Shared Responsibility Agreements

Shared Responsibility Agreements (SRAs) are “agreements between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and groups and Australian government’s based on the principles of mutual obligation. The principle of mutual obligation requires both parties, the community and the Government to each contribute to making the agreement work”. SRAs are not legally binding.

“The official government policy describes SRAs as agreements where ‘communities’ make commitments and governments undertake to provide services or investment tailored to the identified needs of the community”.

SRAs were described by the government as providing a “new” type of Indigenous policy, moving aspects of Indigenous policy away from rights to responsibilities. Indigenous communities had to conform to agreed “responsible” actions in order to access services and infrastructure. The actions are based on negotiations between the government and each individual Indigenous community.

There were over one hundred agreements between the government and Indigenous communities.

SRAs have caused debate over what makes effective Indigenous policy.

How SRAs began and what they look like

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1 Mutual obligation is the idea that those who receive government resources should be expected to give something back to society in response to receiving them (Peter Yeend, Mutual Obligation/ Work for the Dole, Parliament of Australia, Department of Parliamentary Services Canberra, 2004). This idea is supported by some Indigenous leaders, like Noel Pearson and Patrick Dodson who argue that it is similar to the idea of reciprocity in Indigenous culture (Ruth McCausland and Marc Levy, ‘Indigenous Policy and Mutual Obligation: Shared or Shifting Responsibility Agreements?, Australian Journal of Social Issues, vol.41(3), Spring 2006, p. 280). This idea of mutual obligation can also be seen in income management. See articles on ‘Income Management: Northern Territory’ and ‘Income Management: Cape York’ to see if you can see this idea of mutual obligation.


7 Ibid., p. 279.
SRAs were an initiative of the Howard Federal government. They began in 2003 as part of the Council for Australian Government’s commitment to reconciliation.

The first knowledge of SRAs was in 2004 when a draft agreement between a remote Indigenous Western Australian community (Mulan) was leaked to the media. The contents of the agreement sparked much debate and triggered a Senate Inquiry.

In the agreement the Federal government agreed to install two petrol bowsers and the State government agreed to regular health checks for children. In response, Mulan had to make sure that children’s faces were washed twice daily and showered daily, rubbish was removed from homes twice weekly and rubbish bins were in every house, pest control in houses took place every quarter and the petrol provided through the bowsers was not used for petrol sniffing.

If you’re interested in seeing other SRAs you can visit the Australian government portal.

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**Positives of SRAs**

**Government**

SRAs ensure that the needs of Indigenous communities are being met through community consultation. Government action is then shaped by Indigenous priorities rather than government imposed solutions.

Communication between Indigenous communities and the government is also improved because the initiatives are begun by Indigenous communities.

**Scholars**

Despite, criticising SRAs McCausland and Levy do acknowledge that SRAs are a tool to provide much needed funding to Indigenous communities.

**Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC)**

The AHRC suggests that SRAs can deliver human rights to Indigenous people but it depends on Indigenous consultation and involvement in the design of the SRA.

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8 Ibid., p. 277.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid., p. 658.
Therefore, success depends on the quality of participation which should be based on “free, prior and informed consent”\textsuperscript{16}.

The AHRC positively stated that “[c]onsultations with communities who have finalised a SRA revealed that generally, subject matters provided through the SRA, reflect the desires of those communities. Many SRAs completed ... resulted in tailored services being delivered to meet the different needs of communities, culturally appropriate service delivery and/or improved accessibility of mainstream services, or increases to the limited economic development opportunities in remote communities. These are all positives from a human rights perspective”\textsuperscript{17}.

Criticisms of SRAs

Lawrence and Gibson argue that SRAs attempt to “civilize” Indigenous people and a hierarchy of culture is established through SRAs. This means that SRAs create one culture (non-Indigenous culture) as more superior to another culture (Indigenous culture)\textsuperscript{18}. In this way then SRAs are likened to assimilationist policies “because they demand culturally insensitive ‘behavioural change’ from Indigenous people”\textsuperscript{19}.

Lawrence and Gibson also suggest that SRAs continue historical and modern representations of Indigenous people as welfare dependent and incapable of being controlled, governed or regulated\textsuperscript{20}.

The approach in SRAs has been described as a ‘carrot and stick approach’ by various people, including the Howard government, where the benefit is the carrot and the stick is the behavioural change expected in order to receive such a benefit\textsuperscript{21}.

This ‘carrot and stick approach’ also makes SRAS similar to historical rationing “whereby Indigenous subjects are rewarded for fulfilling and performing a particular role in their relationship with the government”\textsuperscript{22}.

SRAs have also been criticised because the resources provided to Indigenous communities are often provided to non-Indigenous communities as a matter of right. Rather than an object with a responsibility tied to it\textsuperscript{23}. SRAs have therefore been described as discriminatory\textsuperscript{24} and paternalistic\textsuperscript{25,26}.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p. 651.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p. 650.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Ibid., p. 651.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Ibid., p. 651.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Ibid., p. 654.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Ibid., p. 658, 659.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Ruth McCausland and Marc Levy, ‘Indigenous Policy and Mutual Obligation: Shared or Shifting Responsibility’
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Mick Dodson argued “… [SRAs] seem to be agreements about the delivery of entitlements that other citizens take for granted. We shouldn’t have to sign an agreement to have a school or a health clinic. No other Australian has to do that”\textsuperscript{27}.

Therefore, the mutual obligation idea which informs SRAs is said to place “different demands on Aboriginal communities than on non-Aboriginal citizens”\textsuperscript{28}.

Further, “[r]ather than commit to large-scale (and necessary) programs of building schools, roads and health care centres, it appears that remote communities are being encouraged to enter contractual agreements for piecemeal handouts\textsuperscript{29}. This can shift the focus of the problem from the government to the individual community\textsuperscript{30}.

SRAs also do not require the government to understand Indigenous culture or change the power dynamics between Indigenous communities and government\textsuperscript{32}. They similarly do not address circumstances of systemic\textsuperscript{33} disadvantage.

Further, it has been suggested that the agreements are not in fact mutual because of the unequal power relations between Indigenous communities and the government. For example, McCausland and Levy question the power the government has over Indigenous communities particularly, when

\textsuperscript{25}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 280.
\textsuperscript{26} See Article ‘Income management: Northern Territory’ for an explanation of paternalism.
\textsuperscript{29}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 661.

Other SRAs have been criticised for their outcomes. One particular Indigenous community established a ‘no school, no pool’ policy with the government agreeing to build a community pool. However, when Indigenous people began enrolling in schools there was not enough resources or room for the children enrolled. This undermines a basic citizenship right of Indigenous Australians, the right to education\textsuperscript{31}.

\textsuperscript{31}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 288.
the government holds the key to communities receiving much needed funding\textsuperscript{34}.

Also, the fact that some communities had not received their anticipated resources from the government in an adequate timeframe\textsuperscript{35} challenged the mutuality of the agreements.

McCausland and Levy also argue that the details of negotiated SRAs between different Indigenous communities and the government are not publicly available\textsuperscript{36}, with limited information available\textsuperscript{37}. This is a problem because it hides them from public scrutiny and doesn’t allow communities to compare agreements between different communities\textsuperscript{38}.

This means that communities because of the secrecy behind the contents of SRAs are unable to present a united front and fight for resources and services as a collective\textsuperscript{39}.

Agreements vary in “focus, commitments and funding”\textsuperscript{40}. This variation is argued to be not based on the size of the problem nor on urgency but on the negotiating skills of the community, the government representative and the government department involved in the negotiation process\textsuperscript{41}. They also were dependent on the communities’ existing relationships with the government and how closely their priorities for their community aligned with the governments\textsuperscript{42}.

Further, some SRAs have been criticised for taking credit for programs designed by Indigenous communities prior to the implementation of a SRA. In these circumstances it then suggests that Indigenous communities need to be coerced\textsuperscript{43} into doing things\textsuperscript{44}.


\textsuperscript{38} Ruth McCausland and Marc Levy, ‘Indigenous Policy and Mutual Obligation: Shared or Shifting Responsibility

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., p. 286.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., p. 283.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., p. 284.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{43} Coerce means to “persuade (an unwilling person) to do something by using force or threats” (Oxford University Press, ‘Definition of coerce in English’, Oxford Dictionaries, Oxford University Press, http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition /english/coerce. [7 November 2013].

\textsuperscript{44} Ruth McCausland and Marc Levy, ‘Indigenous Policy and Mutual Obligation: Shared or Shifting Responsibility
The focus of SRAs is also on rural and remote areas excluding urban Indigenous people\textsuperscript{45}.

Questions

1. What is a Shared Responsibility Agreement (SRA)?
   a. A SRA is a mutual obligation agreement between Australian government’s and Indigenous communities where Indigenous communities commit to changes and governments’ deliver services and infrastructure.
   b. A SRA is a top-down policy where the government enforces obligations on Indigenous communities. If the community fulfils these obligations they will receive infrastructure and services.
   c. A SRA is a mutual obligation agreement between Australian government’s and non-Indigenous communities where communities commit to changes and governments’ deliver services and infrastructure.
   d. A SRA is an agreement designed by all Indigenous communities as a collective which is then signed off on by the government. All the communities then receive the same services and infrastructure.

2. What are the positives of SRAs suggested by the government and scholars?
   a. It gives government a way to control Indigenous relations and scholarly, many academics have recommended SRAs as a policy.
   b. It ensures that the communities’ needs and priorities are met and delivers much needed funding to Indigenous communities.
   c. It ensures that the communities’ needs and priorities are met and it fulfils the aims of a policy based on reconciliation as the Council for Australian Government’s recommended.
   d. It ensures that the government is telling the communities’ their needs and priorities because the

\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 289.
government knows the “best interests” of Indigenous people and delivers much needed funding to Indigenous communities.

3. What is a hierarchy of culture and how is it in SRAs likened to assimilation?
   a. A hierarchy of culture is where one culture (Indigenous) is represented as more superior to another (non-Indigenous). It is similar to assimilation because it is a government policy.
   b. A hierarchy of culture is where one culture (Indigenous) is represented as more superior to another (non-Indigenous). It is similar to assimilation because both seek behavioural change from Indigenous people which is culturally insensitive.
   c. A hierarchy of culture is where one culture (non-Indigenous) is represented as more superior to another (Indigenous). It is similar to assimilation because both seek behavioural change from non-Indigenous people which is culturally insensitive.
   d. A hierarchy culture is where one culture (non-Indigenous) is represented as more superior to another (Indigenous). It is similar to assimilation because both seek behavioural change from Indigenous people which is culturally insensitive.

4. Why does Mick Dodson criticise SRAs?
   a. Because SRAs deliver services and infrastructure to Indigenous communities that other citizens expect and receive as citizens, rather than, as objects which have to be met with behavioural change.
   b. Mick Dodson does not criticise SRAs.
   c. Because SRAs deliver unnecessary services and infrastructure to Indigenous communities.
   d. Because SRAs do not expect enough behavioural change from Indigenous communities through the mutual obligation agreement. People who receive services and resources
should be required to give
back to society.