LOWITJA INSTITUTE

Australia's National Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research

POLICY BRIEF • FEBRUARY 2021

CULTURE IS KEY: TOWARDS CULTURAL DETERMINANTS-DRIVEN HEALTH POLICY

Introduction

The Lowitja Institute has a long history of championing the importance of the cultural determinants of health and wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This has included the commissioning of landmark pieces of research, bringing together key thinkers, and policy advocacy.

The Culture is key: Towards cultural determinants-driven health policy report has been developed as a continuation of this work, to look at how the cultural determinants of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing can be implemented in current and emerging policy frameworks. To develop the report, a selected body of research on the cultural determinants of health was analysed and key thinkers were bought together at a roundtable to test existing concepts and propose ways towards cultural determinants-driven health policy.

What are the cultural determinants of health and wellbeing?

The cultural determinants of health are anchored in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing that encompass a holistic understanding of health and wellbeing. Culture is central to this understanding and shapes the relationship between self to Country, kin, community and spirituality. Based on this knowledge, a culturally centred approach to health and wellbeing has been advocated for by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples for decades. In recent years, this approach has been translated into health determinant frameworks by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experts and researchers, such as the Mayi Kuwayu National Study of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Wellbeing.

"Culture is more than practices (dance, art, song)… it is a framework of ideas, truths, norms, values. It is about 'what matters'. It is how people make sense of life and the world."

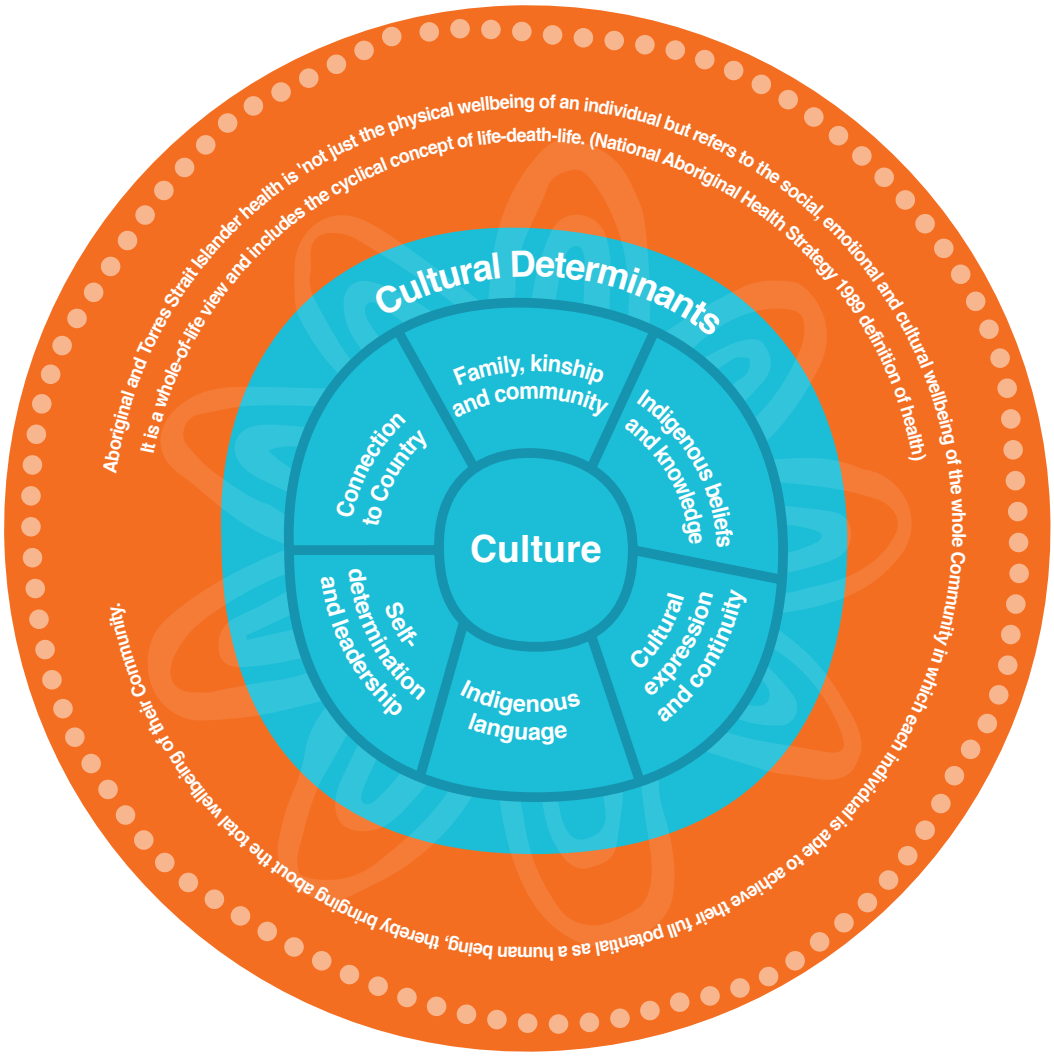
Craig Ritchie, CEO, AIATSIS.
Cultural Determinants Roundtable, 2020

How can they be implemented in health policy?

Recent high level policy frameworks, such as the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2013–2023 (NATSIHP) and the Social and Emotional Wellbeing model have included the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders. However, much is still to be done on enacting the cultural determinants of health into policy directions and processes. The upcoming review of the NATSIHP and the new National Agreement on Closing the Gap offer a unique window of policy opportunity.

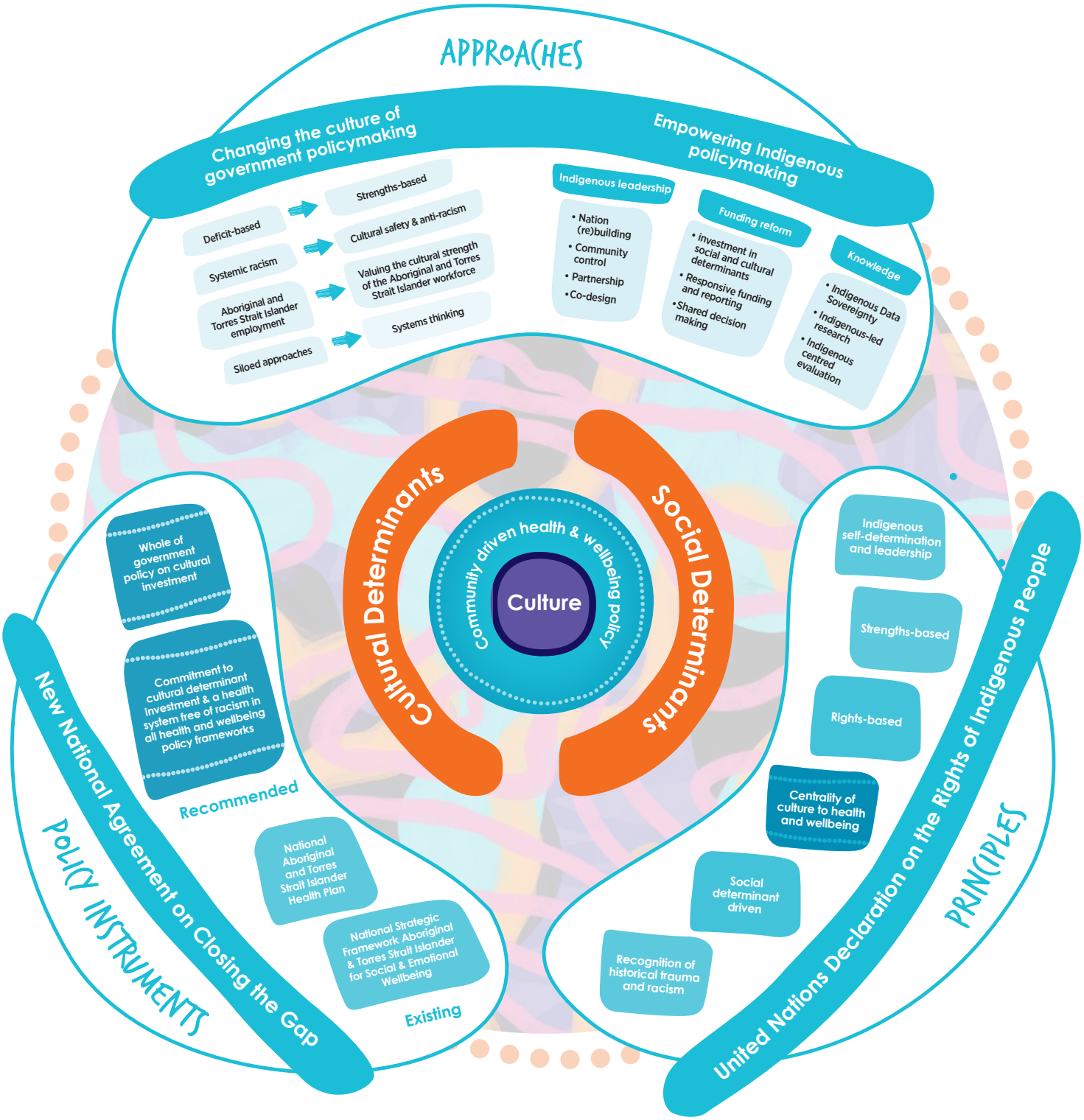
To implement cultural determinant driven policy, it is critical to recognise that policy making does not occur in the absence of culture: it is very much informed and shaped by the culture of predominantly non-Indigenous policy makers. A cultural determinants approach must seek to balance this structural inequality by empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and voices throughout the policy process. Such change requires governments that are aware of their own limitations and uphold the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture.

In our analysis of material on the cultural determinants, we came upon not a singular method or way forward, but a need - across government - for an approach built on a shared understanding, investment and effort into the cultural determinants of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing. The cultural determinant domains identified by work such as the Mayi Kuwayu study—connection to Country; family, kinship and community; Indigenous beliefs and knowledge; cultural expression and continuity; Indigenous language, and self-determination and leadership—require investment from health and other policy portfolio areas and whole-of-government buy-in and action.



Cultural determinants domains identified by the Mayi Kuwayu study. Adapted from *We Nurture Our Culture for Our Future, and Our culture Nurtures Us*, Close the Gap Campaign 2020, p.15

A framework for cultural determinant driven health policy



Key Findings

What are the cultural determinants?
The cultural determinants of health constitute a conceptual framework based on Indigenous knowledge; they are inter-related to social determinants of health and are rights-centred. The determinant domains map the elements that form cultural identity and act as protective factors of health and wellbeing.

Defining the cultural determinants in policy
The Mayi Kuwayu work, led by Indigenous academics, has provided evidence-based domains and indicators that can define the determinants within policy. These definitions and domains are relatable to the National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing and the model being developed for the new National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan.

Shared commitment and collaboration across government
Embedding the cultural determinants into public policy requires a shared commitment from areas outside of health and wellbeing policy portfolio areas. The cultural determinant domains and indicators offer the basis to design a whole of government policy that maps opportunities for collaboration, effort and investment centred around cultural wellbeing. This method must also be matched with approaches, processes and capabilities conducive to the production of culturally centred policy.

Community driven, holistic approaches
Community driven, holistic approaches to health and wellbeing embody the cultural determinants of health and wellbeing. They are generated by empowered localised processes and cultural understandings that cannot be prescribed by national programs or policies. However, there are methods by which governments can support such community driven approaches and address barriers to implementation.

A framework of principles, policy mechanisms and approaches
This includes operating on key principles such as Indigenous leadership, strengths-based approaches, rights-based, and social determinants-driven, the recognition of historical trauma and racism, and the significance of Indigenous cultural identity to health and wellbeing. These principles must be reinforced by policy mechanisms and approaches and strategies for action such as strengths-based community development and empowerment approaches, participatory research and evaluation, and shared decision making.

Recognising the culture of policy making
Policymaking does not occur in the absence of culture: it is very much informed by the culture of predominantly non-Indigenous policymakers.

A culture determinants approach must seek to balance this structural inequality by centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture in policy mechanisms and approaches. Such change requires a bureaucracy that is aware of their own cultural limitations and is willing to change the spaces where policy is made, including ceding control to spaces and processes external of government.

Leadership for change
Cultural change is required within the bureaucracy. This will mean new skills, practices and ways of working. Such changes will require leadership that is reflective, innovative, informed and committed. Bureaucrats must show integrity in their commitment to change both within their own organisations— across portfolios—and in their advice to Ministers.

Calls to Action – Implementing the Cultural Determinants

1. Develop a whole-of-government Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures policy that:
   - affirms the centrality of culture to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health, wellbeing, and identity
   - informs the development of all policies and programs that impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
   - informs the government's investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural maintenance and revitalisation projects, initiatives, and activities
   - explicitly links and measures its investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural maintenance and revitalisation projects, initiatives, and activities, to sustained improvements in family/community cohesion and health outcomes.

2. Support for the maintenance and revitalisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures needs to extend to investment in initiatives that strengthen cultural authority, including traditional community governance and nation building.

3. Implement strategies and actions to support strengths-based approaches to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health policy that include:
   a. Building conceptual understanding through information resources and policy guidance.
   b. Ensuring that health funding program guidelines are in line with the Reframing Discourse project findings on what works – such as funding that embraces holism, innovation and responsiveness and changes to the way financial reporting is managed and funding relationships operate.

4. Reform the way Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research, funding, evaluation and reporting is undertaken by government to empower community driven policy and decision making through strategies that include:
   a. Instigating a formal data partnership between key government organisations (i.e. ABS, AIHW, Department of Health) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and experts to guide action and reforms in line with Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles, including investigating leading international practices and their application in Australia.

b. Implementing 'Action 6 - Agencies should strengthen and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's capability to engage, partner and lead in evaluation' in the Productivity Commission's Indigenous Evaluation Strategy through a focused plan of action.

c. Ensuring that the Priority Reform Actions under the Closing the Gap Agreement, including increased investment in community control, are extended to government research funding bodies and the grant processes that they administer.

d. Investing in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research workforce, and the application and development of Indigenous research methodologies, including participatory action research models.

e. Shaping an approach to funding relationships that emphasise partnership and/ or co-design principles, and looks at more flexible and collaborative process tools for grant applications and reporting that embrace Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and cultural expression.

5 Reiterate the NATSIHP vision for a health system free of racism — along with a holistic definition of systemic racism and a commitment to cultural safety — in the development of any future major health plans and/or strategies.

6 Through the new NATSIHIP, affirm a commitment to historical truth telling as an important component of creating a health system free of racism.

7 That the Australian Government enter into a partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders on the development of a minimum set of standards to guide the Government's investment into cultural safety training, and related capability development.

8 Develop and produce evidence-based partnership and co-design standards and guides to inform practice.

9 Create a body of knowledge on how Systems Thinking methodology and tools can be and are being used to facilitate whole-of-government/whole-of-community approaches to addressing the cultural determinants of health.

10 Invest in the knowledge and capabilities required by the Australian Government to implement the approaches outlined, including valuing the cultural strengths of the Indigenous workforce, and targetting recruitment and capability strategies to build the required skill sets.

Next steps

Shaping the cultural determinants into a whole-of-government policy framework on cultural investment offers the potential for structural and systemic change. This change is needed to enable mainstream government organisations to better respond to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

A key activity in continuing this work will be the Department of Health working with key stakeholders such as the National Health Leadership Forum (NHLF), Implementation Plan Advisory Group (IPAG) for the NATSIHP and the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), to champion the cultural determinants in all policies within health and across portfolios.

Easily implementable mechanisms through which this could be progressed include:

- establishing cross-agency and sectorial communities of practice to share knowledge, generate new thinking and identify opportunities for action based collaboration;
- investing in resources to promote policy knowledge and practice around key approaches outlined in this report such as Indigenous Data Sovereignty, strengths-based practice, and systems thinking. These resources might include:
  - case studies and guides to further explore and inform policy work in key areas;
  - establishing a series of information seminars or workshops to further explore the themes and calls for action identified in this report;
- engaging and activating existing networks to promote understanding of the cultural determinants, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australian Public Service (APS) employees and Senior Executive Champions;
- celebrating success stories such as the sustained partnership approach of the Implementation Plan Advisory Group model and shifts in funding models such as the Indigenous Australians' Health Programme (IAHP) that have successfully increased resourcing to the community controlled sector.

About this policy brief

This policy brief is a summary of Culture is Key: towards cultural determinants-driven health policy – Final Report.

A PDF version of this report and policy brief may be obtained from: **www.lowitja.org.au**.

For more information, please contact **admin@lowitja.org.au**.

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