



# National Council of Churches in Australia

## NATSIEC

## Submission to the Select Committee on Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission to the Committee. We have commenced this submission with some background information on NATSIEC and the Make Indigenous Poverty History Campaign, before making some comments with reference to this inquiry.

### Background to NATSIEC

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Commission (NATSIEC) is the peak ecumenical Indigenous body in Australia. It is part of the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA). With NATSIEC's guidance, the churches are working together for a fair deal for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, and for the healing of our nation.

All but one of the NATSIEC commissioners are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. They represent a cross-section of church-related Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups from the Anglican Church of Australia, the Churches of Christ, the Lutheran Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Salvation Army and the Uniting Church in Australia.

The work of NATSIEC is guided by its mandate which is to:

- Provide a forum for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to speak and take action on issues of faith, mission and evangelism; of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander spirituality and theology; of social justice and land rights.
- Serve as a unified voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as they relate to member churches and international ecumenical bodies.
- Help rebuild self-esteem, pride and dignity within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- Promote harmony, justice and understanding between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the wider community.
- Provide a basis for further political action by church-related Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups, other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and the member churches of the National Council of Churches in Australia.
- Administer all funds of the National Council of Churches in Australia relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- Share in furthering the objectives and promoting the programs of the National Council of Churches in Australia.

Anglican Church

Antiochian  
Orthodox Church

Armenian  
Apostolic Church

Assyrian Church  
of the East

Chinese Methodist  
Church

Churches of Christ

Congregational  
Federation

Coptic  
Orthodox Church

Greek  
Orthodox Church

Lutheran Church

Mar Thoma Church

Religious Society  
of Friends (Quakers)

Roman Catholic Church

Romanian  
Orthodox Church

Salvation Army

Syrian  
Orthodox Church

Uniting Church

379 Kent Street Sydney

✉ Locked Bag 199  
Sydney NSW 1230

☎ (+61 2) 9299 2215

☎ (+61 2) 9262 4514

🌐 [www.ncca.org.au](http://www.ncca.org.au)

ABN 64 493 941 795



# Indigenous MAKE POVERTY HISTORY.

In 2005, NATSIEC started the Make *Indigenous* Poverty History campaign in response to the lack of attention being given to Indigenous poverty in Australia. At the time the Make Poverty History campaign had been developed which was structured around the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which are eight time bound and measurable developed goals designed to halve global poverty by 2015. While the MDGs are an admirable effort, we found that they did not specifically address the issues of Indigenous peoples, particularly Indigenous peoples in a developed country such as Australia.

Central to the Make Indigenous Poverty History Campaign is the requirement to set measurable and time bound goals, establish appropriate benchmarks and measure our achievements in terms of alleviating Aboriginal disadvantage in Australia. We believe that the MDGs provide a structure and framework in which to do this. We have adapted the MDGs to the Australian situation and find that they provide a comprehensive way of addressing Indigenous disadvantage.

Since the campaign began there have been many significant changes in the landscape of Indigenous affairs. In particular, The Northern Territory Intervention, the change in Federal Government, and events such as the Apology and the signing of the Intent to Close the Health Gap. We acknowledge that there has been significant effort and resources directed towards ending Indigenous disadvantage in recent times, this does not however diminish some of the concerns we have.

Our main areas of concern as they intersect with the terms of reference of the Committee are:

- Proper measurement and setting of benchmarks for programs and policy interventions.
- Proper relationship building with Indigenous communities.
- Adherence to Human Rights principles.

Having read the reports authored by the Northern Territory Emergency Response Taskforce (NTER) and the Review of the NTER report, we are concerned about the lack of benchmarks and measurements in place for the Intervention. The Taskforce report is notable for its lack of measurable details and the review report highlights deficiencies in this area. Unless we have a benchmark against which to measure we are unable to ascertain whether the intervention measures are effective. We also note that following the release of the review report there was much discussion about the validity of various aspects of the review and the veracity of its substance. Without appropriate measurements and benchmarks it is too easy to discredit contrary opinions and dismiss them as emotional responses. In setting goals, benchmarks and other tools of measurement we do not lose sight of the importance of gathering evidence based on people's experiences and observations and believe that

qualitative research must also be used in conjunction with the quantitative analysis.

We understand that COAG and the ABS are working on improving data collection in these areas and we stress that this is a matter of priority. We also believe that using the MDG framework ensures that all areas are being addressed. As we know disadvantage and poverty is caused by many intersecting policy portfolios and using the MDG framework allows for a comprehensive measurement and reporting framework.

## **Relationship building**

Relationship building is at the core of good Indigenous policy development. We note that the NTER review called for a renewing of the relationship with Indigenous peoples and we wholeheartedly agree. We believe that the Rudd Government is genuine in its desire to build constructive and new relationships; however, we have doubts as to whether in practice this is yet happening. We hear time and time again from people who feel diminished and excluded by their interactions with Government. We have concerns that although there is the intention at the highest level to renew relationships with Indigenous peoples that the entrenched mindset in the bureaucracies will not create a space to allow this to happen. The NTER review report is not the first report that has highlighted the lack of proper relationship development as an area of deficiency; sadly it is a recurring theme. We wonder how many more times this has to be said before things change. We would like to hear more about what measures the Government has in place to change attitudes and behaviors at all levels of service delivery. We are also concerned that programs and people who are working at the community level are being excluded from planning and service delivery which effectively duplicates services as well as excludes years of expertise and relationships and trust that have been built up.

A further area of concern is with regard to the governance agenda. Indigenous communities are constantly being asked to improve their governance and have many levels of administrative requirements placed on them. The presumption in this dialogue is always that the Indigenous community is at fault, and Government is the standard bearer of good governance. We know this is not true. Governments at all levels must ensure their own service delivery also conforms to excellent governance standards and apply the same level of monitoring to their own activities. Further, Government needs to ensure that the people it employs to deliver its services are properly trained and resourced to do the job they are employed to do.

## **Human Rights**

We are concerned about the exclusion of the Northern Territory Intervention from the Racial Discrimination Act. We understand that for some people income management has helped, but for others it has been a humiliating and devastating experience. We agree that where people are failing in their responsibilities to their children and others it can be a useful tool to ensure the well being of those children, but we categorically deny that there should be blanket application of this measure. In the past similar measures worked where they were voluntary and helped people manage their money and make choices

better. However, such measures must be voluntary. Where income management is utilized it needs to be implemented in a manner which does not cause distress and humiliation. We believe that all policy measures should be in accordance with the Racial Discrimination Act.

***United Nation's Declaration on The Rights of Indigenous Peoples***

We understand that the Rudd Government has indicated its support for the Declaration however it has not yet been ratified. We believe that ratifying this Declaration would signal very real and practical measures of support for Indigenous rights.

I look forward to meeting with the Committee to expand on the points raised above.

Yours sincerely,

Graeme Mundine  
Executive Secretary