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A culturally grounded framework for co-designing policy with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

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ABSTRACT

Policy development in Australia has often overlooked Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems, leading to policies that fail to address their unique needs and aspirations. Modern initiatives, such as the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, mark a transformative shift toward integrating Indigenous voices and experiences into policymaking. The existing evidence underscores the importance of co-design in Indigenous policy, underpinned by shared power, strong leadership, and culturally grounded principles. The literature suggests that co-designing policy with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples can bridge the gap between Indigenous knowledge systems and policy development, fostering trust and creating meaningful, lasting change. We aim to develop a culturally grounded framework for co-designing policy with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by employing a framework synthesis approach and yarning methods. Our research question informs our purposive selection and appraisal of culturally relevant studies, data extraction, synthesis and interpretation to produce our framework. Humphrey et al.'s Aboriginal basket weaving framework underpins our framework synthesis method. Our proposed framework aims to amalgamate Indigenous perspectives into policy co-design, ensuring inclusive, effective and culturally informed policies. Our study contributes to the growing body of literature in co-design's public policy domain by introducing an Indigenous model for integrating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing into modern policy design practices to generate culturally responsive policy. Future framework iterations can inform practical resources to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and policymakers in meaningful policy co-design.

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Introduction

Background

Historically, policy development within the Australian context has largely disregarded the rich and diverse knowledge systems of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Shay, Sarra, and Lampert 2023). This exclusion has precipitated profound misunderstandings of policy issues, resulting in policy objectives and implementations that have inadequately addressed the distinct needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (Schwab 1995; Larkin 2006). For instance, Sherriff et al. (2019) research recognises the profound distrust that First Nations peoples harbour toward researchers and policymakers alike (Sherriff et al. 2019). Tuhiwai links this distrust to a history of exploitative and invasive research practices conducted *on* Indigenous peoples (Tuhiwai Smith 2021). Christie et al. emphasise the requisite to embrace more culturally safe and inclusive policy frameworks, through their research on the failure of breast cancer policy to address the unique needs of Aboriginal women (Christie et al. 2023).

Recent years have seen a growing recognition of the importance of involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the policy-making process. The National Agreement on Closing the Gap (National Agreement) (Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations and T.A.G 2020) is a landmark framework in Australia, signifying inclusive approaches to Indigenous policy and program development. The National Agreement advocates the need for all governments to genuinely partner with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to effectively address socio-economic disparities they experience. The National Agreement was ‘...developed in genuine partnership between Australian governments and the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations (Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations and T.A.G 2020). The National Agreement epitomises a transformative shift toward privileging Indigenous knowledge systems in addressing issues impacting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The National Agreement urges governments to embed Indigenous governance in policy design, delivery and evaluation. Similarly, the Productivity Commission’s review on the National Agreement calls for foundational reform in government systems. Transformative approaches must aim to engender meaningful and lasting change through mechanisms that enable genuine shared decision-making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Commission 2024). However, significant work remains to be undertaken by Australian governments to close the inequitable gaps between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Commission 2024).

Co-designing policy

Although not a silver bullet, co-designing policy with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples has been regarded as a critical undertaking seeking to bridge the gap between Indigenous knowledge systems and public policy development (Dillon 2021). Co-design emerged in Scandinavia in the 1970s as a way of involving end-users in designing technological products and services (Sanders and Stappers 2008). This innovative design approach set out to consolidate end-user expertise, perspectives and experiences into the product development process. Steen’s widely cited work exemplifies how co-design offers end-users a ‘voice’ to improve product development, idea generation and long-term customer satisfaction (Steen 2013). Co-design has since evolved

into urban planning, architecture (Gaete Cruz et al. 2022) and public administration in liberal democracies, highlighting its adaptability in differing contexts (Watchorn et al. 2024). The growing use of co-design in public administration signifies the shift from top-down bureaucracy toward instilling lived experiences of communities in designing public services (Evans and Terrey 2016). Terry and Evans (Evans and Terrey 2016) argue that co-design is imperative for engaging citizens and stakeholders in policy development. By eliciting valuable insights from citizens, they posit that co-design can enhance governments' understanding of policy problems and create trust between public servants and the communities they serve. Parter's research in decolonising health policy calls for co-designing policy to respectfully privilege Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing (Parter 2021). Parter highlights the significance of the 3Es in Indigenous policy by initiating action (enact), enculturating the policy into routine practices (embed) and cultivating a supportive environment for sustaining and elevating its efficacy (enable) (Parter 2021). Notwithstanding its ubiquity in public sector, effective co-design is contingent on how it is practiced.

Done authentically, co-design can inform the way policy instruments align to the needs and aspirations of priority populations that lead to lasting change. For example, by employing co-design principles, the Remote Food Security Project addressed food insecurity issues with remote Aboriginal communities in Australia (Ferguson et al. 2023). It employed a strengths-based strategy to understanding the communities' lived experiences with food insecurity and collaboratively formulate solutions with the communities.

Done poorly, co-design can be tokenistic, erode trust and fail to achieve its objectives. For example, van Toorn (2024) describes the failure of an Australian government agency to meaningfully co-design with people with a disability in 2016 (van Toorn 2024). The project involved co-designing an artificially intelligent virtual assistant to support people with a disability in accessing various social services. The project's downfall was attributed, in part, to the agency's inadequate inclusion and engagement of people with a disability in the design agenda and process. Therefore, we set out to develop a culturally grounded framework for co-designing policy with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to guide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and policymakers undertaking this innovative process.

Policy vs. services

Policy and services differ fundamentally in their nature and scope. We highlight this distinction to emphasise our framework's primary focus on the policy domain (Blomkamp 2018). Policies are strategic and long-term, formulated through legislative processes to achieve broad societal impact (Larimer and Smith 2009). In contrast, services are operational and immediate, delivered through administrative mechanisms to address the specific needs of individuals and communities (Spicker 2009).

Existing evidence

We acknowledge the existing evidence for co-designing services with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, predominantly situated in the public health and academic research realms. Anderson et al. delineates best practices for co-designing with First

Nations peoples in a cancer control context (Anderson et al. 2022). Their key principles for co-designing with First Nations peoples include encompassing First Nations leadership, culturally grounded approaches and respecting Indigenous knowledges. Anderson et al.'s findings offer a comprehensive guide to co-design methodologies, effectively translating co-design principles into actionable practice. Similarly, Sherriff et al.'s SEARCH initiative illustrates how genuinely co-creating with Aboriginal peoples can yield meaningful and sustainable research outcomes. They identify nine critical success factors essential for co-design in Aboriginal health research, namely: '...shared power; strong credible leadership; shared vision, shared goals; willingness to take risks; connecting across cultures; empowering the community; valuing local Aboriginal knowledge; ongoing investment and collaboration; and adaptability' (Sherriff et al. 2019).

While studies focusing specifically on co-designing policy are scarce, examples of co-designed policies (e.g., National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021–2031 (NATSIHP) (Care 2022) and 'Co-design Findings and Next Steps. Child and Family Support System. June–October 2019' (Australia 2019)) offer practical considerations. For instance, Fono et al. describe how such examples underscore the criticality for policy co-design to address complex policy problems and creating enabling conditions for effective collaboration across hierarchical boundaries (Fono, Gwynne, and Rambaldini 2024). They elucidate that despite the challenges of co-designing policy, such pursuits aimed to empower people with lived experience, cultivate authentic shared decision-making and partnerships, and consider accountability and evaluation. Comparably, Fono et al.'s realist review offers an evidence-based roadmap for rooting First Nations peoples' perspectives in drinking water policy. It centers Indigenous governance throughout the drinking water system's interlaced macro, meso and micro policy levels (Fono, Parter, et al., 2025a). Similarly, Fono et al.'s realist evaluation of the NATSIHP posits a context-mechanism-outcome theory to explicate how specific contextual factors and mechanisms interact to produce a national co-designed policy (Fono, Chapman, et al., 2025b). A pivotal insight from Fono et al. realist evaluation urges policymakers to enshrine policy implementation and evaluation into the policy design phase, to closely align the resulting services. Vine et al.'s fundamental Indigenous evaluation principles that promote '...safe, respectful, and valuable' (Institute 2024) outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have significantly informed evaluation of Indigenous programs (Vine et al. 2023). Collectively, these findings underpin our framework to interweave Indigenous knowledge systems into policy development to generate culturally responsive policies that effectively address the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Objective

While the evidence illustrates the transformative potential of co-designing culturally responsive solutions, a gap remains for a consolidated framework for co-designing policy with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Thus, we aim to develop a culturally grounded framework that answers our research question: *What does best practice and an evidence-based approach look like when co-designing policy with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?* Thus, our framework aims to elevate Indigenous knowledge systems in policy design, implementation and evaluation through showcasing what

meaningful policy co-design looks, sounds and feels like. Thus, we adopt a framework synthesis approach that draws on academic literature, case studies, government reports and research yarnning circles to produce our framework. The remainder of our paper details our methodology, presents our findings, discusses our results' implications and concludes with recommendations for future framework iterations.

Language

We adopt the following terms to convey distinct concepts in our research:

Indigenous governance

Dodson and Smith's (2003) highly acknowledged work describes 'Indigenous governance' as the ways in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, communities or groups make decisions, share power, set goals and assign duties and rules. Accordingly, we use the term 'Indigenous governance to denote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' formal role in a policy co-design process, which is to fundamentally self-determine the policy's design via co-design activities. Essentially, Indigenous governance signifies Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' leading role in shaping the policy's design (Dodson and Smith 2003).

Indigenised

We use 'Indigenised' policy to characterise a policy design process that centers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing. In doing this, Indigenised approaches consequently upend colonial influences (Darlaston-Jones et al. 2014).

Decolonized

We use 'decolonised' policy to describe a policy design process that dismantles or challenges colonial ideologies. Decolonized and Indigenized policy design approaches differ in their to an policy design approach in its aim to remove colonial principles, systems and methods from its policy design process and replacing it with Indigenous cultural influence.

Policy co-design and co-designed policy

We use 'policy co-design' to describe the approach for, or process of, co-designing a policy. We use 'co-designed policy' to describe a policy that has been designed using co-design approaches, and principles (Blomkamp 2018).

Culturally grounded

We use 'culturally grounded' to signify that our Framework is deeply rooted in the sacred Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural tradition of basket weaving.

Culturally responsive

We use ‘culturally responsive’ to describe a policy that meets the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, as defined by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Methods

Framework synthesis

We employed a framework synthesis approach (Barnett-Page and Thomas 2009) to organise and interpret our qualitative data and systematically compare and contrast our findings. This modality supports a culturally immersed approach to answering our research question by our application of Humphrey et al.’s Aboriginal basket weaving theoretical framework (Humphrey, Barlo, and Lasczik 2023). We selected framework synthesis over other decolonial and participatory action research methods as Humphrey et al.’s basket weaving principles and creativity deeply resonated with our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants. Humphrey et al.’s framework offered a culturally relevant lens for comprehending the complexities of co-designing policy with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Humphrey et al.’s Aboriginal basket weaving theoretical framework

Humphrey et al. use a basket weaving metaphor to guide research through a culturally grounded theoretical and methodological approach (Humphrey, Barlo, and Lasczik 2023). Their framework centers relationality, interconnectedness and Indigenous knowledges and practices (e.g., storytelling and yarning) in data collection, analysis and interpretation. Its five elements are:

1. Core (axiology): provides basket’s structural integrity (usually requires a stiffer and/or more tightly woven materials);
2. Grasses (ontology): weave around the core creating the basket’s beauty;
3. Steady hands (methodology): maintains basket’s tension and shape;
4. Mind (epistemology): requires patience to repeat the weaving pattern and relax into storytelling and yarning; and
5. Needle (critical/transformational paradigm): connects, pulls and places the grass to attach it to the core.

We selected Humphrey et al.’s Aboriginal basket weaving theoretical framework to present our co-designing policy framework through a decolonising method of western research. We synthesised our data in accordance with Humphrey et al.’s five elements. The axiology is ethically situated in transformational paradigm, suitable for our framework’s progressive objective. By drawing on existing evidence, our framework aspires to safeguard co-designing policy participants that navigate and adapt to the dynamic political environments impacting policy design and implementation. The relational ontology and epistemology support our yarning method for cultivating a culturally informed framework that can resonate deeply with Indigenous peoples and policymakers alike. The relational

ontology also underpins the collaboration dimension inherent in co-designing policy, nurturing a strong sense of shared ownership of the collaboration process.

Yarning

In Australia, yarning is an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander way of respectfully communicating (Kennedy et al. 2022). By centering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing, yarning is uniquely distinct from Western qualitative methods, such as focus groups or interviews. Yarning creates culturally safe spaces for people to share knowledge and build connections through storytelling and listening (Kennedy et al. 2022). Bessarab and Ng'andu (2010) seminal work demonstrates yarning's highly structured nature and different forms (including family, social, therapeutic and collaborative) (Bessarab and Ng'andu 2010). Bessarab and Ng'andu also signify yarning's legitimacy as a research method (Bessarab and Ng'andu 2010). Barlo et al. (2020) elucidate the unique cultural protocols and principles governing yarning in a research setting, that protect yarning participants, their stories and data (Barlo et al. 2020). The cultural protocols encompass "...gift, control, freedom, space, inclusiveness and gender specificity..." (Barlo et al. 2020). The cultural principles include "...reciprocity, responsibility, relationship, dignity, equality, integrity and self-determination..." (Barlo et al. 2020).

We used two forms of yarning to respectfully engage all participants throughout our study. We undertook yarning circles with our Co-design brains trust (CBT) and collaborative yarning with our research team (Bessarab and Ng'andu 2010). We followed The Rambaldini Model (Gwynne et al. 2022) of collective impact and used yarning to collect, review and understand our data (Gwynne et al. 2022).

Our CBT provided Indigenous governance for our research. Our CBT is a small group comprising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers, Elders and policymakers. Our CBT was purposively recruited to ensure that cultural knowledge, co-design and policy development, and implementation and evaluation expertise were reflected throughout our research. Our CBT guided our research and ensured we privileged Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing in collecting, analyzing and interpreting our data. Author 1 facilitated regular CBT yarning circles over an eighteen-month period, fostering a culturally safe space for the CBT to implement and monitor our research while sharing and reflecting on successes and learnings.

Additionally, our collaborative yarning with our research team engaged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers, Elders and policymakers and non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers and policymakers throughout our research.

Our yarning circles and collaborative yarning prioritised the ethical considerations of cultural safety, respect, reciprocity, informed consent, confidentiality, reflexivity, transparency Indigenous data sovereignty and governance. Ethics approval for our research was provided by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS, Reference: REC-0161).

Our yarning informed the following stages of our methods:

1. Defining our study's scope and research questions (as delineated in our introduction 'What does best practice and an evidence-based approach look like when co-designing policy with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?');

2. Selecting Humphrey et al.'s Aboriginal basket weaving theoretical framework to guide our data analysis and coding process;
3. Purposively selecting evidence to inform our framework;
4. Appraising the selected evidence for relevance and quality to include only high-calibre (i.e., culturally relevant) research in our synthesis;
5. Extracting relevant data which involved data coding;
6. Systematically organising and analysing our extracted data in accordance with Humphrey et al.'s five elements;
7. Synthesising our data from the selected studies to generate novel insights which entailed identifying patterns, themes, and relationships within the data;
8. Interpreting and reporting our findings (as outlined in results section); and
9. Producing a framework to address our research question (as outlined in results section).

Evidence

We purposively searched for valuable insights to answer our research question. We based our search on evidence garnered from our previous policy co-design realist studies (Fono et al. 2025a, 2025b). Both studies explored the policy co-design processes within Indigenous policy contexts. We also searched electronic databases and grey literature sources including Scopus, Indigenous Studies (AIATSIS), Google Scholar, Analysis and Policy Observatory and relevant websites (e.g., Australia and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG), Australian Public Service Academy).

We used the following inclusion criteria to inform our selection process:

1. Cultural relevance: studies adopting culturally pertinent approaches, including transferable insights and findings from similar priority populations in other global contexts.
2. Recency: contemporary methods and examples of policy co-design to ensure the understand current approaches. We accepted older studies that described policy co-design's theoretical underpinnings.
3. Methodological rigor and quality: culturally relevant research design and implementation.
4. Relevance to our research Question: evidence that directly addresses our research question, providing applicable insights.

We collectively assessed the quality of our evidence in our CBT yarning circles to determine the agreed evidence sources to include in our analysis.

Results

Evidence

We extracted data from purposively selected evidence sources outlined in [Table 1](#).

Table 1. Evidence sources.

Evidence type	#	Author, Year	Title
Peer-reviewed study (n = 12)	1	Akama, Hagen, and Whaanga-Schollum (2019)	Problematizing replicable design to practice respectful, reciprocal, and relational co-designing with indigenous people
	2	Anderson et al. (2022)	Development of Key Principles and Best Practices for Co-Design in Health with First Nations Australians
	3	Blomkamp (2018)	The Promise of Co-Design for Public Policy
	4	Butler et al. (2022)	A comprehensive review of optimal approaches to co-design in health with First Nations Australians
	5	Christie et al. (2023)	Does breast cancer policy meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in Australia? A review.
	6	Dillon (2021)	Codesign in the Indigenous policy domain: Risks and opportunities
	7	Fono, Gwynne, and Rambaldini (2024)	Co-designing public policy in high-income colonial-settler countries—a systematic review
	8	Fono, Parter, et al., (2025a); Fono, Chapman, et al., (2025b)	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Perspectives in Drinking Water Policy: A Realist Review
	9	Fono, Parter, et al., (2025a); Fono, Chapman, et al., (2025b)	Co-designing Australia's National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021–2031: a realist evaluation
	10	Ritchie (2021)	The path is made by walking: knowledge, policy design and impact in Indigenous policymaking
	11	Sanders (2002)	Toward an Indigenous order of Australian government: Rethinking self-determination as Indigenous Affairs policy
	12	Sanders and Stappers (2008)	Co-creation and the new landscapes of design
	13	Sherriff et al. (2019)	Building trust and sharing power for co-creation in Aboriginal health research: a stakeholder interview study
	14	Vine et al. (2023)	Culturally Informed Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Evaluations: A Scoping Review
	15	Wright et al. (2021)	Co-designing health service evaluation tools that foreground First Nation worldviews for better mental health and well-being outcomes
Book (n = 2)	1	Anderson, et al. (2024)	Co-design with Indigenous Peoples
	2	McKercher (2020)	Beyond Sticky Notes
Government report (n = 5)	1	Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care (2022)	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021–2031
	2	Australian Government Productivity Commission (2024)	Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap: Study Report
	3	Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organizations, The Australian Government (2024)	National Agreement on Closing the Gap 2020
	4	Commonwealth of Australia (2017)	My Life My Lead - Opportunities for strengthening approaches to the social determinants and cultural determinants of Indigenous health: Report on the national consultations December 2017
	5	Government of South Australia (2019)	Co-design Findings and Next Steps. Child and Family Support System. June-October 2019
Other (n = 3)	1	Burkett (2012)	An Introduction to Co-design
	2	Mark and Hagen (2020)	Co-design in Aotearoa New Zealand: a snapshot of the literature
	3	Parter (2021)	Decolonizing public health policies: rightfully giving effect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' knowledges and cultures of ways of being, knowing, and doing in public health policies

The color shades differentiate the evidence type (i.e., Peer-reviewed study, Book, Government report, Other).

Data synthesis

This section presents our synthesised data in the form of our culturally grounded framework for co-designing policy with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Framework), as outlined in Figure 1. We developed our Framework in accordance with Humphrey et al.'s five framework elements and re-arranged the element sequence to align with our Framework's objectives.

Mind

The weaver's mind visualises the basket's shape, texture, appearance and functionality by prudently introspecting, evaluating and testing the interconnectedness of its constructs. Analogous to co-designing policy, our Framework's mind requires cultural, political and intellectual insight to envision, plan and ultimately determine the policy's design. Thus, Figure 2 illustrates how the mind embodies the collective expression of perspectives to underpin our entire Framework. The mind anchors the policy in relationality and entwines relational thinking (Akama, Hagen, and Whaanga-Schollum 2019) throughout by critically examining where decision-making power, control and funding are situated before, during and after policy design—questioning who benefits at each stage. This scrutiny parallels the tactful positioning of each strand of grass in a woven basket. The mind must incorporate a mixed array of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices so that beneficiaries can see themselves reflected in the policy (Ritchie 2021). Our Framework prioritises reciprocity by upholding transparent decision-making that privileges Indigenous contributions, thereby recalibrating traditional power structures toward centering community needs. The mind fosters a creative and innovative approach to reimagining transformative, culturally relevant policy instruments that can tackle ingrained systemic and structural issues, such as racism and colonial trauma (Commonwealth of Australia 2017). Our Framework requires

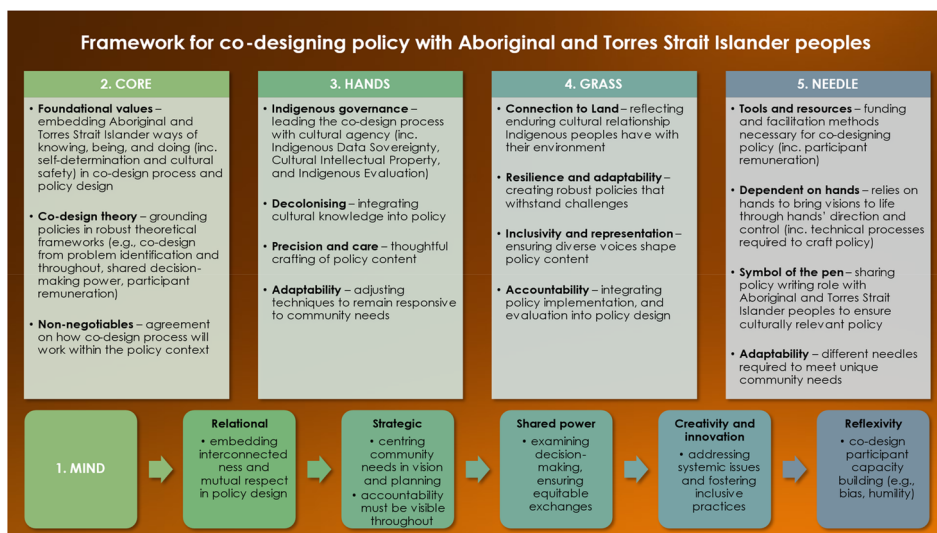


Figure 1. Culturally grounded framework for co-designing policy with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

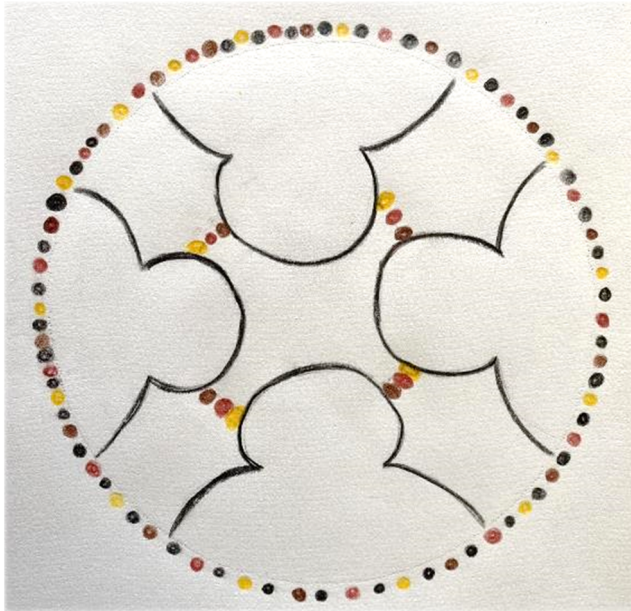


Figure 2. Mind (by Siosifa Fono).

participants to persistently adjudicate their unconscious and conscious biases. This means participants (particularly policymakers) must emulate humility in unlearning deeply entrenched false assumptions through cultural training and ongoing reflective practices. Thus, reflexivity underscores the mind's crucial role in shaping policies deeply rooted in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing.

Core

Just as every woven basket needs a core, all co-designed policies require a resilient foundation characterised by co-design principles in policy design, delivery, and evaluation to sustain outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In upholding Indigenous peoples' right to self-determination (Cambou 2020), our Framework's core endorses the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' expert contributions from the policy problem identification stage. Throughout the weaving process, the core can sometimes become hidden, so Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing must be meaningfully incorporated to ensure its visibility from the very beginning and throughout. The core's hallmark will heavily influence the policy co-design process, precluding misinformed assumptions regarding the policy problem context (Butler et al. 2022). The core also symbolises the foundational cultural values upon which the subsequent co-design process is built. Such principles immerse policy design, delivery and evaluation in Indigenous knowledge systems and practices, including Indigenous Data Sovereignty (Anderson et al. 2022), Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property (Janke 2024), and Indigenous Evaluation (Wright et al. 2021).

Thus, the core embodies the co-design participants themselves, their roles and responsibilities, and the agreed non-negotiables for how they expect to work together.

These measures mitigate the influence of individual personalities that may lack robust leadership qualities or fail to uphold cultural principles. For example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' voices should be privileged as they represent the lived experiences of navigating inequities arising from ineffective legacy policies (Anderson, et al. 2024). Similarly, irrespective of their bureaucratic rank or experience, policymakers are expected to cede or share decision-making authority and willingly embrace the associated risks (Deserti, Rizzo, and Smallman 2020).

The core's robustness sets the tone for collaboration, sustains relationships and reflects the resilience and adaptability required in co-designing policy. Therefore, Figure 3 illustrates our Framework's core which is anchored in co-design theory, addressing the frequent invocation of 'co-design' in public contexts which often lacks robust theoretical reason. The collective co-design theoretical underpinnings (Sanders and Stappers 2008; Burkett 2012; Akama, Hagen, and Whaanga-Schollum 2019; McKercher 2020) can inform participants of what co-design does and does not encompass. For example, co-designing policy integrates many and various Indigenous perspectives and knowledge systems from policy problem identification to evaluation, facilitating a holistic approach to addressing the unique needs and aspirations of Indigenous peoples (Sharmil et al. 2021). This empowers communities by involving them directly in decision-making, augmenting their acceptance and active support for its delivery. Similarly, communal weaving is a cultural activity involving multiple weavers contributing to an individual woven piece (Edmonds, et al. 2020). Different materials and weaving styles coalesce into its sturdy core. Its participatory approach parallels co-designing policy, championing a shared sense of ownership and emphasising reciprocity where everyone can contribute and benefit.

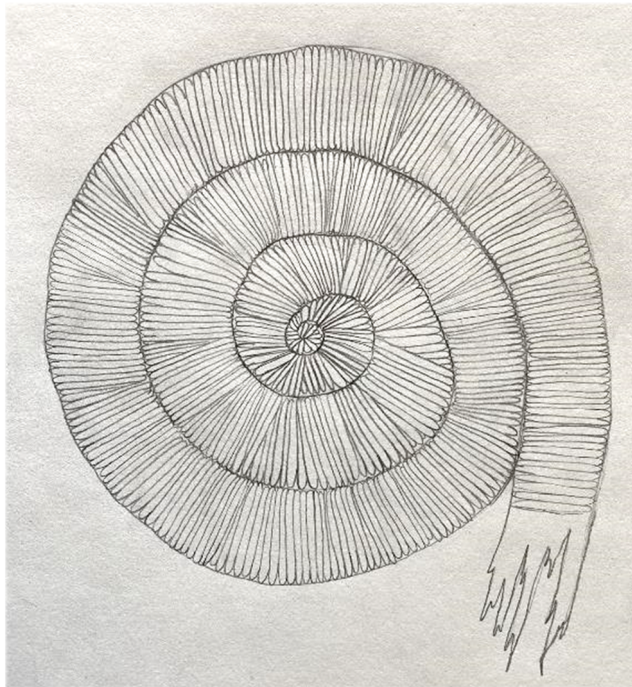


Figure 3. Core (by Siosifa Fono).

Hands

Our Framework's hands symbolise Indigenous governance and cultural agency, depicted in [Figure 4](#). Co-designing policy must be Indigenous-led so that policy delivery, evaluation and accountability mechanisms (e.g. sustained funding) are woven throughout the policy's design. This ensures such constructs are not relegated to secondary considerations, which is often the case (Fono, Parter, et al. 2025a; Fono, Chapman, et al. 2025b). Just as hands select, gather and connect natural elements (e.g., grasses, leaves) in a woven basket, our Framework meaningfully harmonises culturally relevant knowledge systems with the policy's constructs. Specifically, the hands ascertain the grass' interconnectedness to determine how tightly or loosely the weaving flows from the core throughout the basket. Thus, they decide the extent to which participants' (e.g., Indigenous participants and policymakers) voices are woven into the policy's fabric. This influences how beneficiaries see themselves in the resultant policy and determines their acceptance and advocacy. Similarly, communal weaving (where everyone works on the same piece), allows observers to read the resultant weave and see the changeovers of hands reflected in different styles, tensions, and color choices. Just as this collective effort enriches the tapestry through diverse input, policy co-design nourishes a shared sense of ownership and empowerment. The co-design process' adaptability is also reflected in how the hands adjust needle's and grass' tension, direction, and placement. Adopting different techniques can strengthen the collaboration dynamics required for co-designing that consistently responds to the community's needs.

Grass

The grass and other natural weaving materials (e.g., leaves [Figure 5](#)) signify Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' profound and continuous connection to the land

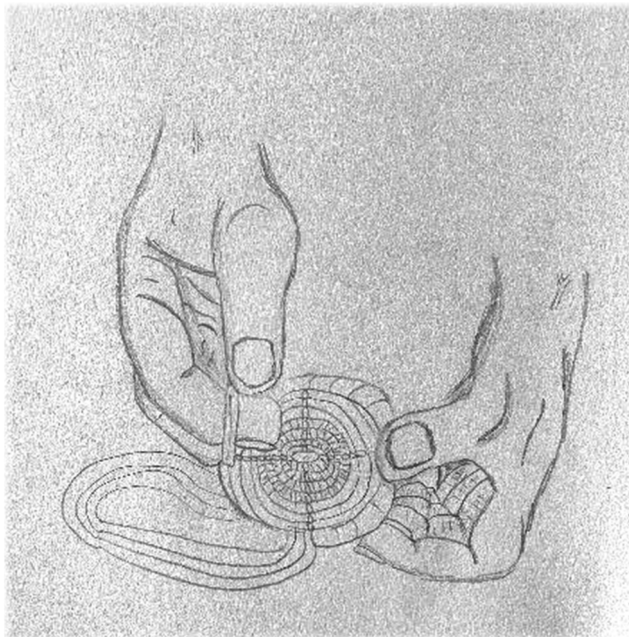


Figure 4. Hands (by Siosifa Fono).

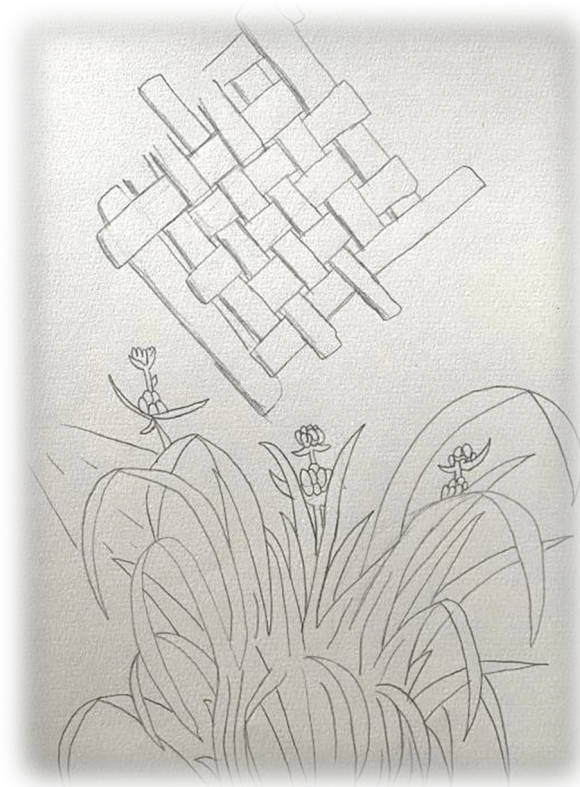


Figure 5. Grass (by Siosifa Fono).

and their environment. Just as the type of natural weaving materials determines the basket's resilience and adaptability, our Framework's capacity to withstand changing political circumstances and other challenges is dependent on the participants' voices informing the policy content. In weaving, the grasses possess their own narratives that deserve to be heard and not silenced. While weavers may have a preconceived vision, they must yield to the grasses, allowing their stories to take precedence. Consequently, the final creation may diverge markedly from initial expectations, embodying the true essence of the plants. Similarly, our Framework's mind, hands and needle need to be adaptable to centering Indigenous voices. These strands also symbolise the assortment of voices collaborating to shape policy content, structure, delivery, and evaluation, highlighting the importance of inclusivity and representation. Thus, yarning and storying are imperative to co-designing culturally informed policy as they preserve respectful and safe spaces for honest, open, non-linear and free-flowing dialogue to deeply enhance policymaker's understanding of complex policy problems (Bessarab and Ng'Andu 2010). Our framework's inclusivity principle also prompts participants to question who is missing from the decision-making table to vouch for robust and representative yarning and storying. This is especially critical for effectively representing the extensive diversity of cultural groups within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Needle

The needle (Figure 6) represents the essential tools and resources required for co-designing policy, such as funding and facilitation methods like workshops. The needle relies on the hands for direction and control and helps to bring the mind's visions to life through careful and precise weaving. It facilitates the creative policy co-design process by bringing together participants' voices to contribute to a cohesive and well-informed policy. The needle executes the technical processes necessary to maintain the basket's integrity, symbolising the meticulous policy design. The needle also symbolises the pen writing the policy, which policymakers must be willing to surrender or share with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to uphold Indigenous governance. Different needles can be used for various tasks, reflecting the distinct roles and techniques (e.g., configuring feedback loops such as mid-term evaluation) required depending on the policy design requirements. This adaptability underscores the importance of using appropriate tools and methods to meet the specific needs of the policy and the community it serves. The needle carefully fuses these elements to secure inclusive, culturally relevant, and effective co-designed policy.

Our Framework

Figure 7 depicts our resultant Framework, integrating the above components into a cohesive paradigm for co-designing policy with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.



Figure 6. Needle (by Siosifa Fono).

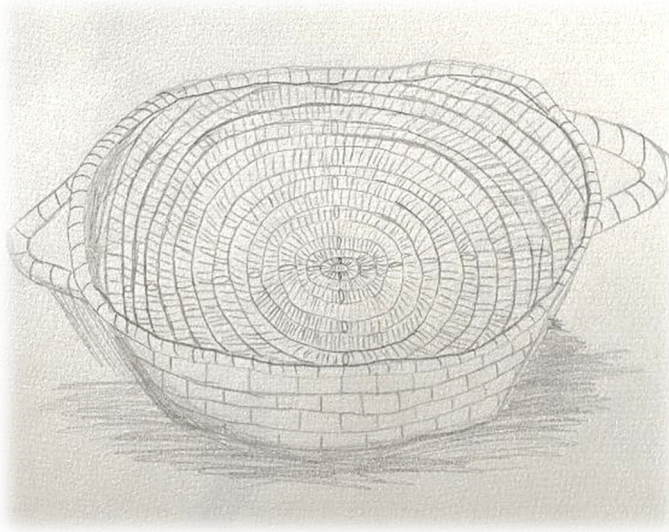


Figure 7. Aboriginal woven basket (by Siosifa Fono).

Framework application

Table 2 outlines how the NATSIHP's policy co-design process demonstrates our Framework elements in practice (Fono et al. 2025). Each framework element can be illustrated across various aspects of the NATSIHP's co-design processes. However, most elements are interconnected and woven throughout the entire process (e.g., centering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing), while others are time-specific (e.g., bipartisan support required from the NATSIHP's inception).

Discussion

Culturally grounded framework

Our Framework takes a crucial step toward a future where policies are not only inclusive, but also deeply rooted in the cultural wisdom of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Our Framework equips policymakers with an Indigenous policy design approach to building culturally responsive policies reflecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' knowledge systems and aspirations (Ritchie 2021). The National Agreement's Priority Reform Three 'Transforming government organizations' requires governments to transform their approaches to improving life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Government 2024). Thus, indigenised or decolonised policy design are imperative for effectively closing the gap in inequities faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Indigenisation integrates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, practices into a process to promote self-determination, culture and identity (McIver et al., 2022; Darwin 1988). Comparatively, decolonisation involves unlearning and dismantling colonial

Table 2. Framework in practice.

Framework element	Application in co-designing the NATSIHP
1. Mind	<p>Our framework's mind is characterised by the Department of Health and Aged Care's (Department):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commitment to the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. • Bipartisan support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led policy design. • Risk-embracing stance for an unconventional yet innovative policy co-design approach. • Genuine collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in critical policy design mechanisms. For example, the Co-Chair structure of the NATSIHP working group positioned Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as equal decision-making partners in all policy development phases, from the outset. This centered Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing and established a relational foundation for shared decision-making, creativity and self-determination throughout the policy co-design. • Investment (of time and resources) into building meaningful relationships with and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities impacted by the policy problem. • Flexibility with policymaking time constraints. • Willingness to enhance staff cultural capability and reflexivity.
2. Core	<p>Our Framework's Core is embodied by the:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy actors involved in co-designing the NATSIHP, namely ministerial office, the Department and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. • Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health sector's (sector) non-negotiable ways of working, which established the conditions for the policy co-design process. • Culturally safe environment that enabled Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to share their experiences and opinions openly without adverse consequences. • Department's cultural capability training and mentoring that fostered respectful, strengths-based, and effective communication with the sector.
3. Hands	<p>Our Framework's Hands are symbolised by the NATSIHP's Indigenous governance, which cultivated cultural agency throughout the community consultations, policy decision-making and policy content. Indigenous governance gave rise to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led dialogue, such that policy content addressed pertinent issues such as systemic racism, culturally safe healthcare and prioritising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led service delivery.</p>
4. Grass	<p>Our Framework's Grass is illustrated by the extensive Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led "My Life My Lead" consultations (Cambou 2020). Around 600 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants took part in these consultations, which focused on the social and cultural determinants of health. Participants shared their lived experiences to inform the design, delivery and evaluation of health policies and programs. Key insights that shaped the NATSIHP's development were the pivotal role of culture in wellbeing and "...governments cannot ignore factors such as the home environment, school and educational attainment, employment, community and experiences of social institutions and systems, and their corresponding influences on a person's health." (Cambou 2020). Weaving these perspectives throughout the NATSIHP aimed to honour Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices.</p>
5. Needle	<p>The My Life My Lead findings shaped the NATSIHP's policy co-design approach. The tools and resources required to support the policy co-design included meetings (in-person and virtual) that suited the sector, support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led policy writing (e.g., departmental administrative support), and participant remuneration. These policy co-design aspects represent our Framework's Needle and highlight the need for a policymaker's openness, flexibility and creativity in empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to genuinely co-design policy.</p>

ideologies to address colonisation's lingering effects (Darwin 1988; Gopal 2021). Both transformative approaches are distinct and complex ways of improving systems and processes to achieve better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Sefa Dei and Cacciavillani 2024). Our Framework represents an indigenised approach to designing policy as it does not start with, dismantle or fit into prevailing colonial policy design paradigms. Rather, it is a culturally grounded approach that weaves Indigenous knowledge systems, cultural practices and perspectives into policymaking, and subsequent service implementation and evaluation—from the beginning of the policy's development. Thus, our Framework aspires to yield culturally responsive

policies that deeply resonate with and effectively address the inequitable lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. More importantly, its relational bedrock pursues stronger and lasting connections between communities and government institutions to naturally fabricate sustainable and impactful outcomes. Moreover, our Framework advances the quest toward self-determination, which the National Agreement regards as the ultimate benchmark for closing the gap and addressing historical injustices to achieve equity and reconciliation.

Practical relevance

While translating a cultural metaphor (e.g. Aboriginal weaving basket) into language that policymakers can grasp is challenging, policymakers need to firstly acknowledge our Framework's cultural significance in policy co-design. Few examples of policy co-design exist to highlight how policymakers can apply our Framework. However, [Table 2](#) (Results) showcases practical ways policymakers have demonstrated our Framework elements. Essentially, policymakers must first setup the conditions to enact our Framework. This begins with investing time and resources into establishing meaningful and lasting relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This means meeting with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples where they are at and on their terms. This may require policymakers to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, communities and sectors beyond standard working hours and typical workplace environments. While some public agencies and policymakers have varying degrees of connections with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, communities and sectors, the time to establish and or fortify these bonds is now. This also involves policymakers partnering with counterparts within and across respective policy domains. This step is critical to garnering holistic and diverse perspectives of policy issues that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples face and minimise inefficiencies. Our research shows how stronger relationships can improve policy design and enrich policymaker perspectives, by integrating Indigenous knowledge systems and lived experiences that would otherwise be neglected. Another key condition to enacting our Framework is enhancing policymaker cultural responsiveness through mandatory and regular cultural training. Australian Public Service (APS) employees are required to maintain and update certain essential qualifications, knowledges and skills such as 'Integrity in the APS' (Academy 2024). Similar training should also be mandatory for public servants working in policy areas impacting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This ensures culturally responsive policy co-design approaches, outputs and impacts.

Benefits

Our Framework's implications are profound and multifaceted. Firstly, meaningfully implementing our Framework can facilitate policy design, delivery, and evaluation that are fit for purpose and culturally responsive to the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Systems that enable genuine Indigenous-led policy co-design can enhance community trust and buy-in, leading

to empowered and more engaged communities with a stronger sense of belonging and greater participation in public initiatives. Additionally, better policy outcomes can strengthen policymaker credibility and contribute to a strengths-based discourse pertaining to policy co-design. Our Framework also promotes robust decision-making mechanisms by incorporating diverse and previously ignored perspectives, including lived experiences, and encouraging bold exchanges and innovative solutions. Finally, by involving communities from the outset, our Framework mitigates resource inefficiencies, ensuring more effective policy implementation.

Framework implementation challenges

While we present an opportunity for policymakers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to embrace community-led policymaking, we recognise three challenges for implementing our framework in a public setting. Firstly, policymakers may be hesitant to embrace our framework as it is an unfamiliar approach that lacks precedence. This reluctance could stem from governments' low-risk appetite for innovative methods and a preference for conventional approaches (Potts 2009). Also, since cultural responsiveness varies across public contexts, some agencies may have more capacity to adopt and tailor our Framework than others. To overcome this, the National Agreement urges all government agencies to embrace the priority reform areas and fundamentally shift their attitude, willingness and approaches to supporting self-determination. Secondly, just as no two woven baskets are ever the same, co-designed policies will inherently differ. This highlights the unique political, bureaucratic and cultural contexts and mechanisms influencing their design. While a co-designed policy's characteristics are likely the product of participant contributions, they are more likely a reflection of the distinct contextual (e.g., political) landscape at a point in time. Therefore, institutional mechanisms and systems that can enact our Framework (e.g., shared decision-making between policymakers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, depicted in [Figure 3](#)) are pivotal to its success (Ritchie 2021). They can insulate policy co-design from individual leader idiosyncrasies and unstable political landscapes. Thirdly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have historically faced repeated disappointments from government initiatives, leading to a deep-seated mistrust. This poses a significant challenge for governments to engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in co-design processes. Addressing this requires policymakers to genuinely empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices by investing in respectful, transparent and consistent engagement that effects tangible outcomes.

Framework limitations

We acknowledge that our Framework is a version one scaffold that serves as a foundation for constructing future iterations. However, as policymakers tailor our Framework to their specific bureaucratic environments, it is critical to preserve its fundamental constructs (Mind, Core, Hands, Grass, Needle). For instance, policymakers could develop enacting frameworks to support implementing our Framework. This could involve cultural competency training. Future iterations could also translate Framework elements into specific resources that provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

communities with a clear understanding of what to expect from policymakers who wish to co-design policy with them. This form of knowledge translation is vital for empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to actively participate in co-designing policy by advocating for their unique needs and aspirations. Future versions could also be strengthened with worked examples (e.g., case studies) and lessons learnt. Such iterations must advocate for Indigenous-led dialogue, respectful remuneration to value community representatives, culturally safe spaces for yarning and storytelling, and policymaker (or departmental staff) reflexivity to ensure policy co-design is respectful, effective and sustainable. Future research could also examine our Framework's application, as a development tool for policymakers in achieving tangible outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we present a culturally grounded framework for co-designing policy with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We employed framework synthesis, guided by Humphrey et al.'s Aboriginal Basket Weaving Theoretical Framework, to uphold relationality, interconnectedness and Indigenous knowledge systems in our Framework. We used yarning as a data collection method, engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers, Elders and policymakers in collaborative discussions to inform our Framework. Our Framework elements (mind, core, hands, grass and needle) epitomise an indigenised way of integrating cultural knowledge systems in policies to foster sustainable and impactful outcomes. Implementing our Framework presents several challenges such as policymakers' hesitancy, unfavorable bureaucratic mechanisms and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' legitimate mistrust of governments. However, future framework iterations can support policymakers to enact our Framework to strengthen genuine partnerships, advance shared decision-making and impactful policies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Essentially, our Framework is a call to action for policymakers to move beyond traditional approaches and embrace a culturally enriched process to facilitate lasting and meaningful change toward closing the gap.

Declaration of generative artificial intelligence in the writing process

During the manuscript preparation, Author 1 used Grammarly and Copilot to edit and refine early manuscript drafts to enhance readability. After using Grammarly and Copilot, Author 1 reviewed and edited the content as needed and (along with all co-authors) takes full responsibility for the publication's content.

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