

Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory

An alliance of the CLC, NLC, CAALAS, NAAJA and AMSANT

Statement on Homelands, Outstations and Other Small Communities

Aboriginal Peak Organisations of the Northern Territory (APO NT)

October 2011

Homelands, outstations and other small remote communities are vital for Aboriginal groups to continue to live on and develop strong, sustainable futures on their traditional lands. These communities are critical to maintaining our unique cultures and strong connections to our traditional lands that are fundamental rights that Australian Governments should pledge to support and protect.

Evidence shows that living on homelands is associated with a range of economic, social and health benefits. These include: improved health and wellbeing outcomes; reduced social problems; and significant economic development and enterprise opportunities, particularly in on-country conservation and land management activities.

APO NT is deeply concerned that recent changes in government policies affecting homelands, outstations and other smaller communities are undermining the capacity of Aboriginal groups to remain on their traditional lands and to develop sustainable futures for these communities.

These changes, rolled out under a number of Commonwealth and Northern Territory policy initiatives, including the Northern Territory Intervention, the Closing the Gap National Indigenous Reform Agreement and related National Agreements, and the NT's Working Future policy, lack effective Aboriginal participation, input and consent, and are resulting in a range of negative impacts:

- Dismantling the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) jobs programs in remote communities is resulting in the transfer of thousands from jobs to welfare, reducing family incomes and jeopardising Aboriginal controlled organisations and enterprises.
- The proposed withdrawal of Commonwealth financial support for homelands in the NT will significantly impact on infrastructure and services for these communities.
- The prohibition on funding new housing on homelands and outstations will result over time in increased overcrowding and the deterioration of existing housing stocks.

- Policies that direct available funding to larger ‘priority’ communities and Territory ‘Growth Towns’ will further disadvantage homelands by reducing available resources and locally-accessible services. Our communities believe that these policies are intended to place pressure on people to move to larger communities and regional centres.
- The top-down nature of these policies is undermining the role and capacity of our governance structures and leadership to take responsibility for addressing the problems facing our communities and assume control of our futures.

APO NT is concerned that the significant negative impacts and unintended consequences of these policy changes are undermining the government’s efforts and investment towards reducing the disadvantage and health gaps faced by our people in the NT.

APO NT calls on the Commonwealth and Northern Territory governments to:

- Clearly state their support for the continued existence of homelands, outstations and other smaller communities and confirm that their policies are not aimed at moving Aboriginal people into growth towns or regional centres.
- Renegotiate their bilateral agreement to provide for ongoing Commonwealth Government involvement in the resourcing of outstations, and seek to re-negotiate the National Indigenous Reform Agreement and related National Partnership Agreements to include effective Aboriginal participation, input and consent.
- Reverse their decisions to refuse government funding for new housing and housing maintenance on homelands and outstations and ensure that equitable, needs-based funding is provided across all communities. Support should be provided for innovative housing and shelter options for homelands and outstations that foster the capacity for greater self-sufficiency.
- Reform CDEP to provide real ‘job creation’ through financial support to commercial enterprise development, social enterprise development and in the paid provision of services on homelands and outstations.
- Address the historic under-investment and inequitable provision of education to homelands, outstations and other smaller communities, through the development of a comprehensive plan for the provision of education to remote communities, including the recognition and resourcing of Homeland Learning Centres as proper schools and the provision of culturally-appropriate distance education.
- Ensure that support is provided to local Aboriginal organisations, such as resource agencies, to deliver services to outstations. Funding should also be provided so that Aboriginal people can be trained to deliver repair, maintenance and construction services, rather than relying on outside contractors.