

Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory

Guiding principles for our research, advocacy and policy work

Aboriginal Peak Organisations of the Northern Territory (APO NT) is an alliance comprising the Northern and Central land councils, the North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency, the Central Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service and the Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance Northern Territory.

The alliance was formed in recognition of the fact that our interests and responsibilities as organisations representing and governed by Aboriginal communities and organisations are inextricably linked.

Our shared interests are underpinned by an unwavering commitment to the principles of Aboriginal community control and self-determination, codified within the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

We share an understanding that tackling the plight of our communities can only be achieved through coordinated action across a broad range of policy areas: in housing, employment, education and health; but equally importantly in ensuring that the right conditions are in place for creating strong, resilient communities.

This requires empowering and giving responsibility to govern our communities and control our organisations in determining our futures—to control and manage the delivery of services, to build and maintain community infrastructure and to develop sustainable enterprises and livelihoods on our traditional lands, as well as on those lands that have been alienated from us.

It requires empowering individuals through developing self-esteem and strong cultural identity that can underpin educational achievement, enhanced capacity to obtain and remain in employment, and to avoid destructive behaviours such as interpersonal violence that all too often lead to contact with the criminal justice system.

And it requires strong action in tackling the scourge of alcohol and other drugs, its underlying causes and accompanying burden of unresolved and ongoing intergenerational trauma in our families and communities.

A belief in evidence

Importantly, our belief in these principles is not merely aspirational, but is supported by a strong evidence base: that of the social determinants of health.

The overwhelming body of evidence of the social determinants of health shows that our health and wellbeing is profoundly affected by a range of interacting economic, social and cultural factors. Key amongst these are:

- Poverty, economic inequality and social status;
- Housing;

- Employment and job security;
- Social exclusion, including isolation, discrimination and racism;
- Education and care in early life;
- Food security and access to a balanced and adequate diet;
- Addictions, particularly to alcohol, inhalants and tobacco;
- Access to adequate health services; and,
- Control over life circumstances.

Psychosocial factors, particularly stress and control, are critically important.

Put simply, the less control we have over our lives the more stress we experience. Stress is associated with anxiety, insecurity, low self-esteem, social isolation and disrupted work and home lives. It can increase the risk of chronic illnesses such as depression, diabetes, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, stroke and heart attack.

This evidence demonstrates that there is a social gradient of health that reflects and affects our opportunities to lead safe, healthy and productive lives for ourselves and our children.

Culture matters!

Control is also central to a further fundamental determinant of our health and wellbeing—that of culture.

Culture is a universal aspect of human societies that gives meaning and value to individual and collective existence.

In the context of societies with dominant and minority cultures, such as Australia, the widespread and persistent suppression of minority cultural practices causes severe disruption, making our communities susceptible to trauma, collective helplessness and endemic maladaptive coping practices.

These can be passed on through the generations, as we have witnessed in relation to the processes of colonisation and past government policies such as those of the Stolen Generations.

We believe that we are also witnessing the generation of such impacts in relation to ongoing government policies, for example, the misguided, coercive approaches of the NT Intervention and Stronger Futures.

The final report of the World Health Organization Commission on the Social Determinants of Health highlighted the issues of cultural suppression and loss, social exclusion and lack of consent and control as key factors affecting Indigenous populations.

The above underscores that the control that we seek over our lives, communities and land is far more than a political aspiration that government may interpret as something it can arbitrarily restrict or deny us. It is as fundamental to our health and wellbeing—and hence to the task of Closing the Gap in life outcomes—as it is to our rights and interests as Aboriginal peoples.

APO NT's work is informed by these principles and the evidence on which they are based and we will continue to strongly advocate to government to ensure that our voice is heard.