



APO NT Submission

Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights

Friday May 10th 2024

PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Committee Secretariat,

RE: Parliamentary Human Rights Inquiry into Compulsory Income Management

We welcome the opportunity to provide feedback to the Inquiry into Compulsory Income Management, 2024. The eight members of Aboriginal Peak Organisations of the Northern Territory (APO NT) continue to advocate for Aboriginal-led, managed and delivered solutions to issues that relate to our families.

Introduction:

APO NT is an alliance of Aboriginal organisations working to promote and protect the rights of Aboriginal people living in the Northern Territory (NT). The APO NT alliance comprises the Central Land Council (CLC), Northern Land Council (NLC), Tiwi Land Council (TLC), Anindilyakwa Land Council (ALC), North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency (NAAJA), Northern Territory Indigenous Business Network (NTIBN), Aboriginal Housing Northern Territory (AHNT) and the Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance of the NT (AMSANT). Since APO NT's establishment in 2010, our members have been working to develop constructive policies on critical issues facing Aboriginal people in the NT and strive to influence the work of the Australian and NT Governments.

Underlining our collective work is the right to self-determination, which is expressed in the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The primacy of this cannot be understated. As representatives from peak organisations in the NT, we share the aim of protecting and advancing the wellbeing and rights of Aboriginal people and communities in several key areas. Local involvement, ownership and control underpins APO NT's work in advocating for practical and sustainable solutions for Aboriginal people. These are then predicated on policy conditions that support Aboriginal self-determination, including commitments to needs-based funding, building the community-controlled sector and centring Aboriginal decision-making on how national strategies are implemented on the ground.

These matters are particularly essential when considering the impact of compulsory income management for Aboriginal people in the NT, which has resulted from ongoing processes of



colonisation and more recently through the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) (2007 Intervention).

Income Management

APO NTs strong opposition to compulsory income management is well established and documented in numerous submissions to relevant inquiries, including;

- [Inquiry into the Social Security \(Administration\) Amendment \(Income Management Reform\) Bill 2023](#)
- [APO NT Submission Social Security \(Administration\) Amendment \(Repeal of Cashless Debit Card and Other Measures\) Bill 2022](#)
- [APO NT Submission for the Application of UNDRIP in Australia – June 2022](#)
- [APO NT Submission on CDC Bill - 23 October 2020](#)
- [APONT Submission - Cashless Debit Card Bill - October 2019](#)

We repeat again here:

‘APO NT asserts that compulsory income management is a vehicle for disempowerment, and perpetuates stigmatisation of Aboriginal people, ‘rather than building capacity and independence, for many the program has acted to make people more dependent on welfare’¹.

Moreover, compulsory income management contradicts the Australian and NT Governments’ commitments through the National Agreement on Closing the Gap which undertakes that: “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples must play an integral part in the making of the decisions that affect their lives – this is critical to closing the gap.” Specifically, continued income management, in its current form, breaches the Australian Government’s existing commitment to Priority Reform 3: to systemically and structurally transform mainstream government organisations to improve accountability, and to respond to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

APO NT remains open to alternatives to income management that support the aims of self-determination of Aboriginal people families and communities in the NT. We are yet to see how the Government will live up to its commitments under Closing the Gap, including formal partnerships and shared decision making on income management reform.

Previous Recommendations

APO NT would like to take this opportunity to reiterate the relevant recommendations from the previous submissions:

From 20220815 – APO NT Submission Social Security (Administration) Amendment (Repeal of Cashless Debit Card and Other Measures) Bill 2022.

Recommendation:

APO NT calls for the abolition of all forms of compulsory quarantining of welfare payments and the repeal of Part 3B of the Social Security (Administration) Act 1999 (Cth).

Recommendation:

¹ Bray et al. (2014). Evaluating New Income Management in the Northern Territory, pp xxii



APO NT also supports the Northern Territory Council of Social Service (NTCOSS) submission and their calls to ensure that the withdrawing of income management is managed with care and done in close consultation of relevant Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and community leaders, to support participants through this process.

Recommendation:

That any reform of income management is carefully considered simultaneously with other policy settings, particularly alcohol legislation and youth justice reform. We urge both governments to take a long-term and evidence-based approach rather than short-term reactive approach.

Recommendation:

The Australian Government to increase social welfare payments to alleviate deepening poverty in remote communities including welfare payments to be permanently and adequately increased to keep people out of poverty.

Recommendation:

The Australian Government with the Northern Territory Government, must jointly invest in evidence-based strategies to address alcohol and drug misuse and problem gambling, including more funding for treatment services.

Recommendation:

That there are remote banking systems and financial literacy supports must be in place to accompany any changes to income management.

Recommendation:

Specialist social security support is adequately funded. As stated in APO NT Submission on the Cashless Debit Card 2020:

'The Government must recognise the significant legal and social needs that impact on Aboriginal people, and disproportionately those in remote communities, especially those individuals that are currently on income management.'

Recommendation:

Further Aboriginal-led research and consultation must be undertaken to generate accurate data on people on income support and those that are completely disengaged from the social security system, including young people who are not studying, training or employed. Anecdotal evidence indicates that the system is so difficult to navigate and disciplinary in nature, that for participants it is not worth pursuing.

From APONT Submission - Cashless Debit Card Bill - October 2019.

Recommendation:

APO NT supports voluntary income management programs being made available for all people on income management with **consideration for short-term**, supported compulsory income management in situations involving Child Protection or extreme vulnerability. All referrals for compulsory income management for Aboriginal people must involve a relevant and **locally endorsed** Aboriginal Controlled organisations.



Recommendation:

APO NT recommends that the Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee recommend further research into the development of a Voluntary Income management scheme for remote Aboriginal communities in the NT. The scheme should reflect the principals of the Arnhem Land Progress Association FOOD card model and that this process *involve consultation with APO NT and key Aboriginal Controlled organisations in the NT.*

Support for NAAJA

APO NT endorses the North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency's (NAAJA) submission to the Inquiry into Compulsory Income Management – 2024.

It outlines the following reasons to repeal compulsory income management:

- Qualifying for an exemption under the regime is an extremely high bar.
- The income management regime creates unintended consequences and leads to an increased risk of financial hardship.
- The regime is discriminatory and does not align with the UN Declarations on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Conclusion

Aboriginal people in the NT are subject to discrimination via punitive conditions and inaccessibility as part of compulsory income management. Compulsory income management is disempowering, adds to stigmatisation, and fails to address unemployment and the underlining, structural issues that force Aboriginal people into poverty and financial hardship, often experienced intergenerationally. There is no evidence that it changes behaviour (as some supporters claim) nor equips people with much needed financial literacy and economic autonomy, and levers from which to escape cycles of meagre welfare. **APO NT cannot stress enough that compulsory income management is a failed regime and should not continue.**

APO NT thanks the Committee for their consideration of this submission to an inquiry of such importance for Aboriginal people in the NT.

Kind Regards,

John Paterson,
Convenor – Aboriginal Peak Organisations NT