AHURI Research & Policy Bulletin

Understanding how policy and tenancy management conditionality can influence positive housing outcomes for Indigenous Australians

DISADVANTAGED INDIGENOUS TENANTS ARE ACHIEVING AND MAINTAINING SECURE AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING WHEN HOUSING ADMINISTRATORS, COMMUNITY LEADERS AND TENANTS SHARE UNDERSTANDINGS ABOUT DISADVANTAGE AND HOW TO NEGOTIATE CHANGE.

KEY POINTS

- Tenants, government and Indigenous/intermediary organisations assume a diversity of responsibilities and are often seeking different tenancy outcomes. Despite differences however, there is evidence of a recognition space occurring.

- Culturally-based values and practices significantly affect the ability of Indigenous tenants to comply with social housing tenancy conditions (the rules) and to achieve and maintain tenancies. Some housing officers are more flexible in frontline practice to support tenants more fully.

- State Housing Authorities (SHAs) are administering new policies that require greater responsibility from the tenants. Comprehensive and rigid policy application across a diverse range of contexts can be counter-productive, preventing the development of a productive recognition space.

- This research supports the need for more devolution to intermediary organisations and frontline workers, in order to develop local implementation plans and mutually agreed measures.

*This bulletin is based on research conducted by **Prof Paul Memmott, Prof Mark Moran, Dr Daphne Nash** and **Dr Shaneen Fantin** at The University of Queensland, and **Dr Chris Birdsall-Jones** at the AHURI Research Centre—Curtin University. The research explored government, community/intermediary organisation and tenant perspectives on tenancy management to identify the conditions and characteristics of a 'recognition space'.*

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- Negotiated and targeted conditionalities together with some form of coercion are more effective in modifying tenants' behaviour than punitive models only. There is clear opportunity for the housing conditionalities to incorporate more incentives to reward people for their efforts.

- The study identified three types of tenant households—*welfare dependent, stable and successfully established*—each potentially benefitting from specifically targeted policy and management approaches.

CONTEXT

Conditionality is defined as a 'form of contractualism in which state benefits are tied to demands that recipients conform to a range of behavioural requirements'. This 'conditionality' mirrors the general use of reciprocity arrangements or obligations in social policy and social housing provision. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people also bring a range of understandings and expectations to their engagement with housing providers, that do not always align with external notions of their expected 'reciprocity'. Of critical importance is the role of Indigenous cultural and social structures, including kinship, cultural obligations and Indigenous governance structures. Whether these are in harmony or in conflict with conditions informing housing assistance can powerfully determine housing outcomes.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research was completed in stages over 3.5 years from September 2012 to March 2016, with fieldwork commencing in the second year. The third year focused on five separate case studies across remote, regional and metropolitan locations: Tennant Creek in the Northern Territory; the Goldfields region of Western Australia; and Mt Isa, Palm Island and Logan in Queensland. These longitudinal field investigations were a special feature of this study. Across the five locations, 140 in-depth interviews were undertaken, including Indigenous social housing tenants, government departmental housing officers (DHOs) and housing officers and frontline workers from Indigenous and community organisations (CHOs). The majority of interviews

were with tenants, reflecting the relatively large numbers compared to housing officers.

The researchers relied on a key informant approach for sampling interviewees, seeking out informants who were interested and able to discuss their tenancy. Contact with interviewees was made through known members of the Indigenous community, through introductions by local agencies and from interviewees who would suggest other possible interviewees. In the case of government and intermediary organisations, formal approaches were made.

KEY FINDINGS

Tensions and responsibilities in the recognition space

Individual tenants typically prioritised their own comfort and needs whereas State Housing Authorities (SHAs) focused more on cost efficiencies. Across all case study locations, tenants were unfamiliar with the conditions of tenancies beyond the basic rules. Most tenants were renting old and poorly maintained housing and generally there was a shortage of suitable housing. This, combined with general tenant dissatisfaction over SHA commitment and responsibilities to maintenance and repairs, was not conducive to good relations. Attitudes to intermediary organisations varied and in most locations they had relatively reduced roles compared to SHAs. The study also highlighted the significance of face-to-face communication, stable and flexible frontline relationships as well as Indigenous staff and community control for enabling a recognition space.

Need for flexibility around kin relationships

Tenants often accommodated many visitors for extended periods because of their obligations to kin. At times this led to anti-social behaviour including excessive drinking, fighting and family violence. Individual housing officers, particularly experienced Indigenous staff, understood the issues and were able to respond in constructive ways to local community members, within the constraints of their roles. All of the case studies demonstrated that family and kin relationships,

as well as cultural and historical connections to land, were highly significant forms of sociocultural capital for the Indigenous tenants that need to be appreciated by SHAs and DHOs.

Diversity of tenants unrecognised

Governments have an important role to afford authority to tenancy rules, as well as provide a stable governance environment to ensure that the rules are consistently but equitably managed. Although tenancy rules have been established to achieve policy objectives there appeared to be little consideration of the diversity of tenants and their socioeconomic circumstances. For Indigenous social housing tenants, housing is just one of many inter-related needs. Tenants who were in need of other services were at risk of losing their tenancy when 'things went wrong' and their day-to-day lives were disrupted, such as financial stress resulting in missed rental payments. Case-management approaches, particularly when coordinated by intermediary organisations, were found to effectively deal with complex sets of tenant problems.

Devolution to intermediary organisations

The most balanced recognition space occurs in communities where effective intermediary organisations exist, particularly functional Indigenous organisations. However, the research notes that although the demise of most Indigenous Community Housing Organisations (ICHOs) has

FIGURE 1: THE RECOGNITION SPACE— THREE INTERSECTING CONTINUUMS OF RESPONSIBILITY

Source: AERC, University of Queensland

shifted responsibility to SHAs, this does not preclude a recognition space from developing. By contrast, the most unbalanced situations appear when one group (government, tenants or intermediary organisation) dominates, with little responsibility assumed by the other two groups. Local implementation plans as well as gendered and strengths-based approaches were effective strategies used to take account of particular community contexts.

Negotiated and targeted conditionalities

Under recent policy changes, an intended purpose of the heightened conditionality in social housing was to modify people's behaviour using the threat of consequences or a coercive model of conditionality, such as the use of 'strikes' for non-compliance with the rules. The study found that the realities faced by the frontline workers made this difficult to implement and that it was important to have choices based on negotiated and targeted conditionalities instead. Face-to-face persuasion, assertive engagement and influence were sometimes more effective forms of action. In relation to the diversity of tenants and their needs, the study identified three types of tenant households—*welfare dependent, stable and successfully established*—each potentially benefitting from specifically targeted policy and management approaches.

Further research

Further research is required to better understand the development pathways that Indigenous tenants take over their social housing careers. As our case studies demonstrated, Indigenous tenants were a diverse group of people with multiple and complex needs including mental and physical health problems that were often unrecognised or only partially addressed. Furthermore, it was clear that tenants' housing requirements changed according to a range of factors such as life stages and family residency patterns. More detailed information about tenants' responses to these changes would inform decision-making about how different conditionalities might work more effectively at different points of their housing careers.
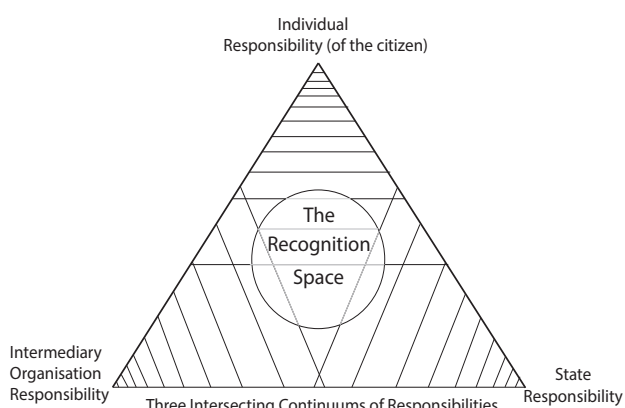
POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The policy intent of social housing has traditionally focused on providing safe, secure and affordable housing for the most disadvantaged Indigenous tenants. There are also policies in place to assist and encourage Indigenous people to leave social housing, moving to either home ownership or private rental, via incentives for saving and sanctions and via an income cap. Further research is required to better understand the development pathways that Indigenous tenants take throughout their social housing careers, and how different conditionalities work more effectively at different points of their housing careers.

Generally, the conditionalities operating through housing policies are mostly coercive, with a clear absence of rewards or incentives. There are incentives operating in the system, but these were largely occurring informally in practice. There is clear opportunity for the housing conditionalities to formally incorporate more incentives to reward tenants for their efforts.

SHAs have replaced many ICHOs by taking on tenancy management, expanding their regional offices and their numbers of DHOs, including running costly local housing offices in remote communities. As the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) National Partnership agreements wind down, SHAs are once again looking to divest this responsibility to intermediary organisations; however, now this is happening in the absence of a viable Indigenous housing sector. With tenders dominated by price, large not-for-profit community housing corporations appear best positioned to compete.

The findings suggest that an efficiency-driven mainstream approach to tenancy management will not work for disadvantaged Indigenous clients. A different governance model might draw on the frontline experience of DHOs, towards one where intermediary housing organisations are appropriately funded, and allowed the flexibility to apply a range of different conditionalities. If policy and practice were better aligned, more improved and widespread outcomes would likely follow. Many of the conclusions in this research support the need for more devolution to intermediary organisations and frontline workers, in order to develop local implementation plans and mutually agreed measures. Treating Indigenous social housing only through the lens of deficit, governance failure and punitive conditionality will undermine the possibility for recognition spaces to form, and ultimately will obstruct or prevent positive housing outcomes for Indigenous households.

FURTHER INFORMATION

This bulletin is based on AHURI Multi-Year Research Project 21705, *Aboriginal lifeworlds, conditionality and housing outcomes*.

Reports from this project can be found on the AHURI website: www.ahuri.edu.au or by contacting AHURI Limited on +61 3 9660 2300.

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