

Northern Land Council

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The Chairperson
Senate Legal and Constitutional Committee
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600



Dear Chairperson

INQUIRY INTO PROGRESS TOWARDS NATIONAL RECONCILIATION

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the References Committee's inquiry on the Progress Towards National Reconciliation.

The Northern Land Council commends the work of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation over the last decade in progressing the reconciliation process.

The Northern Land Council has some concerns in relation to the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) framework for reporting on indigenous disadvantage, which is seen by the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation "as a key plank in sustaining the reconciliation process into the future". These concerns are outlined below.

COAG Framework For Reporting On Indigenous Disadvantage

The draft framework developed by COAG appears to be a "one size fits all" and does not recognise fundamental differences, in terms of economic development, between indigenous people living on and having title to their land and those who are urban based. It also fails to recognise the difference between areas where indigenous languages and cultures remain the primary vehicle for communication and negotiation within and between groups and their representatives and areas where they are not.

While it is commendable that the COAG has recognised the importance of culture in overcoming indigenous disadvantage, culture is not something that can be separated into a single category with stand alone indicators. It must permeate all indicators. For example, the 'individual capacities' headline indicator does not recognise the importance of Aboriginal languages within the education system. Surely, if a community is to grow and prosper and be culturally strong the recognition of the

509

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Aboriginal language of a particular community must be fundamental to the education system.

Language and culture are the most valuable elements of Aboriginal social capital in the Northern Territory and the recognition of this must be provided in any framework that seeks to remove indigenous disadvantage.

The framework is somewhat confusing in terms of not being clear if the 'strategic areas for action' are hierarchical or not. If so, it is worrying to see 'economic participation' at the bottom of the list.

This headline could also be better described as economic development. While numerous communities have some form of economic participation the ideal is to develop both the economic opportunities and participation within that economy.

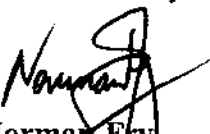
The importance of Aboriginal people participating in traditional economies can not be understated. For example, the importance of the recognition of native title to marine resources would provide Aboriginal people with economic opportunities and employment in traditional economies within their communities' traditional sea country. It is frustrating for many Aboriginal communities to be told repeatedly that they must participate in the economy when they are denied native title rights to marine resources, which they have managed and sustainably utilised for centuries.

The framework and corresponding discussion points talk about 'functional and resilient families and communities', but then fails to include governance models which would provide communities with the necessary structure to be resilient. Strong, responsive, transparent and accountable community governance models underpin all other headline criteria within the draft framework and lie at the heart of economic and social development for indigenous people in Australia.

Finally, the framework is also not clear on specific linkages between 'strategic areas for action' and 'headline indicators'.

I hope that these comments are able to assist the committee in its deliberations.

Yours sincerely


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