

The Australian Assistance Plan (AAP)

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The Australian Assistance Plan (AAP) was piloted in 1973 by the Whitlam Labor Government and was subsequently extended nationally. The Plan created Regional Councils for Social Development (RCSD) and funded the employment of a social planner and Community Development Officers within each Regional Council. In addition, block grants at \$2 per capita per year were made available to some RCSD's for the implementation of innovative or existing social welfare programs.

RCSDs were intended to be representative of local government, Federal and State Government, voluntary organisations and associations of all kinds and individuals living within the region (Tierney, 1979). They were to function as 'autonomous, community based social planning units' (Social Welfare Commission, 1974).

The former Department of Social Security was responsible for the administration of the AAP, in consultation with the Social Welfare Commission. Participation was a core principle of the AAP. A major task of Community Development Officers was to facilitate the involvement of community members, including socially isolated and disadvantaged groups in the planning and development of welfare programs affecting their communities.

In a Discussion Paper, the Social Welfare Commission presents the following as among the most important principles and ideas in the formulation of the Australian Assistance Plan:

- Regional cooperation and coordination among voluntary agencies, governments and local groups;
- Local decision making and accountability to the regional public, as well as financial accountability to the Federal Government;
- Allocation of a capitation grant to fund innovative program for service delivery;
- Involvement of existing organisations, as well as 'grass-roots' participation;
- Cooperative and integrative relationships with existing structures, including government bodies;
- Information gathering and dissemination strategies including public meetings, surveys and questionnaires, publication of regular newsheets and progress reports, and open seminars; and
- Regional Councils for Social Development were intended to be independent, bipartisan, community-based bodies, free of political control

The Taskforce of the Joint Officers' Committee, Local Government Ministers' Conference (1987) notes that the creation of Regional Councils under the AAP created tension with State and Local governments. Some local governments viewed the Regional Councils as an attempt by the Commonwealth Government to by-pass local government in regional planning.

The Australian Assistance Plan was abolished in 1977 by the Fraser Government. However, the concepts of "social planning" and "community development" are legacies of the AAP.