

Evidence Statement from Sr Alma Cabassi rsj – Diocesan Family Support Worker, based in Kununurra and working in the towns and communities of the East Kimberley, Western Australia.

This evidence is presented from my observations and interactions in my current position as a Diocesan Family Support Worker in the East Kimberley, but also as one who has an education background, teaching and leading in Indigenous schools in the Kimberley and Pilbara regions for over twelve years.

My observations come from a pastoral point of view rather than from an organisational or formal structure perspective.

The things that I see include: families who are responsible and well integrated being disrupted and put down by dysfunctional families; children who are violent and destructive; parents, aunties and uncles who are not present to assist over-burdened and tired grandparents in caring for too many ‘abandoned’ children. Communities as a whole are not taking responsibility for the lives of their people; there are children with no boundaries or supervision, and children emotionally needy and generally neglected. I see issues requiring urgent attention in housing, general maintenance, health, education and leadership.

It was with great interest and hope that the words of the Prime Minister declared a policy direction of ‘Learning or Earning.’ The previous scheme of **CDEP** did not really get people into a long-term or full-time work ethic but it did encourage some responsibility for a community task for a few hours a day. It is too soon to know whether the ‘Learning or Earning’ policy will succeed.

In small remote and isolated communities it is difficult to attract Community Managers or CEOs who are capable of initiating ‘**ENTERPRISE**’ let alone a daily regime of work that is satisfying, responsible and necessary. It would be of greater benefit, in my view, to have regional strategies that help to provide for smaller remote areas. This could mean mobile managers who have the necessary knowledge and skills to implement new programs. These strategies must be long term and **AT THE REQUEST OR APPROVAL OF THE LOCAL COMMUNITY**, following education, information and consultation.

The **DEPARTMENT OF CHILD PROTECTION (DCP)** is showing small but significant progress in the area of ‘responsible parenting.’ This is evidenced by more children attending school and families being supported in learning about their responsibilities. This is painstakingly slow work as there are so many other factors that affect the wellbeing of children and their families, and these are not uniform either within or across communities.

‘**STRONG FAMILIES**’ is another Program that is effective in its efforts to have Agencies working together for the needs of families. Again, it is slow work and

progresses by small steps, but it is definitely worthwhile as service providers come together to pool information, ideas, and strategies that can make a difference.

The health benefits of having a **SWIMMING POOL** for a Community, though initially as an incentive to get children to attend school, are beginning to show. The evidence is that ear, eye, and skin health has improved. Children feeling healthier are happier at school as well as being encouraged by the ‘no school no pool’ reward system that is in place in many communities. However, when initial and recurrent funding is being allocated account needs to be taken of the additional expense, time and effort required to maintain and supervise these facilities. The benefits have shown that the additional costs will be more than repaid through decreased expense in other areas.

While I might agree that “something had to be done”, many outcomes from the Northern Territory Intervention have shown that coming in to assist using what could be seen as “heavy handed” methods destroys trust and continues the cycle of degradation and sense of inferiority that many Aboriginal people feel.

FAMILIES LEARNING TO BE FAMILIES require strategic plans in several **areas:** These areas need to be developed side by side as each influences the other. These areas include:

HOUSING – building of new houses and maintenance of existing housing stock continue to be of major concern.

WATER - that in most remote communities and some town communities has a heavy mineral content continues to clog taps and pipes causing continuing problems in laundries, bathrooms, toilets and hot water systems. Regular maintenance of Hot Water Systems would assist with basic sanitary and health needs especially during the Dry Cold Season.

EDUCATION - for adults and young parents, along with improving the literacy and numeracy levels of children by better attendance has been a major concern in communities and schools for many years. Isolated areas have a great need for effective **HUMAN RESOURCES AND FACILITIES** that help contribute to improved levels of learning. Education opportunities for High School students are limited in the Kimberley. Most remote schools and even some town schools are too small to offer anything like a reasonable secondary curriculum, and so students must move away for this. There are many challenges associated with getting students to planes and properly prepared for boarding school. There are not enough boarding places provided in the region; these are currently available only in the Student Hostel in Broome.

HEALTH ISSUES – require a united effort to address. For example, at Warmun the Gija Total Health Program plans, informs, educates and addresses key health issues for the Community. It works for the Community Council by implementing physical and mental health programs. This could be a good model to be adapted and adopted elsewhere.

VOLUNTARY FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT - is slowly educating and assisting individuals to prioritise their needs and provide for their families. It needs to be stressed that this type of financial management **NEEDS TO VOLUNTARY**. Education regarding this issue could be provided to everyone.

PROHIBITION – of the sale of certain types of alcohol in Halls Creek is allowing families to work at getting their lives back together. Agencies are working together for common goals. Children are attending school more regularly and it might simply be because they are getting sleep during the night. This is also true where Community Bylaws regarding alcohol are enforced.

COMMUNITY STORES – do not seem to be able to make any profits, yet the community members are unable to afford the prices for goods needed. [There was a recent conference in Broome on this area of community life, and the Committee might well benefit from access to its outcomes.] Many families in remote areas just do not have enough money to buy food, clothing, run a vehicle or buy fuel. This increases the incentive to gamble for a chance at more money to get them to a funeral or to sporting fixtures in the region.

In conclusion, I wish to stress again, that all projects need to come from the Community, have community ownership, and need to be long term. We have found from experience that there's no such thing as a quick fix. (Psychologists tell us that it takes six years to change an attitude; and this is required before you can change behaviour).

The intergenerational pain from dispossession, segregation, assimilation and continually being controlled and told what to do, has left deep psychological scars for many Aboriginal people. This often results in a draining energy and a lack of will to live healthy lives. Programs which are cooperatively and consultatively developed, funded for the long-term, and simultaneously directed at the basic areas of life outlined above, are needed to help groups heal and begin again.