

A PROPOSED *EMERGENCY RESPONSE AND DEVELOPMENT PLAN* TO PROTECT ABORIGINAL CHILDREN IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

Combined Aboriginal Organisations of the Northern Territory
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The Combined Aboriginal Organisations ('CAO') represent Aboriginal organisations in Darwin, Alice Springs, Tennant Creek and Katherine, as well as community sector organisations Australia-wide. The *Emergency Response and Development Plan* ('the Plan') was prepared following the Australian Government's proposed 'emergency measures' in response to the Report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children, *Amppe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle* 'Little Children Are Sacred'. The Plan comments on the likely effectiveness of the proposals and suggests a set of immediate and long-term reform measures to address the problems facing Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory. The Plan emphasises the need to ensure that local Aboriginal communities can inform and lead community initiatives and programs with bipartisan political support. It also stresses the importance of strengthening the capacity of Aboriginal families and communities to protect and nurture children, rather than disempowering those with local and cultural knowledge and experience.

The Plan proposes a two-tiered response to the problems of child abuse in remote Aboriginal communities, commencing with a short-term emergency response to be implemented over a three to six month period. The primary focus of the emergency response phase is to provide more resources for communities, police and child protection and health services to identify direct risks and protect the victims of violence and abuse from immediate harm. This includes establishing bodies to coordinate the emergency response at the local level and the funding of community-controlled child safety services such as safe houses and night patrols.

Following this short term response, the Plan proposes the implementation of long-term measures, developed in full negotiation with the relevant Aboriginal community organisations, on the part of the Australian and Northern

Territory Governments. The CAO contends that this dual approach will provide a foundation for stable long-term investment resulting in sustainable solutions to the underlying risks for Aboriginal children. The CAO also recommends the establishment of an independent monitoring and evaluation body to report on the scope and nature of the problems identified, the actions taken at local and Territory level and their effectiveness.

The Plan also comments on specific aspects of the Federal Government's proposed measures.

Safety for Children and Families

According to the CAO, the Government's proposal to supplement the police presence in Indigenous communities with federal and interstate police lacks insight into effective means of child protection. In order to comprehensively address child abuse, collaboration between local communities, police and child protection staff is required. The CAO feel it is vital that police have the trust and consent of the communities involved due to the fear of police in Aboriginal communities.

The Plan proposes:

- that police be stationed permanently in the communities in order to establish long-term relationships and networks;
- that a Joint Child Protection Specialist Advice and Support Program be established across the Northern Territory in consultation with Aboriginal communities; and
- the formation of an independent statutory Aboriginal Child and Family Services Authority.

Alcohol

The CAO recognises that alcohol is a causative factor in many interventions in Aboriginal families, but feels the proposed six-month ban on alcohol (apart from approved canteens) is neither new nor comprehensive. The Plan notes that many communities are already 'dry' and the problem lies in the availability of alcohol in the towns and other settlements.

The Plan proposes:

- restricting access to alcohol outside Indigenous communities;
- retaining the 'permit system' in order to restrict access to Aboriginal communities by those engaged in illicit trade in alcohol; and
- adopting a rigorous social assessment process for any application for a remote community wet canteen.

Social Security Payments

The CAO feels that the proposed 50 percent reduction in social security payments (with the remainder being paid in-kind) for long-term social security recipients will not have the effect of reducing expenditure on alcohol and will adversely affect the majority of people in the communities who are not involved in child abuse.

The Plan proposes:

- discouraging expenditure on alcohol or gambling by use of the Centrepay system;
- greater use of existing systems to protect people's money; and
- extending Indigenous communities' access to financial services and financial counselling.

Education

The CAO contends that making the receipt of full social security benefits contingent on the attendance of children at school (barring good reason) is unlikely to solve the problem of truancy because of entrenched problems in both the facilities and environment of educational institutions.

The Plan proposes:

- extending successful models encouraging Indigenous school attendance to Northern Territory communities;
- upgrading the infrastructure and facilities of schools to increase access to education; and

- increasing investment in effective teacher training, particularly cultural training.

Health and Community Support Services

The Plan notes that apart from the proposed medical examinations of all children in Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory, the Australian Government has not made any other specific proposals to extend or improve health and community services as part of the emergency response. The CAO expresses concern at the potentially invasive checks for sexual abuse, as well as labelling the overall poor health status of the Aboriginal community as a 'national disgrace'.

The Plan proposes:

- seeking expressions of interest from interested health professionals wishing to assist in co-ordinating the workforce required to meet the health demands of Aboriginal people in remote communities; and
- facilitating and funding a network of Aboriginal family support services and programs, as well as centres which can provide trauma and grief support.

Housing

The Northern Territory Government has stated that from July 2008 it will no longer provide housing management funds to Indigenous community housing organisations ('ICHOs'); all management will instead be carried out by Territory Housing. The CAO argues that centralised management of public housing in remote communities will inevitably fail if a partnership arrangement with communities is eschewed.

The Plan proposes:

- introducing the Indigenous Housing Management Improvement System across the Northern Territory to assess the effectiveness of ICHOs; and
- investing heavily in new housing stock and renovations to reduce overcrowding and substandard housing.

Employment

The CAO welcomes the Australian Government's proposal to convert approximately 825 CDEP jobs into mainstream employment.

The Plan proposes:

- the development of a stable paid workforce within communities through employment of local Indigenous people in housing projects and their involvement in managing traditional lands; and
- retaining CDEP to provide purposeful work on useful community projects for people who otherwise lack it, though encouraging participants towards mainstream employment.

Land Tenure and Permits

The CAO note that not one of the 97 recommendations in the 'Little Children Are Sacred' Report mentions land tenure or permits. It can identify no justification for linking land tenure measures with interventions aimed at preventing child sex abuse. The Plan states the Government's intention to compulsorily acquire five-year leases over Aboriginal communities is problematic as it undermines and disempowers community residents and traditional landowners. Similarly, the proposed eradication of the permit system will pose significant problems regarding the illicit trafficking of alcohol and drugs.

The Plan proposes:

- maintaining the permit system on all Aboriginal land; and
- abolishing the proposal to acquire five-year leases over communities on Aboriginal land.

The full text of the CAO's proposed plan is available online at: <http://www.acoss.org.au/upload/publications/papers/2787_CA0%20report%20%208%20july.pdf>.