



30 May 2008

Committee Secretary
Senate Select Committee on Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Sir or Madam,

The Desert Knowledge CRC is a virtual network of researchers in 28 organisations nationwide that has just entered its fifth year of operation, based in Alice Springs. The network seeks desert solutions for desert people and their businesses throughout inland Australia. The term 'Desert Knowledge' embodies the unique knowledge we have about living successfully in desert areas. The core aim of Desert Knowledge CRC is to link local desert knowledge with the advances of science in order to generate new economic options for desert Australia.

We would like to make a contribution to the Senate Select Committee on Regional and Remote Indigenous Committee.

THE INTERVENTION: A COMMENTARY

There is, in our view, little point in an exercise of band-aiding individual and specific problems as each one achieves an appropriate degree of media and political hype. It has not worked in the past and will not work in the future.

Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle Little Children are Sacred

There is little doubt that some form of action was necessary to deal with the crisis of child sexual abuse in Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory. But as these opening remarks¹ of the report make abundantly clear, it is not enough to be reactive. The Australian Government's Intervention has clearly been a textbook example of responding to disaster: marshalling resources speedily, getting the people on the ground to do the job and at the same time locking in support from the Australian community. But questions remain over what it is likely to achieve and whether it is the right course of action.

Child sexual abuse is a disaster wherever it occurs. In the context of remote Aboriginal communities, however, it is also a symptom of deep-seated alienation, dysfunction and disadvantage. Aboriginal people have faced rapid and dramatic social, cultural and economic change in a comparatively short period of time: less than 100 years for many in the Territory. Much of the dysfunction can be attributed to these changes. That Aboriginal people have

¹ Pat Anderson and Rex Wild: *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle Little Children are Sacred*, NT Government Printer, Darwin 2007, p12

adapted to the changes and maintained their social and cultural cohesion is an asset that belies the subtext of the crisis: that they are socially, culturally and morally deficient human beings.

It is the systems for delivering services and support for remote Aboriginal communities which are deficient. We contend that it is impossible to deal with the crisis without planning how to overcome these root causes and without integrating and empowering Aboriginal people in the process of finding solutions. Major disasters enter a recovery stage which when successful have a significant community involvement. We need to move to this stage and involve communities in what we do together.

Dealing with disadvantage requires a long-term plan, it requires coordination of government and non-government agencies and it requires a fundamental acceptance that nothing short of systemic reform will prevail. We need to change the ways we deliver health, housing and infrastructure, education and child welfare to these communities. We need to consider how to support communities in developing small-scale local and regional economies. We need to plan and work towards sustainable and productive communities, an outcome that crisis intervention of itself is unable to deliver. We also need to have an evidence base as the foundation for policy decisions and a comprehensive strategy for evaluating the outcomes of our actions.

So what might such a plan look like? Firstly, it needs to be based on *engagement and empowerment*. As the Anderson-Wild report recommended²: *It is critical that both [Australian and NT] governments commit to genuine consultation with Aboriginal people in designing initiatives for Aboriginal communities*. Engaging Aboriginal people and valuing their knowledge and systems is critical to creating sustainable solutions. Government Business Managers appointed for the period of the Intervention and who have had previous experience working with Aboriginal people have recognised this. Their efforts to engage people, however, are somewhat undermined by punitive or coercive strategies such as the blanket quarantining of welfare payments, which has made many feel shamed and stigmatised.

Anderson and Wild noted the importance of empowerment³ and we contend that it is critical to moving out of the crisis and into productive and sustainable futures. We can empower people by seeking their advice and support in defining policy and practice. We can also empower them by collaboratively developing appropriate and locally relevant systems of governance, instead of insisting on poorly-explained whitefella models which repeatedly fail to meet Aboriginal expectations and aspirations. And we can further empower people by helping them develop the systems and processes for economic self-sufficiency. Standing back and listening to what Aboriginal people are saying about their needs may be more effective than deciding policy with no reference to them whatsoever.

Acting from these basic principles, and with the concept of sustainability firmly entrenched in our thinking, we may see some progress in key areas. But we have to commit to long-term support and we have to integrate each element of our response in an overarching plan for change. A fully coordinated approach can lead to economies if we recognise complementarities between services and systems.

Housing and infrastructure

² Ibid, Recommendation 1, p21

³ Ibid, p13

Housing is an important ingredient in people's well being and it needs to be affordable and appropriate to specific regions. In the desert, this means engineering houses for passive heating for winter as well as passive cooling in summer. Throughout the Northern Territory, it means designing houses that reflect regional differences in Aboriginal ways of living and definitions of family. Importantly, there also needs to be significant funding for house maintenance as a pre-emptive, rather than reactive and remedial, strategy. Aboriginal people should be an integral part of planning, design and maintenance teams.

All people in Australia have the right to expect equitable levels of infrastructure no matter where they live. We need to guarantee remote communities adequate funding for roads, power and water supply, sewerage schemes, internet and phone communications and airstrips. Whatever technology we use, it will be more sustainable if we train Aboriginal people in the skills needed to install and maintain the infrastructure, which means there should also be a solid investment in vocational education and training.

Education

Remote education needs to be properly planned and not merely be a transplanted mainstream service. Key areas for any plan should be recruitment and retention of skilled teachers, upgrading skills of Aboriginal teacher aides, high expectations of students, appropriate pedagogies for literacy and numeracy, improved housing and school buildings, family and community engagement, relevant school governance, use of community knowledge and more flexible timetabling to meet community needs. School buildings should be appropriately equipped for multiple use as adult and vocational education centres. The key, however, is getting primary education right and there appears to be no plan to do so at present.

Health

Primary health care needs appropriate levels of staffing – more doctors, more access to itinerant specialist services - and there needs to be more home community-based chronic disease management. Prevention and health promotion needs a greater emphasis and current strategies need to be reviewed for relevance and effectiveness. Community-based health organisations need proper administrative support and improved understandings of governance for more effective functioning. If centralised control of the health service is to remain, it must be flexible enough to support regional and local solutions.

Economic Development

Currently remote Aboriginal communities survive in a largely welfare economy that is simply not sustainable. For the foreseeable future, however, Aboriginal people are not likely to move away from country in search of jobs. This makes it imperative to design economic development strategies for small-scale local and regional economies which may involve: building up the skills base so Aboriginal people take up more jobs in local essential services; more flexible support for local business development; creating partnerships with outside business and industry to market local products; and generating an economic value for local Aboriginal knowledge in, for example bush food, environmental management, cultural tourism and the arts.

Support for environmental programs

Community-based environmental management programs allow people to live on country and carry out land management using both traditional knowledge and contemporary techniques and equipment. Living and working on country gives people a strong sense that their knowledge is valued. This results in improved well-being which, together with access to bush foods, makes for healthier people - an important complementarity. Aboriginal knowledge may

also offer important perspectives on contemporary environmental problems; eg: controlled burning of country contributing to reduced greenhouse gas load.

Governance

Whitefella systems of governance have evolved over a long and complex history. Concepts of lines of authority and responsibility, not to mention distinctions between governance and management, do not readily cross cultural boundaries. Insisting on a sole model that is largely unworkable in the remote community context is merely to set up failure after failure. Funding bodies will continue to insist on accountability, but they need to negotiate appropriate governance arrangements with Aboriginal people and set up mechanisms to underpin them so they can jointly achieve it.

Some conclusions

As a society we need to get over the desire to be seen to be decisive and capable that is reflected in the language of the Intervention. We should start to consider complexities, imperatives from cultures other than our own and ways of doing things that are humanly and economically sustainable. We need to acknowledge what has failed to work and build evidence bases so we can make more informed policy and deliver more appropriate services. Above all, we need to view remote communities from an asset, rather than deficit, perspective and – bearing in mind that it is not solely up to non-Aboriginal Australians to determine the nature and scale of the partnership - engage Aboriginal people as collaborators in the joint venture of overcoming disadvantage and dysfunction.

If you would like to follow up the submission in any way please feel free to contact me on jan.ferguson@desertknowledgecrc.com.au

Yours sincerely

Jan Ferguson
Managing Director