

The Chairman  
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Committee  
House of Representatives  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

## **Submission to Inquiry into sport for Indigenous wellbeing<sup>1</sup>**

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### **SUMMARY**

This private individual submission has no vested interest and is directed specifically to the opportunity it presents for indigenous communities in remote regions. It is made on the basis of direct personal experience of both indigenous disadvantage there and insight at senior level of Government service delivery and decision-making processes. The submission analyses reasons why policy proposals of the type examined by this Inquiry, though invariably good in concept, rarely deliver much of the promised benefits. They are therefore viewed with, at best, resigned scepticism by the intended recipients.

It argues further that, for any general and sustained improvement in the lot of remote area indigenous people, there has to be far-sighted, non-blame or fame seeking, non-political and inter-bureaucratic cooperation at all levels of Government. Indigenous Community representatives, welfare NGOs and the business community will have to overcome scepticism and come on board. It can expect to make only slow steady progress. Rent-seekers and politically motivated opportunists must be kept away and all efforts focussed on a common goal.

**It proposes that this utopian goal might just be possible in this case.** The potential for sport to community development is unarguable and the interest in sport in Australia crosses all class and cultural boundaries. Wider cooperation and greater success could happen here if anywhere. It might even extend from here to other areas if the whole Government, including both the political representatives and the executive, sets out to lead by example.

**It proposes an implementation program that can be offered in modular units to groups of willing communities. It builds on past experience and uses tested delivery and accountability structures.**

**It can be introduced as identifiable discrete units that will be attractive to corporate sponsorship.**

**If requested by a community, they will receive frequent, organised, climate-appropriate sporting opportunities on an ongoing and cost effective basis. A preliminary cost estimate suggests an annual cost of less than \$50000 per participating community.**

It can start with even one willing group of say six neighbouring communities and can grow as enthusiasm develops. This enthusiasm would be expected to come from both the communities and from several categories of corporate and philanthropic sponsor (vehicle and trailer manufacturers, sports equipment suppliers, sporting organisations, mining industry, Rotary clubs etc.)

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<sup>1</sup> Electronic copy sent to ATSI@aph.gov.au

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## INTRODUCTION

We are a “retired professional couple” working voluntarily at the Ikuntje community school as part of a literacy improvement program. We can anticipate that this will be one of very few independent personal submissions you receive from a remote community address. Ikuntji is 250km west of Alice Springs. The final 60 kilometres is a heavily corrugated dusty gravel “road”.

We have experience of several remote indigenous communities and in other Third World situations. We therefore feel competent to provide informed suggestions about program risks and opportunities while avoiding both ingratiating political correctness and ideologically loaded terminology.

It is 40C today and there has been no measurable rain for several months. The air is smoky and willy-willys regularly swirl up the dry, red sand from the school playground. This climatic observation is included to ensure that Canberra based ideas for sport activities appreciate the reality: Non-essential vigorous or sustained outdoor activity in Australia’s Arid Zone just will not happen during the greater part of every day between September and April.

In this context we are reminded that war correspondents have no credibility unless they can get close enough to feel the action. We wonder how different your eventual recommendations would be if your report were to be entirely prepared from here: They would reflect the limitations imposed by inadequate supplies, indifferent communications, sub-standard accommodation and erratic services. There is no mobile network (unless you have an expensive satellite phone). We have only super-slow broadband. If you need another printer cartridge: “Tough luck until Wednesday when the weekly mail plane comes, if you remembered to order it!” The community store has only the most basic food supplies. Diesel fuel costs \$2.20 per litre. There is no alcohol and not even a decent coffee! And it is still over 40C!

Some pictures are attached to illustrate the on-ground realities. (**Not** for re-use without permission.)

### PROGRAM PROPOSAL

Our suggestion is that, using a combination of Government and corporate funds, a number of two person "Sports Teams" are set up, each equipped with a four-wheel drive vehicle and an off-road, purpose-built, dust-proof, lockable trailer full of sports equipment.

They would each rotate through their own set of related communities on a weekly or at least fortnightly basis. This rotational visiting is common for specialist teachers and health workers. In our area, west of Alice Springs, five related Luritja communities receive visits of this type. (Ikuntji, Papunya, M'bunghara, Walungurru and Watiyawanu)

At each community the "Sports Club" would have a wide brief to support and encourage whatever opportunities for promoting sport that already exist. This may be sporting clubs, schools or Local Councils. The only overriding requirement would be to promote participation without regard to gender or "level of ability."

The particular sports would build on existing interest and climatic constraints. They would take the existing facilities as they are and there would be no focus on capital investment. Familiar leaders making repeated, regular visits and a planned predictable will build confidence and trust. Unlike the "sporting celebrity" visits which happen here and there and from time to time, the "Sports Team" will aim to make sport accessible to everyone. It would try to become a normal on-going community activity.

Community agreement to participate would be a pre-requisite and the first couple would be treated as pilot studies. They would then evolve as individual modules with only a loose over-arching coordination. This enables them to evolve to meet local circumstances. Some will succeed better than others. In some cases, if the initial corporate sponsorship experience is successful, capital investment in improved facilities may follow.

Corporate sponsors would be sought by invitation and advertisement with an expectation that they can brand their contribution. Enthusiastic support can be expected to come from several categories of corporate and philanthropic sponsor: vehicle and trailer manufacturers, sports equipment suppliers, sporting organisations, mining industry, Rotary clubs etc.)

In some cases the vehicle and trailer might evolve to a larger purpose built vehicle. In other cases a heavy duty set up may not be as necessary. Similarly new sports may be introduced for variety from time to time. In every case an essential requirement is that knowledge of local conditions is the basis of the equipment choices.

The home-base and reporting relationship for each outfit would be determined by "logical fit" in each case. Normally that would be Local Government with "Steering Committee" coordination and oversight from State and Commonwealth. Recruitment and management of sponsors would rest with the Steering Committee. Accommodation "in community" would be provided in the Government Business Manager Quarters (GBMQ)

A preliminary cost estimate is set out below: It suggests that this entire set up could be provided to natural regional groups of five communities for less than \$50000 per community per year.

<b>Item</b>	<b>Capital (initial) cost (\$)</b>	<b>Recurrent cost (\$/yr)</b>
Sport and recreation professional	5000 (recruitment admin)	90000 gross
Technical support officer	5000 (recruitment admin)	75000 gross
4WD vehicle	75000 (incl. purchase admin /sponsor negotiation)	20000 (registration, insurance fuel and maintenance)
Heavy duty equipment trailer , tandem, dustproof, secure)	35000 (incl design and tender)	2000 (registration / maintenance)
Sports equipment sets appropriate to locality	10000 (incl specification and donor/sponsor negotiation)	3000 (maintenance replacement and increment)
Administrative overhead	0	18500 (10% of total operating)
<b>Total (5 year equipment life)</b>	<b>130000</b>	<b>1042500</b>
Annual cost per community	\$46900 (five communities in module)	

**AVOIDING SCEPTICISM ARISING FROM PAST EFFORTS**

Observation of past efforts suggests several reasons for the generally low expectation of a useful outcome from Inquiries such as this. Comment in italic in each case assesses the likelihood that the program proposal presented here can avoid that risk:

**1. Ideological posturing.**

Nothing useful emerges if politicians, elected and NGO activists insist that only they and their “side” has the moral integrity, wisdom and ability to deal effectively with indigenous issues. Sadly this observation includes indigenous representatives who sometimes seem as intent on grandstanding as any partisan opportunist. A genuine move to bi-partisanship and a move away from petty point-scoring would be very encouraging.

*Sport as the universal Australian pre-occupation can hardly be criticised on ideological grounds. Under this proposal, pressure on the Government budget pressure is not only modest but can reduce as corporate sponsorship is secured. A genuine offer of bipartisan participation could not credibly be refused.*

**2. Pre-occupation with inputs rather than outcomes**

- Ministers like to have “announceables”. Inquiries are ideal as they provide numerous opportunities: Initiating the Inquiry/ receiving the report/ tabling it in Parliament/ securing funding (perhaps). The short term nature of the political cycle may mean that the last of these never actually reaches an agenda.
- Public servants like Inquiries as they generate endless “important” bureaucratic endeavours: supporting the Inquiry, collecting data, preparing briefing papers, preparing budgets and, better still, legislative amendments, establishing governance and reporting mechanisms, new central offices to monitor impossibly detailed input/output matrices.
- Consultants enjoy Inquiries as opportunities for securing expensive (oops sorry) extensive contracts for consultations, data collecting, options evaluations, risk analyses etc. etc.

- Academics, NGOs and minor parties enjoy demonstrating their superior insight and greater moral worth to their constituents by making lofty and unattainable submissions to Inquiries.

In the end, most of the energy and funds are dissipated before anything trickles through. We are reminded of an apocryphal judge commenting during protracted litigation: “After all, we wouldn’t want the money frittered away on the beneficiaries.”

*The proposal presented here uses a well-trying delivery mechanism, can be introduced incrementally and requires only a minimum overhead component.*

### **3. Program “Branding”**

Each Government insists on having sole ownership of the initiatives it makes while in office. It does this by distinctively naming the Program (for example “Closing the Gap”). At the same time Oppositions have come to imagine that any indication of agreement with a Government initiative is a sign of weakness. Any acknowledgement of the success of a program they have felt bound to criticise cannot be countenanced. It therefore needs to be reviewed and re-branded when there is a change of Government. State Governments play the same game with Commonwealth proposals. Short-term thinking becomes the norm even though everyone knows that the entrenched disadvantage besetting indigenous cannot be solved overnight.

*This program proposal is no instant fix but as a determined bi-partisan initiative led by example “from the top” it could become a durable and cost-effective program. It would become a part of an ongoing, long-term determination to overcome indigenous disadvantage in Australia.*

### **4. Short-term funding of “One-Size Fits All” solutions**

There are very wide differences across the range of indigenous community situations, not only geographically, climatically, economically, and socially but also in political acumen. Programs that work in some may fail in others. Take-up time to community acceptance and ownership may vary widely. Examples of failure or disinterest in some places can easily enough be found. At times of change of Government or in cost-cutting drives these are then exaggerated and used to terminate whole programs despite their demonstrated effectiveness in other places. You can see why those out here doing the actual delivery lose heart when good programs are summarily wound-up.

*The program proposal presented here has such a modest budgetary demand on Government as to be negligible. Indeed it may come to be entirely supported through private corporate funding.*

### **5. Excessive and irrelevant reporting requirements**

The Commonwealth agencies, remote from service delivery and with little appreciation of field reality, often have an excessive enthusiasm for micro-level reporting of “quantified deliverables”. These requirements can usually only measure inputs and they remove the flexibility needed to respond to unforeseen or changing circumstances. The evaluation of outcomes, which is what it should be about, takes too long to accumulate, is difficult if not impossible to measure in the short term. Reporting requirements should be minimised by channelling funds through existing agency

mechanisms. That would often require inter-Department and inter Government trust and cooperation. What an innovation that would be!

*Once again, with determined leadership and an incremental implementation mechanism, reporting requirements can be minimised.*

### **6. Lack of consultation**

Achieving adequate consultation is admittedly a fraught area. Clearly it is essential to have "buy-in" by the target clients and for that they must feel that they are meaningfully involved. Still, it is almost inevitable, no matter what consultation process is used or how long it takes, those whose requests have not been met or those seeking a soapbox, will claim it has been inadequate. The main thing is to avoid being captured by those for whom process is more important than outcome.

Programs that begin modestly through pilot studies in communities willing to participate have greater chance of acceptance than those announced with little notice and grand fanfare. Success in the pilot studies will hopefully lead to others complaining that they were left out and are missing out. So the program can grow in response to popular demand!

*Incremental introduction responding only to requests from interested communities will dramatically reduce consultation requirements and risks.*

### **7. Reinventing the wheel / Failure to learn from past experience**

New programs emerging from Commonwealth policies sometimes fail to acknowledge efforts already being undertaken in the same direction. In doing so they not only alienate potential allies and but they also risk being naively unaware of avoidable pitfalls and problems. Local people experienced in program delivery know most about the particular operational and logistic issues in their region. Further, they can offer access to existing governance mechanisms that could reduce administrative overheads.

In this specific case, it is hardly a new idea that participation in sport promotes personal health and helps build "community". Local Governments already employ Sport and Recreation Officers and they have large capital investment in sporting facilities. State Government Education Departments have a similar priority and level of investment. Amateur sporting organisations run competitions and carnivals. So it is not new and for goodness sake don't ignore or bypass them.

*Localising the program via Local Government and willing communities will ensure that local knowledge and past experience is used to maximum advantage.*

## **CONCLUSION**

**This proposal is worth a try! Nothing to lose/ much to gain! Give it a go!**

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**24<sup>th</sup> October 2012**

### APPENDIX 1: Qualifications of submitters

Peter and Cathie Sheehan are tertiary educated retirees with voluntary interest and experience in indigenous community development in northern Australia. We have similar experience in the Solomon Islands. We have travelled extensively and visited several widely separated remote communities (Warmun, Larjamanu, Papunya, Ikuntji, Laura, Doomadgee)

Prior to retirement, Peter Sheehan was a Divisional Director with the Victorian Government Department of Sustainability and Environment / Commissioner of Forests in the Solomon Islands / AusAID Team Leader Capacity Building in the Ministry of Agriculture, Forests and Fisheries Samoa. He has experience of aid program delivery and of State, National and international Government processes at senior representational level.

Catherine Sheehan is a trained primary teacher with a lifetime of paid and voluntary experience.

We have a shared interest in providing practical independent advice to the Inquiry.

APPENDIX 2: Examples of desert community sports facilities (not for re-publication)



Desert community open space



Desert community football ground with brumby manure top-dressing



Desert community girls' softball facility