By Aboriginal Peak Organisations NT (APO NT)

# Putting Aboriginal people back in the driver's seat

## A post-Intervention roadmap for the NT

In the post-Intervention landscape of the Northern Territory, Aboriginal people and their organisations are working to re-establish their role in leading service provision and community development in Aboriginal communities. In doing so, Aboriginal Territorians are working together to overcome the fundamental failing at the heart of the Intervention (the Northern Territory Emergency Response, or NTER) – the disempowerment of the people directly affected by its measures.

Photo © Dreamstime.com.

The Aboriginal Peak Organisations NT (APO NT) is working with others in the NT to achieve a fundamental shift in partnerships between Aboriginal people, their organisations and non-Aboriginal non-government organisations (NGOs). In February 2013, at a forum held with non-Aboriginal NGOs in Alice Springs, John Paterson, CEO of the Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance Northern Territory (AMSANT), and one of the spokespeople for Aboriginal Peak Organisations NT (APO NT), addressed non-Indigenous service providers about the fundamental importance of Aboriginal community control in achieving better outcomes for Aboriginal peoples in the Northern Territory (NT). He called for a new approach to service delivery in remote NT communities, which 'puts Aboriginal people back in the driver's seat'. At a Governance Summit convened by APO NT in April 2013, David Ross, Director of the Central Land Council and another key APO NT leader, reiterated this call: '[e]ffective Aboriginal governance puts us back in the driver's seat ... You can start by acting now on the things you do control, and make decisions about priority issues to tackle.'

Both articulated deeply held feelings that Aboriginal people have become passengers, with little control over outcomes for their communities – and that this needs to change.

Evaluation of the NTER in consultations on Stronger Futures (discussed below) confirmed this deep sense of disempowerment:

'The recorded comments suggest a strong sense of disempowerment in many communities. There is a widespread view that communities are not being listened to and that they do not have an adequate say in decision-making.'[1]

An analysis of the NTER found that:

'[F]or initiatives specific to the NTER communities – such as income management and signage outside communities referring to the alcohol and pornography bans – the abrupt imposition broke trust and made some people feel that they had been unfairly labelled.'[2]

Further:

'Many people valued the measures, but the manner in which they were implemented caused problems.'[3]

The NTER imposed top-down measures on Aboriginal communities, and wrested control away from Aboriginal peoples and organisations. Aboriginal organisations were framed as part of the problem in remote Aboriginal communities in the NT, and sidelined. A focus on 'failure and crisis' in remote Aboriginal organisations undermined trust in Aboriginal leadership and community control, resulting in an increasing trend towards funding non-Aboriginal NGOs to deliver services in remote NT communities. This response disregarded the important benefits of services delivered by Aboriginal organisations, both short-term and long-term, and the capacity of Aboriginal organisations to deliver these services.

Under Stronger Futures, a package of legislation passed in February 2012, the Commonwealth Government has made a commitment to a new way of working in partnership with Aboriginal people, leaders and communities to address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage. A vital component of this new approach must be putting Aboriginal peoples and organisations at the centre as active participants, rather than passive passengers.

The change of direction under Stronger Futures is supported by strong international and Australian evidence that local involvement, ownership and control are vital elements for the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people and the effective development of their communities. New government programs are also starting to refund and recognise the role of Aboriginal organisations in service delivery and capacity building in communities. There is a long way to go, but this positive shift is starting to create some opportunities for NT communities and Aboriginal people.

While the change in direction under Stronger Futures is welcome, it is only part of the roadmap to re-empowering Aboriginal communities. APO NT recognises that non-Aboriginal NGOs remain an integral part of the service delivery environment in NT, but we are committed to ensuring that they work in partnership with Aboriginal organisations (where they exist) and Aboriginal people.

Recognising this, APO NT, together with Strong Aboriginal Families, Together (SAFT), National Congress of Australia's First Peoples (National Congress), Australia Council of Social Service (ACOSS), and NT Council of Social Service (NTCOSS) convened the forum for non-Aboriginal NGOs in Alice Springs in February 2013 to discuss a renewed approach to service delivery and development in remote communities in the NT.

The new partnership approach seeks to harness government investment and non-Aboriginal NGO engagement towards (re)building an Aboriginal-controlled services and development sector in the NT.

### SERVICE DELIVERY MODEL UNDER THE NTER

Aboriginal NGOs have long delivered services in the NT, often using a community development approach with an emphasis on good governance, local involvement and capacity strengthening. The strength of Aboriginal NGOs includes: strong relationships with communities, understanding of community needs, cultural competence, and a permanent presence in Aboriginal communities. Changing government policy and a lack of ongoing resourcing has undermined the service delivery and community development capacity of Aboriginal NGOs, as well as their capacity to document and evaluate their work. However, overall it is clear that many organisations have legitimacy among their Aboriginal members and with the government departments that fund them, and that they are delivering positive outcomes in the very challenging NT environment.

The Aboriginal NGO sector in the NT has long been concerned about the increasing use of non-Aboriginal NGOs in Aboriginal service provision, which has seen the fragmentation and duplication of service delivery, a lack of co-ordination with Aboriginal organisations and service >>

> Since 1996, successive governments have viewed non-Aboriginal NGOs as less risky and have steadily preferred them to deliver services in remote Aboriginal communities.

providers, lack of genuine capacity development outcomes and indeed the gradual erosion, undermining and loss of Aboriginal organisations.

The decline in Aboriginal service organisations over the past decade or so began first with the de-funding of key women's and family organisations, along with outstation resource centres, in 1996, followed by the abolition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) in 2004. Other factors have also influenced the decline in the NT, including the abolition of over 60 local government bodies in favour of the super shires, the loss of Aboriginal Community Housing Associations (also known as ICHOs), progress associations and so on, and the progressive winding down of the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) program.

Others, including the former NT Coordinator-General and Commonwealth Coordinator-General for Remote Indigenous Services, have also recently raised concerns over the outcomes of the increasing trend to award contracts to non-Aboriginal NGOs.

Introduction of the NTER in 2007 accelerated a trend of preferencing non-Aboriginal NGOs to deliver services in remote Aboriginal communities, driven by a largely false rationale by government about Indigenous governance and organisational capacity, and a policy shift to 'mainstreaming'. Non-Aboriginal NGOs were seen as less risky.[4]

The exclusion of Aboriginal organisations from service contracts often occurs through competitive tendering processes that they are either not invited to tender for, or fail to win. The resulting negative impacts on Aboriginal organisations, employment and community development outcomes are not factored into the policy equation. Challenging the illusory economic rationalism of 'contestability' is critical to any strategy designed to re-build the Aboriginal NGO sector.

The announcement of significant ten-year funding under the Stronger Futures package provides an opportunity for government and non-Aboriginal NGOs to reverse this trend. This is achieved by changing the way funding is allocated and spent, in particular its re-direction towards building capacity of Aboriginal organisations under new government programs, such as Stronger Communities for Children and the Remote Jobs and Communities Program, which preference local (often Aboriginal) service providers. It is also critical that a rigorous, long-term and adequately resourced approach is taken to implementing and evaluating development work in the remote context.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY CONTROL

The cumulative impacts of recent policies of the NT and Commonwealth governments have denied opportunities for community leaders to govern their own communities.[5] There are, currently, few clear processes for community decision-making about planning for the future.

A vital first step in rebuilding Aboriginal capacity is recognising that top-down 'intervention' as an approach to policy-making is fundamentally flawed. This is clear from the Closing the Gap Clearing House report, *What works to overcome Indigenous disadvantage.*[6]

The report found that what does not work includes 'one size fits all' approaches and a lack of collaboration with communities. It found that what *does* work is community involvement and engagement; adequate resourcing and planned and comprehensive responses; respect for language and culture; working together; development of social capital; recognising underlying social determinants; commitment to doing projects with, not for, Aboriginal people; creative collaboration; and an understanding that issues are complex and contextual.[7]

International and Australian evidence highlights that **local involvement, ownership and control are critical to effective development** for Indigenous people and communities. There is strong evidence to show that Aboriginal governance and control is fundamental to improving Aboriginal wellbeing and achieving sustainable socio-economic development of communities.[8] The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner's 2012 *Social Justice Report* noted that:

> 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations with good governance are innovative hybrids which combine the features of the community's governance culture with the requirements of the governments' governance culture.'[9]

The Aboriginal community-controlled health sector in the NT demonstrates the positive outcomes of community control and ownership. The former NT Coordinator-General has noted:

> 'There is a growing body of evidence demonstrating the efficacy and benefits of well-managed, community-based and controlled organisations that can provide culturally appropriate and responsive services… Aboriginal community controlled health services have played a significant role in providing primary health care services, having sound local knowledge, cultural competence and experience in delivering a diverse range of complementary health programs.'[10]

Moreover, evidence shows that **control and empowerment** are themselves critical determinants of **health and wellbeing**. Control is a fundamental human need that underpins individual and community health. International evidence shows that empowerment strategies produce improved outcomes at psychological, organisational, community and population levels, especially in relation to socially excluded populations.[11]

Aboriginal control is well-recognised in international human rights covenants, most notably the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The Declaration protects the right to self-determination for Indigenous peoples including the right 'to be actively involved in developing and determining health, housing and other economic and social programmes affecting them and, as far as possible, to administer such programmes through their own institutions'.[12]

The Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development has documented examples from diverse settings in the United States where, under Indigenous jurisdiction or control:

'... programs operate more efficiently, health improves, costs decline, and the long-term burden of Native poverty begins to be reduced for both Indigenous nations and the society as a whole. These empowered nations are solving problems that the United States and Canada have failed to solve for nearly a century...' [13]

Similar research in Alaska found that 'native self-governance is an essential ingredient in overcoming poverty and related social problems in rural Alaska'.[14] Efforts by Indigenous Alaskans, particularly at the village and sub-regional level, produced an array of effective new governing strategies and institutions. The research concluded:

'Governing institutions that advance self-determination, have legitimacy with the relevant community, are effective, and fit the internal capabilities of the community are likely to succeed not only as vehicles of self-governance, but as keys to improving the socio-economic welfare of Native communities.'[15]

### CREATING NEW PARTNERSHIPS WITH ABORIGINAL PEOPLES AND ORGANISATIONS

Effective Aboriginal organisations are vital as they facilitate the local involvement, ownership and control necessary to achieve sustainable Aboriginal communities in the NT. There are a number of important benefits of services delivered by Aboriginal organisations, both short-term and long-term. Short-term benefits include culturally competent and community-responsive service delivery, better access to services, and increased community participation and employment in service delivery. Long-term benefits include program sustainability and accountability, more active decision-making by Aboriginal people, stronger Aboriginal leadership, and improved socio-economic and health outcomes.

APO NT has argued for a new partnership approach to enable governments, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal NGOs to work together in order to obtain the best possible outcomes for service delivery and capacity development for Aboriginal communities in the NT. This approach needs to be based on delivering control for Aboriginal people and their organisations, genuine partnership and recognition of the respective capacities each partner brings.

Central to this new approach is the need for resourced, competent and legitimate Aboriginal organisations to undertake service delivery and development, representing

their constituents regarding policies and priorities, and entering into partnerships with non-Aboriginal NGOs and all levels of government. Good community development practice in the NT must fundamentally contribute to the (re) building of such Aboriginal organisations, or (in some cases) other governance arrangements which deliver Aboriginal control over decision-making, finances and outcomes.

There have been some promising signs with recent changes in Australian Government approaches under Stronger Futures, the Communities for Children program, and the new remote employment arrangements, that are preferencing local (often Aboriginal) service providers in the NT. The Australian Government has actively begun to recognise the strengths of Aboriginal providers in the context of remote communities in NT.

### A NEW RELATIONSHIP WITH NON-ABORIGINAL NGOS

The Alice Springs forum brought together senior representatives of non-Aboriginal NGOs operating in the NT with Aboriginal peak organisations. The forum was attended by nearly 30 non-Aboriginal NGOs.

The forum was a watershed moment, driven by the desire to work with and secure the support of non-Aboriginal NGOs towards strengthening and rebuilding an Aboriginal-controlled development and service sector in the NT. These aspirations are shared by the vast majority of non-Aboriginal NGOs.    >>

The forum discussed a set of principles drafted by APO NT to guide the development of a partnership-centred approach for non-Aboriginal NGOs engaging in the delivery of services or development initiatives in Aboriginal communities in the NT. The principles were finalised in consultation with non-Aboriginal NGOs and have been circulated for endorsement. The response has been very encouraging.

A steering committee is now turning its attention to how non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal organisations can work together to put these principles into practice in the NT. This is occurring with an understanding that to be effective, the principles require a corresponding commitment from government to provide an enabling environment to properly support and resource action under the principles. A number of non-Aboriginal NGOs have initiated discussions to this end with APO NT. In recent months, a number of non-Aboriginal NGOs have declined government contracts in situations in which they did not feel confident – under the terms of the principles – in engaging in genuine partnerships with Aboriginal communities or organisations. A quiet change is in the wind.

## CONCLUSION

Better outcomes for remote communities in the NT will not be achieved quickly. They will require a sustained effort over time. This is why APO NT welcomed the ten-year funding commitment made under Stronger Futures.[16] In 2012 APO NT called on the Australian Government to make good its commitment to a new way of working in partnership with Aboriginal people, leaders and communities to address Aboriginal disadvantage, and called for a commitment to doing projects with, not for, Aboriginal people.[17] It is clear that disempowering and paternalistic approaches to addressing Indigenous disadvantage in the NT have not worked. A new approach is needed and the evidence clearly supports control, self-determination and empowerment as vital drivers of change in the health and socio-economic circumstances of Aboriginal communities.

The recent experience of APO NT working with non-Aboriginal NGOs is positive. Many non-Aboriginal NGOs have endorsed the principles for a new partnership approach, and have committed to a conversation about new ways of working with Aboriginal communities and organisations. We are continuing to work with these organisations on the bigger challenges of putting the principles into practice. The Australian Government's reformed approach under Stronger Futures and related policies appears to herald a genuine departure from the failed top-down model of the NTER. However, the ongoing challenge will be to work with government to ensure that its implementation transfers real control to Aboriginal communities and their organisations and continues to build the capacity of Aboriginal organisations. Aboriginal organisations also need to be ready to step up to the new opportunities and in many cases this will require the support and/or help of the non-Aboriginal NGO sector.

The elements are in place to harness government investment in Aboriginal services and communities towards more productive outcomes based on new partnerships between Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal-controlled organisations, government and non-Aboriginal NGOs. APO NT is actively engaged in helping to bring this vision to reality – to put Aboriginal people back in the driver's seat. ■

**Notes**: **1** O'Brien Rich Research Group (May 2012) *Stronger Futures Quantitative Analysis Report*, www.fahcsia.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/05_2012/obr_report.pdf, p108. **2** FaHCSIA, Report on the Northern Territory Emergency Response redesign consultations, FaHCSIA, Canberra, 2009, p40. **3** NTER Evaluation Report, November 2011, p4. **4** Northern Territory Coordinator-General (2012) *Office of the Northern Territory Coordinator-General for Remote Services Report*, June 2011 to August 2012, Department of Housing, Local Government and Regional Services, Northern Territory Government 2012, p57. **5** See Janet Hunt et al (eds), '*Contested Governance Culture: power and institutions in Indigenous Australia*', ANU E Press, 2008, <http://epress.anu.edu.au/caepr_series/no_29/pdf/whole_book.pdf>: '... in contrast to earlier collaborative "partnership" approaches with both the NT Government and Indigenous leaders, [the NT Emergency Response] was a return to command-and-control-style hierarchical governance (Davis and Rhodes 2000; Rhodes 2005)... Indigenous governance was to be shunted aside while public service administrators with extraordinary powers took over again (Siewart 2007)... The intervention also coincided with a period of local government reform in the NT, which had begun in 2003 (Smith 2004) and already undergone policy change in October 2006. A shift from a relatively bottom-up process of regional authority development based on culturally defined and negotiated boundaries was shelved in favour of nine proposed shires, almost all of which were considerably larger than existing proposals, and incorporated non-Indigenous landholders and small urban areas (Smith 2007a, 2007b).' **6** Al-Yaman, Fadwa and Higgins, Daryl (2011), What works to overcome Indigenous disadvantage 2009/2010, Australian Institute of Health and Wellbeing, <www.aihw.gov.au/uploadedFiles/ClosingTheGap/Content/Publications/2011/what_works_to_overcome_disadvantage_2009-10.pdf>, accessed 8 August 2013. **7** Aboriginal Peak Organisations NT Submission *Response to Stronger Futures*, August 2011, p3. **8** J Hunt, S Garling and W Sanders (eds) (2008), *Contested Governance: Culture, Power and Institutions in Indigenous Australia*, CAEPR Research Monograph No. 29, ANU E Press, Canberra; The Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development, http://hpaied.org/. **9** Social Justice Commissioner, 2012, *Social Justice Report 2012*, Australian Human Rights Commission, 113. **10** Northern Territory Coordinator-General (2012), 57. **11** Wallerstein 2006, *What is the evidence on effectiveness of empowerment to improve health?* Copenhagen, WHO Regional Office for Europe, Health Evidence Network report; http://www.euro.who.int/Document/E88086.pdf. **12** UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Article 23. **13** Stephen Cornell (2004), 'Indigenous jurisdiction and daily life: evidence from North America'. Remarks presented at the National Forum on 'Indigenous Health and the Treaty Debate: Rights, Governance and Responsibility', University of NSW, Sydney. **14** Cornell et al, 1999, *Achieving Alaska Native Self-Governance: Towards Implementation of the Alaska Natives Commission Report*. The Economics Resource Group Inc, Cambridge MA. **15** *Ibid*. **16** Aboriginal Peak Organisations NT Media release, *Long-term funding commended, but promised new partnership is the key*, 2 April 2012. **17** *Ibid*.