Although it is important to encourage and support planning at the regional and local levels, it is also critical that communities and organisations (and even regions) which choose not to plan at this time, are not seriously disadvantaged by that decision. It behoves ATSIC administrative arm and the Commission to accept the decision of communities and organisations which choose not to do formal planning.

Support systems

ATSIC regional planning has shifted a great deal of responsibility for planning to the regional and local levels. This is consistent with the tendency on the part of central agencies to transfer burdensome responsibilities to other less powerful lower levels (Quarles van Ufford 1988, 34). Lessons from Canadian aboriginal community planning and international regional development planning draw attention to the need for better planning on the part of central agencies, particularly a commitment to effective internal linkages between levels (Wolfe 1993a). The ATSIC administrative arm had not initially paid much attention to planning and implementing the internal systems which it needs to have in place to support regional and local level planning, although efforts are now underway on the part of the Community and Regional Planning Section to address these issues.
As noted in the cases described earlier, some regional staff can play a direct role in planning facilitation, although most regional councils and communities opt for outside paid planning consultants or facilitators. Because of the variability in quality of external planning consultants, ATSIC staff have an important support role to play in working with Aboriginal clients to develop appropriate terms of reference for planning and facilitation consultancies, for working with clients to develop and apply appropriate monitoring and evaluation procedures for the performance of planning consultancies, and in compiling and up-dating registers of effective consultants.

ATSIC also needs to develop and use internal systems which enable regional staff and councillors to see at a glance the vision, key goals and objectives, strategies, and implementation steps in each regional plan. Such systems would enable tracking of the plans: that is, pin-pointing where and why delays, and, most importantly, successes, are occurring. This would go a long way towards dealing with problem areas and identifying the mix of factors which lead to success. Computer systems could be used not only to track funded projects, but also local level and regional plan implementation. Regional offices should also consider ways of displaying this information visually, so that project staff as well as planning staff, regional councillors and community and organisation leaders could then see the relationship between projects and the two levels of planning, could track them and, most importantly, use the plans.

Regional and local level plans afford a vital source of information on Aboriginal priorities. ATSIC needs internal systems at the regional and central office levels which enable staff, councillors and Commissioners to review at a glance the key long-term goals identified in regional plans across the country. Regional differences in priorities can be identified and used in the development of nationally, regionally and locally sensitive policies and programs.

Similarly ATSIC internal systems are needed which enable staff and councillors to see at a glance the timing and demands of the annual work
and decision-making cycle. This would enable staff to plan their work ahead, and enable them to be ready with the information which councillors and others need for each review and decision-making step.

Commission-wide adoption of a simple, fair and objective method of assessing continuing and new projects in terms of their contribution to local and regional goals and strategies and how well they are planned, is also an urgent need. The Cairns trial of such a system, described earlier, is one such option. Community and Regional Planning Section, assisted by the Cairns planning officer, is working to refine and further test the Cairns system. In any application of this or similar systems, care needs to be taken with projects which do not fit with plan goals or strategies. They should get particular scrutiny. Two responses are possible: the project is deemed inconsistent with the plan, and inappropriate; or, the plan itself needs to be revised in light of the importance of the need or issues that the project seeks to address.

**Implementation: the missing step**

The great 'missing step' in most planning is implementation. Guidelines for regional and local level planning place great emphasis on negotiation by the regional council or community with government and other agencies to achieve implementation of the specifics of a plan. While many local and regional councillors may be skilled negotiators within their community setting, they often have limited formal bargaining and negotiating experience and skills. Given the burden of negotiation currently placed on councillors, ways need to be explored to strengthen the negotiating capabilities of Aboriginal local and regional councillors and other leaders. As the case of Mount Isa and Gulf Regional Councils illustrated, one way to do this is for negotiation-training facilitators to work with councillors prior to their meeting with agency personnel, and to follow this up with after-the-meeting debriefing and further training.
However, training in bargaining and negotiating, useful as it is, is no substitute for real coercive power and authority, which regional councils lack both in their dealings with Commonwealth, state or territory and local agencies, and in their dealings with other longer established and now legitimatised Aboriginal organisations.

**Planning as an on-going process**

Plans are not static. They change as circumstances change, new needs arise and some needs are fulfilled. Also, communities and organisations will be preparing their first plans for some time to come. Ways need to be found so that the regional level and local level plans feed into each other without one level dominating or controlling the other.

Internal ATSIC systems, and funding support, are needed which allow for regional, community and organisation plans to be reviewed and revised on a regular basis. Regional plans will likely need formal review and revision annually, to identify progress towards goals through implementation of strategies, and completion or continuation of projects, and to put in place course corrections and changes where things are not working out. Greater flexibility is appropriate for local level plans.

Planning is not a one-off activity. For planning to be a useful tool, ATSIC must not regard it as 'just another project'. Planning must become the *modus operandi* not only for regions and communities, but also for the Commission itself: the natural, proper, and effective way to get things done, centrally, regionally and locally. A 1993 conference of ATSIC 'key managers' endorsed that an executive committee should examine the possibilities of an integrated planning system.⁶

**Patience, time and commitment**

Although at present unlikely, it is conceivable that Aboriginal people across Australia could choose to use regional plans as a means to
highlight the Australia-wide 'big issues' and issues which differ in nature and intensity regionally, and as a tool to place such matters firmly on the national political agenda from an Aboriginal perspective.

Aboriginal regional and community or organisation level planning has the potential to invert the current system of planning for Aboriginal people: to shift it from a top-down system determined by external interpretations and decisions about what is best for Aboriginal people, to a system through which local needs are identified locally and addressed through Aboriginal-controlled Aboriginal-run agencies, or mainstream agencies, at the regional, sub-regional and local level; and regional and Australia-wide Aboriginal issues are maintained at the forefront of the national agenda from an Aboriginal perspective and dealt with in ways which benefit rather than disadvantage Aboriginal people. The potential is continually in jeopardy, as this paper has highlighted. The current emphasis is important, but it is only a first step.

What effective Aboriginal regional planning needs right now is patience and time, and commitment: patience on the part of critics and supporters of planning alike to deal with the changes in relationships and the emergence of structures that this new planning emphasis sets in motion; time, to get into place the support systems that were not carefully considered and developed prior to initiation of regional planning; and real commitment of all parties to support all aspects of the process while encouraging regions to take their own course. This in turn demands an acceptance of a diversity of approaches which most institutions, especially government agencies, find it difficult to cope with. Patience, time and commitment are essentially cost free. All three are apparently in limited or uncertain supply.

Notes

1. I wish to acknowledge the contribution of Bill Sheldon, community and regional planning staff officer, ATSIC Cairns, for bringing the notion of input and outcome indicators clearly into focus for me through his writings and in
our discussions on planning. There is a movement within ATSIC towards outcome performance indicators. Also, there has been a reduction in the number of program elements, and further reductions are planned.

2. A rating and weighting scheme developed by the Cairns ATSIC planning officer and trialled successfully with two area regional councils is under consideration by the Community and Regional Planning Section of ATSIC for general application.

3. The proposal in April 1993 to establish regional council chairs as full-time paid positions within ATSIC's elected arm is a recognition by government of some of the regional councils' workload problems.

4. The Bill to reduce the number of regional councils from sixty to thirty-six which has recently been introduced to the Commonwealth parliament 'in the interests of greater democracy' is a step which can also be interpreted as moving in the opposite direction.

5. The public service arm of ATSIC is now grappling with the dilemma of how proactive it should, and can, become.

6. ATSIC is exploring systems to effectively link ATSIC corporate planning with regional planning.

7. Restructuring and reduction of ATSIC regions and regional councils from sixty to thirty-six has important implications for the regional plans which are being developed and for the future of their implementation.

REFERENCES


Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs 1990. *Our Future Our Selves: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Control, Management and Resources*, AGPS, Canberra.


Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

At the heart of this institution lies the principle that all knowledge comes from the people, and that this knowledge is lived, experienced, and passed down from generation to generation. This approach is deeply rooted in the cultural and spiritual traditions of these peoples, who have been stewards of the land for thousands of years. It is this fundamental belief that guides the work of this institution, ensuring that the voices and perspectives of the peoples are at the forefront of all its activities.

The institution's commitment to preserving and promoting the cultural heritage and knowledge of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is evident in its programs and initiatives. These include the revitalization of languages, the promotion of cultural practices, and the support of indigenous scholars and researchers. By doing so, the institution is not only contributing to the preservation of rich cultural traditions but also fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of the diversity and complexity of human experience.

In conclusion, the institution's focus on indigenous peoples is not just a commitment to justice and equality but also a recognition of the integral role these peoples play in shaping the world we live in. Their knowledge and perspectives are essential for a holistic understanding of society, and the institution's work is a testament to this belief.

References:
1. *Australian Nationhood and Outback Indigenous Peoples*
   Peter Jull (November 1991)

2. *Aboriginal Australia and the 'New Federalism' Initiative*
   G J Crough (December 1991)

3. *A Guide for Australian Research into Northern Regions and Indigenous Policy in North America and Europe*
   Peter Jull (January 1992)

4. *Strategic Regional Planning on the Northern Frontiers*
   John Holmes (July 1992)

5. *Coastal Management: Challenges and Changes in the Torres Strait Islands*
   Monica E Mulrennan (April 1992)

6. *The Constitutional Culture of Nationhood, Northern Territories and Indigenous Peoples*
   Peter Jull (May 1992)

7. *Aboriginal Land and Development in the Northern Territory*
   G J Crough (June 1992)

8. *Towards the Public Sector Financing of Aboriginal Self Government*
   G J Crough (August 1992)

9. *An Aboriginal Northern Territory: Creating Canada's Nunavut*
   Peter Jull (September 1992)

10. *Cultural Heritage Conservation in the Northern Territory*
    Marjorie Sullivan & David Carment (September 1992)
11. *The Economics of Mining Coronation Hill*
   Bruce Knapman & Owen Stanley  (November 1992)

12. *Willowra*
    H C Coombs  (February 1993)

13. *Alternative Welfare: Aboriginal Women Work at the Grassroots*
    J Richardson  (March 1993)

14. *Community Development Planning and Aboriginal Community Control*
    David Lea & Jackie Wolfe  (April 1993)

15. *Who's Planning, Whose Plans? The DEET-ATSIC Aboriginal Community Development Planning Pilot Scheme*
    Jackie Wolfe  (May 1993)

16. *The ATSIC Aboriginal Community Development Planning Program in Northern Australia: Approaches and Agendas*
    Jackie Wolfe  (May 1993)

17. *Lessons in Regional Planning and Development from Canada and Australia: Relevance for Aboriginal Regional Planning*
    Jackie Wolfe  (June 1993)

18. *Regional Planning by ATSIC Councils: Purpose, Process, Product and Problems*
    Jackie Wolfe  (June 1993)