


**Centre for
Appropriate
Technology**

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Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs
House of Representatives
Parliament of Australia
Canberra

Re: Enquiry into Remote Community Stores

A significant number of organisations and individuals have provided submissions to the enquiry. CAT relies on the evidence of these groups and others to derive a range of technological issues that impinge on stores and store operations. Our purpose in this brief submission is to encourage the Standing Committee to consider the role and function of community stores in building healthy sustainable communities and to consider some of the infrastructure issues that also play a role.

The terms of reference for this enquiry provide an important but in our view a narrow focus on health outcomes through a limited focus on nutrition and food security. Community stores have a unique potential to provide access to a wide range of goods and services that might significantly advance livelihood and well being objectives in communities. Food is a necessary but not sufficient element of a broader community building function.

By way of example, toilet paper is a non-food product whose availability can be critical to the technical functioning of communities' infrastructure. It is widely recognised that the use of toilet paper substitutes (such as rags) can be a factor in failure of septic systems in remote communities leading to poor health outcomes.

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In the same way that housing provides an access point for individuals and families to a range of basic personal and hygiene services around protection from the elements and access to water and ablutions and food preparation areas, a store should provide a general access to a range of goods and services that enable an individual to sustain their livelihood in a particular place. Nutritious food is a solid foundation for this but the remote community store should not be constrained to this narrow focus.

The Australian and State and Territory government are providing a significant investment in housing in remote communities. These new houses are generally not furnished and new residents are responsible for purchasing furniture and fittings. In larger regional centres stores will offer whitegoods and furniture however in remote communities stores rarely provide these goods and services. In turn this lack of supply severely undermines the investment made in the housing. A lack of these goods limits the ability of the resident to derive the health benefits normally available through essential personal and hygiene services.

Improving access to a wider range goods and services that contribute to community wellbeing and livelihoods relies on the condition of the transport network including the condition of roads, airstrips and cars and barge access as well as access to broadband communication. Increasing people's ability to connect and circulate either physically or virtually will ultimately enhance health and wellbeing and enable people to tap the wider economy and the goods and services available within it. It will also impact on competition between providers of goods and services.

Clustering stores in order to bulk purchase would appear to achieve cost savings and efficiencies in purchasing power and transport logistics including the frequency of delivery (eg weekly rather than fortnightly). Regular freight into communities reduces the need for additional storage and mitigates against any stock deterioration that may occur during transport (eg can be on sold more quickly, less lost over time etc) – this in is effect the Outback Stores model.

But such stores also have a role in regional development and stores should not be viewed in isolation of this broader purpose. To some extent the preoccupation with health outcomes masks this broader contribution to sustaining livelihoods on country.

The issue regarding transport in the Torres Strait Islands study conducted by Leonard, Beilin and Moran as reported in the Australian Journal of Public Health was about the effect of multiple transitions of stock (barge, road etc) and unregulated or inconsistent temperature controls.

This was also an issue raised by the Lajamanu Community Store owner in one of CAT's 'Our Place' radio segments last year. Lajamanu Community Store is trialling effective temperature control as a condition in their freight contracts from Katherine (temperature tested at source and at delivery) and if any inconsistency arises re stock it is rejected. The store seems to be having some success in ensuring that stock now arrives in good condition. However, in general, CAT is not aware there is any work being done on improving reliability and affordability of transport refrigeration systems or freight handling logistics. Knowing how to secure a load on a truck that is delivering across dirt roads is as important to the outcomes of this enquiry as the nutritious content of the freight.

Apart from the main issues of poor nutrition (and therefore accelerating diabetes), costs and store management practices that are raised at length in the submissions to the committee, other issues result from transport logistics and poor store infrastructure and equipment, especially refrigerated equipment, poor IT connectivity for stock ordering and controls, payments etc. A related issue is the energy cost for keeping refrigeration going 24hours (both in the store and the home) – especially where more remote stores have less frequent deliveries.

CAT's Bushlight project has been addressing refrigeration capacity in small communities through stand alone Renewable Energy systems. We understand Outback Stores have received funding from the AG and NTER funds to address store infrastructure and communities have access to commercial loans through IBA to update infrastructure. However, there appears to have been no consideration of reliable, affordable energy related issues that directly impact on the ability to store and process fresh produce.

Given the limitation of funding for Outback Stores and the rather low number of stores they are running, the enquiry might consider an investment fund that focuses on energy efficiency and demand side management for remote stores as a more broad based response to food security issues. Such a fund could still be IBA based but separated from the operational funding of Outback Stores.

Most stores on larger communities are also places where banking is done (apart from a few rural transaction centres on the APY lands), mail is sent and collected and people congregate for news. Given the need for robust IT systems especially given income management and the basics cards, it would make sense for stores to be supported as the community hub for public IT access (banking), community payphones, mail, Centrelink etc. We acknowledge that there are complexities involved in making stores the focus of community IT access, such as security, privacy and appropriate design of public areas to enable both comfortable use and customer traffic. However should these issues be successfully negotiated, co-location would avoid the construction of duplicate infrastructure such as RTCs, diversify store revenue and expand the range of employment opportunities for locals. Reliable and affordable energy is also important for IT access. Costs saved here could perhaps absorb the inevitably expanding costs of transport.

The challenge for the committee is to meet the immediate requirements for food security but not lose sight of the much broader role for stores in communities and their role in regional development. We look forward to an opportunity to discuss this wellbeing and livelihoods dimension of remote community stores with the committee.

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15th March 2009