

It does not surprise me that James Anaya, the U.N's special reporter on human rights and fundamental freedoms of Indigenous people, has described the Northern Territory Intervention as discriminating against Aboriginal people and that he believes there is entrenched racism in Australia. I recently spent some time in Mapuru, a small Indigenous Homeland in N.E Arnhem Land I am more than ever disturbed by, and opposed to, the one-size-fits-all nature of the Northern Territory Intervention.

Mapuru is a cohesive Homeland community of around 150 residents, rich and strong in their Yolngu traditions and culture. They are living on their traditional ancestral land and they are healthy, pro-active and proud. The children are happy, secure and healthy. Their traditional kinship system means they have an abundance of family to love and care for them. All children are educated in their Yolngu culture as well as attending their homeland learning centre daily. There is no alcohol, no petrol sniffing - no soft drink even.

If you wanted to establish a culturally intact, motivated and thriving self-governing Indigenous community model, Mapuru is a community that would tick all the right boxes. Several successful culture / tourism businesses operate in Mapuru, which give people the opportunity to learn traditional skills such as hunting and basket weaving. These initiatives are important steps in our shared path toward reconciliation and healing. They generate income in a culturally supportive context and in contrast to the usual dynamic present in white/black interactions, non-Indigenous people are coming to learn *from* the Yolngu people, which in turn helps to reinstate their sense of self respect and worth, diminished by a long history of cultural dispossession. I felt deeply privileged to have the opportunity of participating in the 'Arnhem Weavers' cultural workshop and I came away humbled and inspired.

Yet the N.T Intervention does not distinguish between empowered self-governing Indigenous communities such as Mapuru and communities suffering from gambling, substance abuse, violence and other effects of cultural dispossession and despair. As in all Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, Mapuru residents are under compulsory welfare income management. Regardless of individual circumstances, 50% of everyone's centrelink payments are locked to a 'Basics Card' which can only be used at a registered shop, to prevent food money being spent on alcohol and pornography.

Mapuru has a small co-operative food store, which they own and manage themselves and which has won awards for promoting healthy eating. However the co-op has failed to meet registration requirements because it doesn't stock frozen meat. There are good reasons for not selling frozen meat; the lack of reliable power supply, the distance from a supplier and the ample availability of meat on the land means this community does not need to purchase meat. The store has never sold alcohol or pornography.

Under the new legislation the simple task of purchasing food has become expensive, socially dislocating and inconvenient for Mapuru residents. They have the choice of a lengthy boat trip, dependent on weather, or more commonly; an expensive plane charter to Elcho Island, which costs hundreds of dollars per person. Obviously this outcome was not the intention of the N.T Intervention. It is the result of inflexible and centralized decision making. The result of this enforced welfare income management is the exact opposite of the intentions of this 'special measure', and there are many other negative social ramifications beyond the financial impact.

Imaging how I would feel if this law applied to me I understand the people's anger and frustration. It is an insult to any well functioning community, in this case one that has always been alcohol free, a community who place high priority on taking care of their children, a community in no need of such intervention, who are subjected to it simply because they are Indigenous people living in the Northern Territory. Under the Racial Discrimination Act, which was suspended to allow the N.T Intervention, this policy would have been illegal.

This case leads me to question the intention of the federal government. If there was true commitment to addressing the issues facing Indigenous people today then the government would be supporting healthy communities and looking to them for guidance. Instead they are choosing an approach that is undermining the strength and security of thriving Indigenous communities such as Mapuru, and at the same time *removing more power from people suffering the symptoms of a long history of disempowerment and 'intervention'*. This inconsistency between what the government claims are the intentions behind the N.T Intervention and some of the actual implications for the people affected is disturbing to say the least. If the wider public saw how communities such as Mapuru are being treated under the Intervention, perhaps we would not be so accepting of these so called "solutions".

I hope the Government takes Anaya's expert advice seriously, fully reinstates the Racial Discrimination Act and looks a little deeper into the underlying and historical causes of the problems faced by Indigenous people today. Perhaps then they will find that the solution lies not in continuing to 'intervene', but instead, as Anaya says, *"in partnership with Indigenous people's own institutions and decision-making bodies"*.