

Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory

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

Statement in response to the Australian Government's Remote Jobs and Communities Program (RJCP)

3 May 2012

APO NT supports the Government's intention to help people transition into available jobs with proper wages and conditions and to building sustainable communities. However, both of these outcomes require an innovative and flexible approach for remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory.

APO NT notes that the Remote Jobs and Communities Program (RJCP) reforms are not due to come into effect until 2013, and limited detail has been provided at this stage. However, APO NT is disappointed that the RJCP investment appears to have an inadequate focus on supporting the development of local economies.

In contrast, APO NT's alternative model—the 'Community Employment and Enterprise Development Scheme' (CEEDS)—harnesses the significant government investment in remote welfare and employment services towards developing local community economies through local enterprise development, and providing diverse pathways for engagement in available employment and relevant skills development.

The most critical component of the model proposed by APO NT, the provision of waged employment, has not been adopted in the Government's new scheme.

Aboriginal providers

APO NT welcomes the Government's proposal to have a single local provider with a permanent presence in the region, and notes the support indicated by the Government for Aboriginal controlled organisations.

It is critical that service providers properly engage with the community and ensure that profits are reinvested locally. In remote communities in the Northern Territory, this means that Aboriginal-run service providers should be strongly supported to deliver employment services.

We welcome the commitment of five year funding with an option to extend for another five years, as we believe this is essential to allow local Aboriginal providers to plan for the future.

However, APO NT notes that there is significant complexity associated with meeting tender requirements and administering such a program. We are concerned that, by default, non-Indigenous commercial companies or NGOs may be at an advantage over local Aboriginal organisations in this regard. The Government has committed \$15 million nationally to build the capacity of local organisations for delivery of current and new services. This is inadequate. The Government needs to ensure there is an adequate funding commitment for capacity building and, where necessary, for developing new Aboriginal organisations to take on a service provision role. Without this investment, there will be little prospect of new Aboriginal organisations akin to Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation developing elsewhere.

In regions where there are few remaining Aboriginal organisations, specific strategies will need to be developed to foster new organisations and slowly build their capacity.

Sustainable economic enterprise

Though dwarfed by the \$508m Participation Account, the \$240m Community Development Fund appears to represent some potential for fostering local enterprise in communities. Its focus on 'larger community development activities' is, however, problematic.

There is no clear strategy or focus on fostering micro/small business in remote communities as a means of promoting economic development. The absence of such a focus would be a missed opportunity under a new scheme. APO NT would welcome further detail on how the fund is intended to be used to support local enterprise development and on how this will interact with the process of developing 'Community Action Plans.'

Lack of an employment component

The RJCP focus on participation through 'activities' is disappointing. While APO NT welcomes the extension of 'grandfathered' CDEP wages for 5 years we remain deeply concerned about the failure to provide an employment component as part of the new scheme. We note that as at 23 April 2012 in the Northern Territory only 1,667 of around 4,500 CDEP participants were in receipt of CDEP wages (significantly down from 2,403 in February 2011).

APO NT has been advocating for the continuation of a waged scheme similar to CDEP and outlining the flow on risks posed for communities by the removal of wages. The CDEP waged employment program has benefitted remote Aboriginal communities and economies and has provided an incentive-based job environment that is preferable to a welfare participation model.

Importantly, with no immediate or medium-term prospect for a significant increase in private sector jobs in remote communities, welfare participation will become a destination rather than a genuine stepping stone to work. There is inadequate detail of how people in remote communities will make the transition from participation activities to 'real' employment where it does not exist 'in or near their community.'

APO NT is concerned about the inadequacies of the Government's over-reliance on a welfare participation approach. This includes the likely unintended consequences of a Centrelink-administered, as opposed to locally-administered, 'no show no pay' rule.

Next Steps

The reforms are not due to come into effect until 2013. Limited detail has been provided at this stage.

APO NT will work with local Aboriginal CDEP providers to influence the implementation of the capacity building program and associated funding allocations.

APO NT will continue to lobby the Australian Government for a waged program for remote areas of the NT to fill the gaps in the Government's model.

We look forward to working with the Government to ensure these reforms are implemented with an emphasis on supporting local Aboriginal-run service providers, building local capacity in remote areas and fostering sustainable social enterprise.

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