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## Achieving Indigenous outcomes in an ATSIC environment: Issues and constraints

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### Abstract

ATSIC was established in 1990 as the peak Indigenous representative body for policy advice with executive powers to implement programs impacting on Indigenous people. From 1 July 2004 the Commonwealth Government abolished ATSIC. In announcing this decision the Prime Minister expressed disappointment at the outcomes achieved in areas of health, education and employment. The prime Minister stated that “We believe very strongly that the experiment in separate representation—elected representation—for Indigenous people has been a failure”. Although the basic service delivery to Indigenous communities is the responsibility of the State and Territory governments, and ATSIC provided supplementary funds to meet any service gaps in Indigenous communities, most agree ATSIC should have done better towards Indigenous self-determination and achieving improved outcomes.

Drawing from existing literature supplemented by evidence from ATSIC’s own operational and program implementation, this paper highlights factors that possibly hindered ATSIC’s ability to improve Indigenous outcomes and enhance self-determination. Some factors related to structural issues: architecture of ATSIC Act (i.e. dual responsibilities, operational limits, staffing and budgetary control); the structural nature of socio-demographic factors (youthful age-structure, spatial distribution, low access to education, health and prospect for employment). Other limitations discussed include: ATSIC’s over-emphasis on financial accountability, top-down planning, centralised control and lack of devolution to Regions, failure to develop statistical database within ATSIC, lack of policy research and policy advice provided to the Commission, and failure of ATSIC to develop community capacity. Understanding these shortcomings could help, if an alternative organisation is established for Indigenous representation.

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