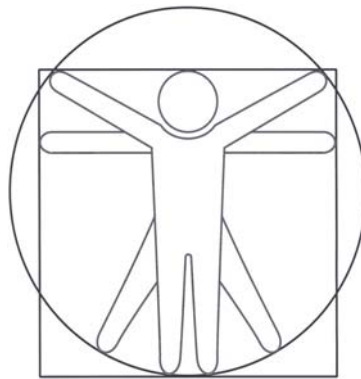


**Submission of the Northern Territory Council
of Government School Organisations Inc.
to the
Senate Select Committee – Inquiry into
Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities**

30th May 2008



COGSO

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Preamble

The Northern Territory Council of Government School Organisations Inc. (COGSO) is the peak advocacy and representative body in the Northern Territory for parents of children in public education.

COGSO believes:

That the Commonwealth Intervention into 73 remote Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory:

- was a politically driven exercise, resulting in further inequity for a sector of the Australian community already suffering from poverty, dispossession, and an unimaginable level of despair stemming from almost a century of marginalisation – the root causes of dysfunction
- was and is in the main, a superficial raft of measures, counter productive to long term, sustainable outcomes for Indigenous community health and wellbeing
- is racially discriminatory
- is designed on the foundation of an economic rationalist solution to the dysfunction of communities by driving people into regional centres to minimise the cost of service delivery and the provision of adequate infrastructure

COGSO condemns:

- use of the Australian military to implement social policy
- the previous Commonwealth Government's opportunistic use of the NT Government's report '*The Little Children are Sacred*' (2007), and the subsequent discounting of that report's recommendations regarding the most appropriate methods to address the causes of dysfunction in remote NT Indigenous communities
- the bureaucracy building exercise arising from the Emergency Response legislation (an additional 725 public servants employed as at November 2007 – a conservative average wages estimate of \$63million per annum)

COGSO Challenges the Terms of Reference for the Senate Select Committee

COGSO challenges the superficial and narrow *Terms of Reference* of the Senate Select Committee on Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities, as self serving and designed to support implementation of the Emergency Response legislation. (The top down imposition of Western cultural models has never worked. Success will not be achieved until the bureaucratic model is dropped and members of remote Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory are fully included in defining and implementing local cultural solutions for local problems.)

Evidence

Impact of Emergency Response legislation on remote NT Indigenous communities

In late 2006 COGSO commenced two projects designed to support Indigenous parent/school governance, and to facilitate greater parental involvement in their children's education. Our officers

are constantly moving across the NT and are able to see at first hand the effects of the Intervention on parental and community ability to support their children's education. The COGSO Secretariat has also been advised of circumstances arising from the Intervention, some of which are documented below.

COGSO is aware that:

- The intervention does not support better educational outcomes - children are being taken out of home communities to areas where parents can drink and often are not returning to school until several months later.
- Alcohol bans are easy to circumvent which defeats the purpose of having them. Anecdotal evidence provided in response to a COGSO survey on the implications of the Intervention, alleges that a known alcoholic and suspected child abuser moved to a Wet community area to continue drinking. During his stay there it is alleged he removed two children from their parents/carers custody as the normal checks and balances on his behaviour instituted by his home community were not in place. The matter was followed up by local NT Police.
- An increase in urban drift has resulted in an increase in homelessness in major regional centres, placing an untenable burden on struggling health and welfare services in those locations.
- As at November 2007 we are aware that not one case of child sexual abuse had been reported as a result of the mandatory Health Checks introduced under the Emergency Response legislation.
- We have corresponded with the Honourable Jenny Macklin in regard to children from one remote community school being removed for Health Checks without the knowledge or agreement of the school staff and parents of those children. This is abhorrent behaviour by government officers.
- Managers of two remote Indigenous community stores advised us they would have to close due to additional operational pressures placed upon the stores by the Income Management system - in the first instance due to concerns about the store's capacity to support the IM program, and in the second instance, the cost of supplying fresh fruit and vegetables to the community was prohibitive irrespective of Income Management or not.

COGSO recommends that:

1. *All future action taken to redress inequities in remote NT Indigenous communities be based on the locally responsive, consultative and respectful recommendations of the NT Government report, **The Little Children are Sacred**.*
2. *Further work be undertaken to develop long term sustainable community infrastructure and service provision, including the training and proper payment of local people to care for local community.*
3. *The current Terms of Reference be adjusted to include investigation/reporting on successful community development programs employed by other Indigenous peoples, which employ the cultural assets of the community as the foundation of health and wellbeing, rather than holding that culture to be 'deficit'.*