A FRAMEWORK FOR CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE AND SUSTAINABLE INDIGENOUS HOUSING

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Executive Summary

Safe, secure and stable housing is central to social, emotional and economic well-being for individuals and families. Housing is recognised by the United Nations as a fundamental human right, yet when it comes to Indigenous housing individuals disproportionately experience unsafe, unstable and substandard housing. The absence of housing security is therefore a significant contributor to the intergenerational poverty experienced by some Indigenous individuals and families.

The long-standing nature of this issue makes it appear intractable and systemic, however there is increasing evidence that governments working in partnership with Indigenous organisations and communities, can begin to change these dynamics.

This brief is based on an extensive review of the multidisciplinary evidence base, including literature and policy analysis as well as empirical investigation. Sources include research articles, official reports and statistics and scholarly debates, as well as media commentary and debate. These, along with original data sources, are analysed to identify the key policy learnings for a framework for culturally appropriate and sustainable Indigenous housing.

Introduction:

One of the most familiar tropes of Indigenous communities is that of deteriorated, crowded housing. This is true for countries including the United States, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. The issue of homelessness and substandard housing for Indigenous people is regularly described as a wicked problem, yet with appropriate policy settings, and political will, safe, secure and appropriate housing should be the norm.

The profile of Indigenous housing

Indigenous populations generally experience low levels of home ownership, difficulties accessing private rentals and high levels of rental stress. They are over-represented in social and affordable housing, with high levels of crowding, homelessness and unmet housing need. A relatively high proportion of homes fall short of acceptable standards so they are insuffiently safe, comfortable and healthy.

Crowding and deteriorated housing occurs across the settlement hierarchy and contributes to housing instability and homelessness with involuntary movement between homes, public spaces and other forms of inadequate temporary shelter.

These features are most extreme in remote communities, but also occur in regional and urban areas.

Housing, health and well-being

Inadequate, unsafe and insecure housing directly impacts health and well-being, with World Health Organisation guidelines identifying crowding as increasing risks to mental and physical health. This is partly due to excess wear and tear caused by crowding. Crowding impacts on essential health hardware, such as functioning taps and flushing toilets, making it hard to practice healthy hygiene, such as washing, and safe removal of wastewater.

The result is increased rates of infectious disease and chronic illness, including upper respiratory tract infections such as asthma, and ear and skin infections. This can lead to chronic disease, including acute rheumatic fever, rheumatic heart disease and chronic kidney disease. Crowding also affects nutrition, with flow-on affects for other aspects of health and development.

Deteriorated homes create electrical and infrastructure hazards, creating risks of electrocution and falls. Communities without access to safe drinking water risk exposure to high levels of nitrates leading to kidney disease.

Inadequate, deteriorated, unsafe and unstable housing and homelessness play a critical role in the intergenerational cycle of poverty. They compromise health and well-being and impact on educational and economic participation and performance across the life-cycle. Everyone needs a safe and stable space for study, sleep and play. Without this, family conflict and mental health problems increase, causing stress for all household members.

These problems are especially acute in the context of climate change since Indigenous peoples are over-represented in areas on the front line of its impacts.

What is the explanation for the problems of Indigenous housing?

The similarities of the housing problems experienced by Indigenous peoples has its roots in the impact of colonization and its aftermath, with subsequent policies of normalisation entrenching and maintaining their situation of housing exclusion.

- Within the social housing sector, policy settings have been poorly adapted to the lifeworlds of Indigenous populations, resulting in high levels of tenant dissatisfaction and tenancy failure.

- Indigenous populations face many barriers accessing and sustaining private rentals including low income, disability and large family size, as well as racism and discrimination.

- Housing stock on remote communities is often deteriorated and in short supply. Housing in these locations is costly to build and maintain. The budgets for repairs and maintenance are usually inadequate, resulting in deteriorated, crowded homes.

- Policies designed to promote home ownership have tended to operate within neoliberal principles of individualism and self-responsibility. In urban settings home ownership may be an option for some Indigenous people, but in remote communities these policy settings are at odds with Indigenous forms of land tenure and with the family and community values prevalent in many of these locations.

At different times and places principles of self-determination have led to greater choice and Indigenous control within the Indigenous housing sector. There are some successes, but efforts have rarely been implemented systematically. In other cases inadequate funding and a lack of policy oversight has resulted in only limited success.

in both policy circles, and in the media, the 'problem' of Indigenous housing is often constructed as arising from aspects of Indigeneity itself. It is only more recently that analyses have addressed the role of policy settings and interventions.

The morally and politically contested nature of Indigenous housing policy creates a highly politicized context with policy development often being paternalistic and ideologically driven. Policies have often been top-down, rapidly developed, and involving significant policy churn. This runs counter to what research repeatedly shows is needed. Effective policies are evidence-based, developed in partnership with Indigenous peoples, and aligned with their geographic, cultural and socio-demographic realities.

Recommendations

The key feature of any framework for sustainable Indigenous housing is that it must be rooted in respect for, and responsiveness to, Indigenous lifeworlds. This requires meaningful and sustained engagement with Indigenous individuals and communities, and an openness to mutual learning and engagement.

Beyond this, culturally appropriate and sustainable Indigenous housing involves.

- A medium- to long-term policy approach that approaches solutions incrementally, builds capacity within both the state and Indigenous communities, and is based on the evidence.

- In most jurisdictions governments will need to maintain their investment in, and oversight of Indigenous housing. This engagement must be in partnership with Indigenous peoples, and should maximise opportunities for local service delivery and employment.

- Housing planning and design must be responsive to local socio-demographic and cultural contexts. Large, extended families require larger homes, that are adaptive to changing family size, including visiting kin. High levels of occupancy require assertive repairs and maintenance programs.

- Adequately funded, and responsive repairs and maintenance programs are essential to prevent deterioration of existing stock. The association between housing and health means the health and well-being of residents should be central to program design.

- Life-cycle costing should be routinely applied in housing programs, with the assessment of housing need analysed across the full cycle of construction, operations and disposal.

- Housing budgets must recognise that remote housing will always be costly. Strategies to minimise costs include planned maintenance, standardisation of components and establilshing strong relationships with reliable contractors.

- Indigenous housing programs offer significant potential for local employment. Achieving this requires policies that address the skills base of local communities, while also developing strategies to ensure long-term employment. This requires government and other housing providers to support apprenticeships through longer contracts than often currently apply.

- Climate preparedness should be an integral feature of policy development especially in relation to new builds, refurbishments and retrofit programs. This includes attention to insulation, double glazing, mechanical and passive heating and cooling and technologies for water management.

- To ensure appropriate standards and principles are maintained, they should be supported by enforceable legislation and funding arrangements.

- Within the private rental market, anti-discrimination legislation is essential, including regulation of tenancy data bases, as well as regulation to ensure appropriate housing standards. Other strategies include tenancy support programs, and targeted financial assistance.

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