

**Aboriginal Peak Organisations  
Northern Territory (APO NT)**

**APO NT Submission**

**February 2023**

**Senate Community Affairs References Committee Inquiry into the  
Extent and Nature of Poverty in Australia.**

We welcome the opportunity to provide feedback on the inquiry into the extent and nature of poverty in Australia. The eight members of Aboriginal Peak Organisations of the Northern Territory (APO NT) continue to advocate for Aboriginal-led, managed and delivered solutions to issues that relate to our communities and peoples.

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## List of recommendations

### **Northern Territory Remote Aboriginal Investment:**

1. Implement APO NT's position on the design and oversight of the future investment package to replace the NT Remote Aboriginal Investment agreement. This includes increasing quantity and scope of Australian investment in the NT, partnering with Aboriginal people to make decisions about the investment, and investing early in strengthening the Aboriginal Community Controlled sector in preparation for the new Agreement.

### **Housing:**

2. The NT Government commissions research to determine the current and future housing need in urban public housing, remote communities, community living areas and town camps, and share these findings with stakeholders, including APO NT and its members.
3. The NT Government publish data on the number of applications and average wait times for housing in remote communities.
4. The NT and Australian Governments work with Land Councils and Aboriginal Housing NT to develop a new, ten-year tripartite agreement on remote Aboriginal housing in the NT, which responds to demand for housing and is aligned with Closing the Gap targets.
5. The Australian and NT Government fully-fund preventative repairs and maintenance in remote communities, initially using the Healthhabitat survey fix model, and then moving to a roster of regular planned maintenance.
6. The Australian and NT Government fully fund responsive repairs and maintenance to ensure all public housing in the NT is safe and habitable.
7. The NT and Australian Governments fund infrastructure on currently unregistered homelands such that they can become 'registered' where potential residents intend to live in those homelands.
8. The NT Government release the 2022 Homelands audit.
9. The Australian Government undertake a survey of overcrowding, poverty and health outcomes on Homelands.
10. The NT and Australian Governments work with Land Councils and Aboriginal Housing NT to develop a new, ten-year tripartite agreement that properly funds housing on homelands as part of the housing continuum.
11. The NT Government reverse the Remote Rent Framework and implement an income-based rent for remote communities and town camps, and then work with the sector to design a fairer rent-setting model

**Education:**

1. Fund an NT Aboriginal Independent Education Peak Body to ensure Aboriginal people have decision making roles at all levels within education.
2. Greater transparency regarding the use of funds invested by the Australian Government to the NT Government for education.
3. Ensure sufficient flexibility in delivering education policies and programs, including school calendars, curricula, to allow for local circumstances and needs.
4. Commit to the delivery and adequate resourcing of bilingual learning / two-way learning at a minimum for remote Aboriginal communities.
5. Adult literacy programs are resourced and implemented in remote communities and/or where majority of adults do not speak English as their first language.
6. Support the reintroduction of secondary schooling in remote communities across the Northern Territory – with curriculum that supports relevant local training, transition pathways to boarding school and into employment.
7. Bolster the Remote Area Teaching Education (RATE) program to ensure it is fit for purpose, culturally appropriate and flexible to deliver training in the communities.
8. A life course approach to education engagement, investing in all stages in childhood and young adulthood, especially key transition points.
9. Expand and build on existing programs that demonstrate promising results, for example the Learning on Country Program delivered by Northern Land Council.

**Welfare:**

10. The Australian Government to increase social welfare payments to alleviate deepening poverty in remote communities including:
  - a. Welfare payments to be permanently and adequately increased to keep people out of poverty.
  - b. An increase in the rate of the remote area allowance in line with higher cost of living of remote regions of the Northern Territory.
  - c. Ongoing indexation of all payments in line with wage movements at least twice a year.
11. The Australian Government abolish all discriminatory forms of mandatory income management and replace with opt-in models that empower families and communities.

**Remote jobs:**

12. The Australian Government to implement the recommendations from the [APO NT Fair Work and Strong Communities](#), a proposal for a remote development and employment scheme' to enhance employment opportunities for Aboriginal people in remote communities.

## Introduction

APO NT is an alliance of Aboriginal organisations working to promote and protect the rights of Aboriginal people living in the Northern Territory (NT). The APO NT alliance comprises the Central Land Council (CLC), Northern Land Council (NLC), Tiwi Land Council (TLC), Anindilyakwa Land Council (ALC), North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency (NAAJA), Northern Territory Indigenous Business Network (NTIBN), Aboriginal Housing Northern Territory (AHNT) and the Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance of the NT (AMSANT). The member organisations of APO NT are united in their commitment to improving conditions for Aboriginal people across broad political, economic, social, and cultural areas. Since APO NT's establishment in 2010, our members have been working to develop proactive and constructive policies on critical issues facing Aboriginal people in the NT, and strive to influence the work of the Australian and NT Governments.

Underlining our collective work is the right to self-determination, which is detailed and expressed in the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People. The primacy of this cannot be understated. As representatives from peak Aboriginal organisations in the NT, we share the aim of protecting and advancing the wellbeing and rights of Aboriginal people and communities in several key areas. Local involvement, ownership and control underpins APO NT's work in advocating for practical and sustainable solutions for Aboriginal people. These are then predicated on policy conditions that support Aboriginal self-determination, including commitments to needs-based funding, building the community-controlled sector and centring Aboriginal decisions in how national strategies are implemented on the ground.

## Northern Territory context

When considering the impact of poverty for Aboriginal people in the NT, it is essential to understand the unique environmental and demographic context of the NT. The Territory has a sparsely distributed population and the highest proportion of Aboriginal people of any jurisdiction, many of whom live in remote communities or on homelands, and speak English as a fourth or fifth language. Socio-economic indicators across education, justice, health, employment and housing for Aboriginal people in the NT reflect decades of exclusion, underinvestment and disempowerment, with rates often the worst in Australia when compared to the non-Aboriginal population<sup>1</sup>. These statistics, some of which appear to be worsening, describe the outcomes of successive, and often cumulative, failures across policy decisions to address underlying causes of poverty.

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<sup>1</sup> Productivity Commission, Closing the Gap Annual Data Compilation Report July 2022.

It must be acknowledged that for many Aboriginal people in the NT, poverty has resulted from a brutal history. The multifaceted and ongoing impact of colonisation has had a devastating impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for over 200 years, driven by policies that saw wholesale dispossession from their lands, being moved off Country to reserves and missions, and the loss of language and culture. Aboriginal people bore the brunt of the horrendous policy of the Stolen Generations, the effects of which still reverberate today. Aboriginal people recognise the inherent link between discrimination and poverty, and how this disempowerment has resulted in cycles of poverty across generations.

## Poverty undermines our rights to culture

This reality is the frame we use to position our work- not only does it show we seek to repair harms of the past, but we recognise that return to culture is how we can reassert Aboriginal ways of being, doing and becoming. Without the restoration and preservation of Aboriginal languages, Kinship, cultural practices, ceremonies, laws/lore, and Country, it is extremely difficult for Aboriginal people to enjoy the same rights as other Australians. Indeed, it is vital that we consider the impact of poverty on the ability of Aboriginal people in the NT to practice and share culture. Culture is so important because it is over 65,000 years of history and survival. It's everything.

For every Aboriginal person it is imperative that culture is prioritised, that they know their Country and where they come from, their rights and responsibilities and obligations under Kinship systems.

Ultimately, though, it is the systems that create poverty that are the problem, not the people subject to the system. Above we have described the devastating effect of colonisation on Aboriginal peoples. It is clear however, that successive Governments' authoritarian approach to Aboriginal Affairs policy, and punitive approaches to welfare, have seen increasing amounts of pressure placed on individuals to change their behaviour, with limited focus on addressing the structural disadvantage that drives poverty, especially transgenerational poverty. The disempowerment that has resulted from specific policies, such as the NT Emergency Response (also known as the NT Intervention), and the prolonged lack of investment in the bush over decades, means we are often caught in repeating cycles of political inertia, interspersed by rapid bursts of paternalistic crisis intervention. What is critical is that local voices and solutions are prioritized, and we see sustained commitments, borne from active partnerships.

To this, it remains vital that APO NT reiterate its support for the Voice to Parliament, the Uluru Statement from the Heart and implementation of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, along with reforms that ensure funding and investment decisions are made with Aboriginal people and Aboriginal Community-Controlled organisations. Only through these varied mechanisms can we empower Aboriginal people in the NT, and ensure accountability for a range of outcomes. These approaches, though different in their scope and intended outcome, are necessary to change the current status quo and restore the voice and power of Aboriginal people.

## APO NT's submission

The interrelationships between the causes and impacts of poverty have been well documented. An attempt to map these factors is shown in the Appendix, based on internal discussions within APO NT. While not exhaustive, it is an attempt to provide the Inquiry with an overview of the complexities of poverty in the NT, without trying to determine causal/inferred pathways that contribute to, or result in, poverty. Rather our submission describes the NT context and details solutions APO NT members advocate for, as detailed in the recommendations (listed on Page 3).

Moreover, other bodies have described, in detail, NT-based, sector specific research on critical issues that relate to poverty, and we encourage the Inquiry to consider the findings and recommendations in:

- Ngaanyatjarra, Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara Women's Council's recent report on 'Cost and affordability of healthy, equitable and more sustainable diets, and store food environments, in the APY Lands'<sup>2</sup>
- AMSANT's Food Summit report<sup>3</sup>
- NTCOSS' biannual Cost of Living reports<sup>4</sup>
- And submissions to this Inquiry from APO NT members, including CLC and AMSANT.

APO NT's submission reports on the drivers of poverty for Aboriginal people in the NT context, with particular focus on cost-of-living pressures, remote service access and poverty; the interrelated impact of poverty on housing security, and health, education, family violence and child protection outcomes; and the impacts of poverty as experienced in remote NT communities and on homelands. Lastly, we provide the rationale and overview for of APO NT's *Fair Work, Strong Communities* proposal that aims to address and reduce poverty by increasing real jobs in remote communities.

## NT Remote Aboriginal Investment

The existing NT Remote Aboriginal Investment is a national partnership agreement between the Australian and NT governments which has invested approximately \$1 billion over a 9 year period, and funds a large range of services in remote NT. APO NT recently made a [submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs](#) about the opportunity for future investment as a significant opportunity to improve outcomes for Aboriginal people in the NT. This submission mirrors efforts from all APO NT members to enact Aboriginal community control of how policy and programs work for the communities they serve. This approach is vital as the current Northern Territory Remote Aboriginal Investment partnership agreement between the Australian and NT Government for investment in remote services ends in July 2024, and any new arrangement for future investment must include APO NT as a signatory to ensure adherence to the intent of the reforms under Closing the Gap.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.npywc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/APY-Lands-Summary-Results-Brief\\_June-2022\\_final.pdf](https://www.npywc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/APY-Lands-Summary-Results-Brief_June-2022_final.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.amsant.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Food-Summit-Report-V2.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://ntcoss.org.au/cost-of-living-reports/>

As part of this, APO NT has tabled a three-part position which states how the design and implementation of the future investment package should proceed:

**Part 1:** The next phase of Australian investment in the NT must be far greater than the existing contribution through the NT Remote Aboriginal Investment package, as this is not able to adequately address the needs of Aboriginal people in the NT. APO NT has made a high-level initial proposal for low, medium and high-cost options amounting to an investment of \$4 to \$5 billion over 10 years. The proposal is structured around the Closing the Gap Priority Reforms, with an emphasis on supporting the durability and growth of Aboriginal communities and organisations. The key elements of our proposal are related to the Closing the Gap Priority Reforms, as detailed below:

- Priority reform 1: Support regional and community governance and decision-making.
- Priority reform 2: Strengthening Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations through infrastructure, workforce, governance.
- Priority reform 2: Grow and develop community-controlled service systems including policing, community safety, youth services, community housing.
- Priority reform 3: Transform Government services.
- Priority reform 4: Support regional data projects and Aboriginal-led evaluation.
- Other: Water purification systems and infrastructure, climate adaptation including solar power, and stores licencing/food security.

**Part 2:** APO NT requests up-front Australian investment in strengthening the Aboriginal Community Controlled sector amounting to \$22 million, starting from July 2023. We are seeking this funding to support the Aboriginal Community-Controlled sector in the lead up to the commencement of the future investment agreement from July 2024.

**Part 3:** APO NT is developing a new tripartite Agreement between ourselves, the NT and Australian Governments to drive and oversee implementation of the future investment package, in line with Priority Reform One in Closing the Gap. As part of this Agreement, APO NT will build on local and regional decision-making into the investment governance arrangements. This would enable community to make decisions at the local level on the design, implementation and monitoring of the new investment package. APO NT will table a draft Agreement in March 2023 for negotiation with NT and Australian Governments.

To date, APO NT has received limited formal support or feedback on our position from Ministers and public servants at both levels of Government. However, we firmly believe that by increasing Australian investment in the NT, strengthening Aboriginal organisations and partnering with Aboriginal people to make decisions, the future investment package can contribute to alleviate the drivers of poverty in the NT, as outlined throughout the rest of this submission. We urge the Australian and NT Governments to proactively engage with and support our position on the design and oversight of future investment.

**Recommendation 1: Implement APO NT’s position on the design and oversight of the future investment package to replace the NT Remote Aboriginal Investment agreement. This includes increasing the quantity and scope of Australian investment in the NT, partnering with Aboriginal people to make decisions about the investment, and investing early in strengthening the Aboriginal Community-Controlled sector in preparation for the new Agreement.**

## Housing

The NT has the highest rates of homelessness in Australia with 6 per cent of people experiencing homelessness — [twelve times the national average](#). This is largely driven by the NT and Australian Government’s long-term underinvestment in housing in remote communities and public housing which has resulted in a lack of affordable homes, badly maintained housing and high rates of overcrowding.<sup>5</sup> In this context, building much more good quality, affordable housing and supporting proactive repairs and maintenance are critical to reducing poverty and improving the health and social and economic wellbeing of Aboriginal people in the NT.<sup>6</sup>

The link between housing and poor outcomes for Aboriginal people in other areas of life is well documented.<sup>7</sup> The availability of a secure home affects life expectancy, physical health, mental health, health, education, workplace participation and employment and (obviously) homelessness.<sup>8</sup> The positive effect of good housing is exemplified in the reflections of an Aboriginal health worker in the Barkly Region who described a dramatic difference in health outcomes in families who moved from little sheds into proper housing:<sup>5</sup>

*When I started going back, and houses were built, I noticed immediately a drop in the scabies... You could see the mental change. Could see the difference in families. Kids are healthier and happier. I’ve seen this repeated in other communities once housing was given – the change.*

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<sup>5</sup> NT Government, Homelessness in the Northern Territory: Northern Territory submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs Inquiry into Homelessness in Australia, 17 March 2020, 8.

<sup>6</sup> Dr Nicola Brackertz and Alex Wilkinson, AHURI Professional Services, Research synthesis of social and economic outcomes of good housing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People, January 2017, ii ([link](#)); Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, ‘Indigenous mental health, housing and homelessness, 2022 ([link](#)).

<sup>7</sup> Dr Nicola Brackertz and Alex Wilkinson, AHURI Professional Services, Research synthesis of social and economic outcomes of good housing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People, January 2017, ii ([link](#)).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

In remote areas of Australia – which includes all of the NT except Darwin – [71 per cent of Aboriginal](#) people live in social housing that is either provided directly by Government (public housing) or at least partially funded by Government and delivered by a community housing provider or Aboriginal community housing organisation. The NT has the highest proportion of people in public housing of any jurisdiction in Australia.<sup>9</sup> This means it is squarely within the NT and Australian Governments’ power and control to remedy the issues of supply, quality and cost.

Funding more quality housing provides a net economic benefit. According to modelling from SGS Economics and Planning, every \$1 spent now on social and affordable housing will deliver \$2 in benefits, while a failure to act on the housing needs of people will cost \$25 billion per year by 2051.<sup>10</sup>

The key opportunities to reduce poverty related to housing are found in the barriers Aboriginal people face to accessing adequate, affordable housing in the NT, being that:

- Governments have failed to keep up with the demand for public housing in remote communities and town camps, leading to chronic overcrowding and waiting lists of up to ten years.
- Housing is of low quality, due to the age of dwellings and the failure of the Government to undertake regular maintenance and respond to requests for repairs in public housing and provide funding to ensure homelands don’t fall into disrepair.
- Rent in remote communities and certain town camps has recently become more unaffordable. On 6 February 2023 the NT Government implemented the ‘Remote Rent Framework’ which changed the way rent is calculated in remote communities and some NT town camps, from being income-based, to being based on the number of bedrooms in a house. For two-thirds of tenants, this led to a rental increase.

Each of these is addressed in more detail below.

## Undersupply of public housing in remote communities, community living areas and town camps

In 2019 the new Closing the Gap partnership agreement with all Australian Governments [set a target](#) of just 12% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in overcrowded homes by 2031.

The NT is thousands of homes behind that target; the majority (56.6%) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the NT live in overcrowded dwellings [according to 2021 Census data](#). Since the census, this has improved marginally in remote communities and town camps -- to [55.2% as at October 2022](#) -- as a result of investment in new houses and additional rooms through the [National Partnership on Remote Housing NT](#) (NPRHNT).

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<sup>9</sup> Report on Government Services 2023, Housing and Homelessness, Table GA. 15

<sup>10</sup> Give Me Shelter – Housing All Australians’ Synopsis, June 2022 ([weblink](#)).

NPRHNT is a five-year agreement, from July 2018- June 2023 between the Australian and NT Governments that is aimed at reduce overcrowding in remote communities and town camps in the NT. Each Government contributed about \$550 million during the lifetime of the agreement – with the NT pledging to spend an additional \$550 million over a ten-year period. From commencement to 31 October 2022, the NPRHNT has added 1,525 bedrooms, through building 383 additional homes, 321 additional bedrooms and 585 additional living spaces. However this investment has only had a marginal effect on overcrowding, which dropped 3.2 percentage points from [58.1% in 2018 to 55.2% at 31 October 2022](#).

This small improvement is unsurprising when compared with demand: in 2020 NT Government estimated 8,000-12,000 additional homes were needed across the NT to reduce overcrowding and meet the demand through population growth.<sup>11</sup> This need is reflected in current wait times for public housing. There are currently more than [5,000 unallocated applications](#) for public housing in NT – 2,942 on the ‘general’ wait list and 2,111 on the ‘priority’ list. [According to the NT Government](#) the below are the current estimated wait times in the larger centres of the NT:

Estimated wait times for public housing (years)						
Region	General wait times			Priority wait times		
	1 bedroom	2 bedroom	≥3 bedroom	1 bedroom	2 bedroom	≥3 bedroom
Darwin/Casuarina	8-10	4-6	4-6	6-8	4-6	4-6
Palmerston	6-8	2-4	2-4	6-8	4-6	2-4
Katherine	6-8	6-8	6-8	4-6	4-6	4-6
Nhulunbuy	6-8	6-8	6-8	4-6	4-6	6-8
Tennant Creek	6-8	6-8	8-10	6-8	2-4	4-6
Alice Springs	6-8	6-8	6-8	6-8	6-8	6-8

Wait times in remote communities are not published, because applications are reviewed, assessed and allocated by locally-constituted [Housing Reference Groups](#). However, the NT Government could publish an estimated wait time for housing in communities, community living areas and town camps based on the average time an application stays on the list before it is allocated.

<sup>11</sup> Department of Local Government, Housing and Community Development, ‘A Home for all Territorians: NT Housing Strategy 2020-2025’ 2019, 11 ([weblink](#)).

**Recommendation 2: The NT Government commission research to determine the current and future housing need in urban public housing, remote communities, community living areas and town camps, and share these findings with stakeholders, including APO NT and its members.**

**Recommendation 3: The NT Government publish data on the number of applications and average wait times for housing in remote communities.**

**Recommendation 4: The NT and Australian Governments work with Land Councils and Aboriginal Housing NT to develop a new, ten-year tripartite agreement on remote Aboriginal housing in the NT, which responds to demand for housing and is aligned with Closing the Gap targets.**

## Quality of public housing in remote communities, community living areas and town camps

The system and funding for repairs and maintenance in public housing in remote communities, community living areas and town camps in the NT have largely been inadequate to ensure homes keep their occupants healthy and well. Overcrowding, described above, exacerbates the need for repairs, as assets degrade more often because the infrastructure in a house designed for 4-6 people is going to break down nor function as well when there are 10-15 people living there.<sup>12</sup> Not undertaking timely repairs is associated with poorer outcomes, including gastrointestinal infections and diarrhoea associated with inadequate food preparation and storage areas.<sup>13</sup>

While there is a lack of NT-specific data, Healthhabitat, which has surveyed around 7,500 homes in Aboriginal communities in Australia found that 62 per cent of homes had no working shower, and 40% of homes had a broken toilet.<sup>14</sup> Research from 2014-15 in remote Aboriginal communities found that 36% of people were living in homes with major structural problems.<sup>15</sup>

In 2017, residents from the remote community of Ltyentye Apurte (also known as Santa Teresa) commenced litigation against the NT Government seeking compensation for failure to undertake repairs for – [in some cases – 540 days](#). In 2022 residents of remote communities in the NT, [launched a class action](#) against the Territory Government seeking damages for failure to maintain housing at the legally-required level – ‘safe and habitable’.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Liam Grealy, Tess Lea, Megan Moskos, Richard Benedict, Daphne Habibis & Stephanie King, Sustaining housing through planned maintenance in remote Central Australia, Housing Studies 2022, 13 ([link](#)).

<sup>13</sup> Liam Grealy, Tess Lea, Megan Moskos, Richard Benedict, Daphne Habibis & Stephanie King, Sustaining housing through planned maintenance in remote Central Australia, Housing Studies 2022, 4 ([link](#)).

<sup>14</sup> Healthhabitat, Export Data, 2021 ([link](#))

<sup>15</sup> Liam Grealy, Tess Lea, Megan Moskos, Richard Benedict, Daphne Habibis & Stephanie King, Sustaining housing through planned maintenance in remote Central Australia, Housing Studies 2022, 13 ([link](#)).

<sup>16</sup> *Chief Executive Officer (Housing) v Young & Anor* [2022] NTCA 1

Repairs and maintenance in the NT is largely reactive, rather than proactive. If a tenant reports an issue, the Territory Housing will send a contractor out who can only undertake repairs up to a certain cost – in 2016 that was around \$100.<sup>17</sup> If the cost of repairs exceeds that amount, the contractor will drive back to the major community or town they are located within, and seek permission to undertake the full repairs needed. This creates additional costs for travel, paperwork and delay in getting issues fixed in a timely and efficient manner. In other jurisdictions, preventative repairs models have been utilised across communities, with success in terms of health outcomes and the longevity of houses.<sup>18</sup> In South Australia, teams go to all communities in the APY lands in the north west of the state as part of routine, a planned repairs and maintenance program, which is more cost-effective in the long-run.<sup>19</sup> These teams employ local people as apprentices, creating a reliable source of work and boosting skills and training in communities.<sup>20</sup>

Through the NPRHNT the NT Government has begun to roll out its ‘Healthy Homes’ program in a three communities and town camps, which uses Healthhabitat’s survey fix model to promote preventative repairs and maintenance.<sup>21</sup> While this is a welcome move, all communities in the NT need urgent access to this program.

**Recommendation 5: Australian and NT Government fully-fund preventative repairs and maintenance in remote communities, initially using the Healthhabitat survey fix model, and then moving to a roster of regular planned maintenance.**

**Recommendation 6: Australian and NT Government fully-fund responsive repairs and maintenance to ensure all public housing in the NT is safe and habitable.**

## Housing on homelands

The movement to move from often mission-run remote communities to traditional lands began in the early 1970s, and now [it is estimated](#) that around 10,000 Aboriginal people live in around 2,400 houses in 500 homelands or outstations across the NT. Homelands are clusters of houses and other structures that vary in population but can be home to between 20-100 people. They are largely located on Aboriginal land, held by Aboriginal Land Trusts awarded under the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976*.

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<sup>17</sup> Geoff Shaw, Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory (2016) Inquiry into Housing Repairs and Maintenance on Town Camps: Public Hearing Transcript 11 April, LANT, Darwin ([link](#)) 27.

<sup>18</sup> Liam Grealy, Tess Lea, Megan Moskos, Richard Benedict, Daphne Habibis & Stephanie King, Sustaining housing through planned maintenance in remote Central Australia, *Housing Studies* 2022, 13 ([link](#)).

<sup>19</sup> Liam Grealy, Tess Lea, Megan Moskos, Richard Benedict, Daphne Habibis & Stephanie King, Sustaining housing through planned maintenance in remote Central Australia, *Housing Studies* 2022, 5 ([link](#)).

<sup>20</sup> AHURI Final Report No. 368 Sustainable Indigenous housing in regional and remote Australia, p 44-45 ([link](#))

<sup>21</sup> Territory Families, Housing and Communities, Annual report 2021-22, ([link](#)) 62.

Whether or not people live there permanently, homelands are places of cultural significance and vital to maintaining Aboriginal peoples' connection to land and culture, and promoting health and wellbeing. In 2008, a [long-term study](#) of health outcomes in Utopia – a cluster of six homelands about 350km north-east of Alice Springs – found that occupants there largely [experienced better health outcomes](#) due to:

- A better diet and increased exercise levels as a result of living a more traditional lifestyle;
- Regular visits from its community-controlled health service; and
- Self-determination and community control.

However the study also found more could be done to include health outcomes and that there was urgent need for better housing and infrastructure. Issues with repairs and maintenance, along with access to essential services, are common on homelands. In 2015, the Centre for Appropriate Technology visited 401 of the 630 homelands in the NT, and in its report noted that while there has been significant investment in physical infrastructure:<sup>22</sup>

- Most homelands have no or limited mobile coverage;
- Almost 40 per cent of homelands had no energy supply or relied on a generator; and
- Ageing infrastructure and poor maintenance affected service levels and the condition of assets.

The state of disrepair of houses and essential infrastructure on homelands are consistently one of the top issues that delegates ask about at NT Land Council meetings.

The history and context of Government funding is key to understanding the current condition of homelands. Until the NT Intervention in 2007, the Australian handed management of homelands funding to the NT and refused to fund new houses. From 2008 to 2015, the Australian funded the NT Government municipal and essential services, but not new housing or repairs and maintenance, on homelands. In 2015, the Australian Government only agreed to a once-off \$155 million grant, again, only for municipal services. This meant traditional owners and residents were only able to undertake repairs, maintenance, upgrades, or new builds if they could self-fund. Some (but not all) had access to money for new homes, upgrades and improvements through royalties money. In 2018, the Aboriginal Benefits Account [awarded \\$40 million](#) to improve living conditions on homelands, with spending determined by Land Councils- a welcome injection of funding but inadequate given the state of disrepair and neglect. As at October 2022, many of the funded projects are still yet to be completed.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Centre for Appropriate Technology, The Northern Territory Homelands and Outstations Assets and Access Review, Final Report (2016), p63-67 ([link](#)).

<sup>23</sup> ABA Homelands Project – Status update from NIAA, October 2022.

Currently, the NT Government funds homelands through a [complex set of grants](#). Grants are only available to 'registered homelands', meaning homelands that:<sup>24</sup>

- have a sustainable, potable water supply;
- have a water supply in operating condition;
- have its own operating power supply;
- have safe and secure housing;
- are accessible;
- are the principal place of residence; and
- have a service provider, recognised under the Homelands Program, must be willing to undertake the responsibility for servicing the homeland and be able to deliver services in a safe environment.

These criteria create a prohibitive barrier to many people moving back to and permanently living on homelands.<sup>25</sup> Residents in overcrowded homes in remote communities who wish to return to and live on their homelands where the homeland doesn't have, for example, a water supply, are unable to seek funding for infrastructure upgrades to ensure the home is habitable.

In the federal October 2022 budget, the Australian Government committed to \$100 million for NT homelands to be spent over two years. APO NT understands decisions about how this money will be spent are still being made, but that this will only fund registered homelands.

**Recommendation 7: The NT and Australian Governments fund infrastructure on currently unregistered homelands such that they can become 'registered' where potential residents intend to live in those homelands.**

This tangle of funding arrangements for homelands means the current and future housing needs across all homelands in the NT is unclear and it is unclear how many more homes are needed in order for the NT to meet the overcrowding Closing the Gap commitments. In 2022, the NT Government commissioned an independent audit of homelands housing and infrastructure, but it is yet to be released to the sector or publicly.

**Recommendation 8: The NT Government release the 2022 Homelands audit.**

**Recommendation 9: The Australian Government undertake a survey of overcrowding, poverty and health outcomes on Homelands.**

**Recommendation 10: The NT and Australian Governments work with Land Councils and Aboriginal Housing NT to develop a new, ten-year tripartite agreement that properly funds housing on homelands as part of the housing continuum.**

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<sup>24</sup>NT Government, 2021-2023 Homelands Program guidelines ([link](#)).

<sup>25</sup> Centre for Appropriate Technology, The Northern Territory Homelands and Outstations Assets and Access Review, Final Report (2016), p64 ([link](#)).

## Remote Rent Framework

On 6 February 2023 the NT Government's new Remote Rent Framework (Framework) commenced, which abolished income-based rent and introduced a bedroom-based rent scheme. The Framework means public housing tenants in remote communities and the Tennant Creek community living areas, where incomes are some of the lowest in the country, now the only public housing tenants in Australia whose rent is not calculated based on income. Based on the Government's modelling, the Framework increased rents of about two third of tenants in remote communities and the Tennant Creek community living areas. The Framework includes a 'Safety Net' which allows tenants to apply for a cap on their rent when rent exceeds 25% of household income.

The rent increase comes at a time when people in remote communities in the NT are already facing inflated prices for food, electricity and fuel. The [NT Council of Social Service's Cost of Living](#) report, released in December 2022, shows that the price of fuel has almost doubled in the NT over the past five years, while the average cost of a healthy food basket in remote stores in Aboriginal communities has continued to rise and was 52% higher than in a town supermarket.

Aboriginal Housing NT (AHNT) along with Land Councils, APO NT and a range of NT and national organisations [have called on](#) the NT Government to maintain income-based rent until a new model is designed in true partnership with stakeholders. [AHNT has said](#) it is particularly concerned that these rental increases could further exacerbate overcrowding in Alice Springs and increase the number of people in town without a safe place to sleep.

**Recommendation 11: NT Government reverse the Remote Rent Framework and implement an income-based rent for remote communities and town camps, and then works with the sector to design a fairer rent-setting model.**

## Health

The interrelationships between poverty and poor health and wellbeing outcomes are well established, and we draw the attention of the Committee to the submission made by APO NT member AMSANT, given its focus on health and wellbeing. In the NT, the burden of both communicable and non-communicable diseases is particularly evident, compared to other Australian jurisdictions (as detailed in the [Report on Government Services 2023](#) data), and contribute to inequitable health system costs<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> Zhao, Y., Wakerman, J., Zhang, X., Wright, J., VanBruggen, M., Nasir, R., ... & Burgess, P. (2022). Remoteness, models of primary care and inequity: Medicare under-expenditure in the Northern Territory. *Australian Health Review*, 46(3), 302-308.

Another area of concern is the impacts of environmental hazards on health, including those associated with agriculture, mines and heavy industry<sup>27</sup>, and especially for already under-resourced remote communities and Homelands. This clinical focus, however, does not include consideration of the ‘both-ways’ impact of transgenerational trauma on poverty, nor of the effect of poverty on the incidence and/or exacerbation of mental illness.

Though not a communicable disease itself, antimicrobial resistance is getting worse, particularly in central Australia, requiring heavy duty antibiotics with serious side effects to treat common infections. Clinicians and health services are trying to treat the consequences of poverty and overcrowding with antibiotics, leading to high rates of resistance.

Indeed, any progress to reduce incidence and prevalence of many of these illnesses cannot occur until the social determinants of these diseases (particularly poverty, poor quality and overcrowded housing, and food insecurity) improve.

## Food security

This Inquiry is of particular importance to Aboriginal communities in the NT, who have long felt the heavy burden of an inadequate food system, leading to some of the highest rates of food insecurity in the nation. This insecure food system regularly fails to provide access to food that is affordable, of sufficient quantity and quality that the rest of Australia enjoys.

Despite best efforts, health promotion programs are regularly hampered by a vulnerable and unaffordable food system. Aboriginal communities in the NT are often hundreds of kilometres from a major town and a large supermarket. With such high rates of food insecurity, it is becoming increasingly difficult for services to address the nutrition related diseases which disproportionately affect Aboriginal people in the NT.

The consumption of healthy food for a large majority of Aboriginal families has become more unattainable over the last 20 years in the NT. In remote Aboriginal communities the cost of food has continually increased faster than in major towns and cities. The cost of a basket of food is 56% more expensive in remote areas of the Northern Territory than in the major towns and some communities have as little as 6 types of fruits and 2 types of vegetables in their store. Of the remote stores assessed in the 2021 NT Market Basket Survey, 19 stores were found to have poor quality or rotten fruits and vegetables in them, often an outcome of the limited shelf life of food once it has reached its location. This continual increase in the cost of food, faster than CPI, has now placed the ability to prepare and eat a healthy meal out of reach of many families, leading to them regularly skip meals and rely on unhealthy and poor-quality fast food.

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<sup>27</sup> Schultz, Rosalie. "Investigating the health impacts of the ranger uranium mine on Aboriginal people." *Medical Journal of Australia* 215.4 (2021): 157-159.

The latest NT Market Basket Survey and ABS median Indigenous household income data showed that Aboriginal households in the NT now need to spend on average 42% of their household income to afford a healthy basket of food. Few Government programs have recognised this ongoing issue leading to a situation where, for example, central Australian families living outside of Alice Springs could have as little as 20% of their household income left for bills, transport costs and rent once they had purchased enough food to feed an average family.

Aboriginal people living in these areas with high cost of living, including healthy food, and low employment opportunities also have some of the poorest quality diets in the country. Aboriginal people in remote areas of Australia are more likely to consume high sugar drinks and less likely to meet dietary recommendations for the consumption of fruits and vegetables. Without providing people in remote Australia with sufficient income and employment opportunities their ability to afford and consume a healthy meal is greatly diminished.

At the household level, strong cultural practices in Aboriginal communities of the NT mean that large numbers of families can collect traditional foods. However, due to both legal and physical barriers on land and sea surrounding Aboriginal communities this is becoming increasingly difficult. Climate change, poor management and destruction of land from overgrazing, and fencing, have also meant numbers of traditional foods are dwindling and less obtainable. Aboriginal people identified traditional foods as a key opportunity to improve the food security of Aboriginal families in remote areas of the Northern Territory.

Under-investment and a lack of a coordinated supply chain in large parts of the NT have profound impacts on the cost and availability of food in grocery stores. The large majority of food consumed in the NT has to be bought in from the southern and eastern markets, where distribution centres are concentrated. The AMSANT Food Summit consultations found poor road infrastructure over long distances, combined with a volatile supply chain, leads to high operational costs for freight and retail businesses that supply food to remote Aboriginal communities. This has flow on effects to the cost, quality and quantity of healthy food available in remote Aboriginal communities.

Some improvements have been made through independent community owned stores coming together to form larger organisations. However, these improvements have not bridged the gap between major towns and remote communities cost and availability of healthy food.

Select recommendations, from [AMSANT's 2021 Food Summit report](#), provide a holistic approach to build true food security for Aboriginal people in the NT.

## Children and Families

Australia-wide there are 46,000 children and young people in out-of-home care, 22,297 (42%) of these children and young people are Aboriginal. In the NT these figures are significantly worse; 89% of children and young people in out-of-home-care and 100% in youth detention are Aboriginal<sup>28</sup>. Target 12 in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap aims to reduce the over-representation of Aboriginal children in

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<sup>28</sup> SNAICC Family Matters Report 2022

out-of-home care by 45% by 2031. It is deeply distressing that this target remains significantly off track. Not only is the number of our children in out-of-home care continuing to rise, these children are less likely than ever to be placed with Aboriginal family and carers. Far too few are restored to their families. The impacts of separation and removal cause great distress. The impact on families and communities is felt every day.

Poverty, socioeconomic disadvantage and exclusion are the primary causal factors for the shockingly high rates of Aboriginal children in out-of-home-care and youth detention. Poverty affects many aspects of their lives, from their physical and mental health, educational outcomes, and access to healthcare. For far too many of our families, multiple forms of discrimination and inequalities, systemic racism and intergenerational trauma have a corrosive effect on our cultural and social fabric. These issues combine and compound and form the conditions for the high prevalence of family violence, drug and alcohol dependence, abuse and childhood trauma. All of these issues have become key factors in community fragmentation and driving contact with child protection and the youth justice system<sup>29</sup>.

The links between poverty and child protection involvement are extensively documented. By age 10, 4 in 10 Aboriginal children born each year in the NT are expected to be the subject of at least one child protection notification to Territory Families Housing and Communities. For almost half of these notifications, 'neglect' is identified as the reason for child protection intervention, this is significantly higher than the national average of 23.5%.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices): Securing Our Rights, Securing Our Future Report, 2020

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

The *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle* “Little Children are Sacred” Report (2007) and the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory (Royal Commission, 2017) told the stories of children whose life opportunities are compromised by a complex layering of pervasive disadvantage, poverty, overcrowding, mental health issues, substance misuse, and family or community violence. During hearings for the Royal Commission, people expressed their anger and frustration that poverty continues to be mislabelled as neglect, providing the basis for children and young people to be removed from their family and Kin. The Commission heard unambiguously that ‘If you don’t tackle poverty, you’re always going to be taking Aboriginal kids away’. This means untangling the network of disadvantages underpinning poverty, each one exacerbating the other. These disadvantages affect generations of families and communities who lack access to basic services and culturally appropriate support that children and their families in other parts of Australia receive.

Past and present Government responses to Aboriginal child welfare frame Aboriginal peoples in the deficit, as if they are the problem to be responded to and resolved. In response to the *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle* report – which made specific reference to the critical importance of Governments committing to genuine consultation with Aboriginal people in designing initiatives for Aboriginal communities - the Australian Government initiated the Intervention, a discriminatory response that has left a lasting hurt on Aboriginal people across the Territory. With respect to the Royal Commission, the response has been Government inertia and business as usual. Meanwhile, the disproportionate over-representation of Aboriginal children in out-of-home-care and in youth detention persists. It is no coincidence that 16-years on from the Intervention – a policy approach that systematically disempowered and eroded the self-determination of Aboriginal peoples – we are seeing worsening outcomes for Aboriginal children, young people and families. In the absence of a truth-telling process about the structural origins of Aboriginal powerlessness, intergenerational trauma, racism, multiple inequalities, and poverty, Governments will indefinitely respond to these issues as crises.

Despite the devastating evidence presented to successive Governments, the child protection system and Government-led approaches to supporting children and families have not prioritised finding ways to address and prevent the root causes. The disproportionate and rising number of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care and youth detention is because Government responses to poverty and social exclusion aren’t changing. These statistics are evidence of a fundamentally flawed approach in which Governments implement systems of surveillance upon families who are struggling, instead of seeking to address the poverty and structural barriers that contribute to their children being taken away – ‘the Intervention’ and its ongoing negative impacts provide a stark example of this approach.

Policies that focus primarily on resourcing and growing the youth justice and child protection systems at the expense of strengthening Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to support Aboriginal families early on, fail to recognise the profound social, cultural and economic problems which confront many Aboriginal families. Crisis intervention approaches represent an immense missed opportunity to adequately resource and harness the expertise of Aboriginal people to drive their own solutions for their own families and communities.

Any approach to improving outcomes for Aboriginal children and families must acknowledge and deal with the cycles of poverty perpetuated by the systems designed with the intent to support families to

overcome the social challenges they face. New approaches must focus on Aboriginal self-determination and empowerment and on our people being active participants, with real decision-making power, in designing the solutions to the problems they're subject to<sup>31</sup>.

To address the drivers of child protection requires transformative systemic change, grounded in the strengths of culture, and led by Aboriginal people. Governments must live up to their commitments in Closing the Gap, the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children (2021–2031) and provide Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations with the resources and decision-making power to provide family preservation and reunification, and other prevention and early intervention supports for our families.

The Family Matters Report (2022) projects that a failure to act could see an increase by 50% of Aboriginal children in out-of-home-care by the end of the decade, compared to an increase of just 13.5% for non-Indigenous children. APO NT calls upon Governments to engage all available resources and efforts, in working alongside Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations to ensure that this distressing increase in over-representation does not occur as currently projected.

## Education

As outlined in UNESCO's 2014 report "Sustainable Development Begins with Education", accessible quality education is essential to increasing income, offering better livelihoods, and reducing chronic poverty. It is important to emphasise that:

*"Education is both a human right in itself, and an indispensable means of realising other human rights"*<sup>32</sup>

Education enables people to fulfill other human rights such as the right to economic and political participation, the right to live free from violence and poverty, as well as the right to maintaining cultural identity, practices and participate in one's first language, and thus a crucial component in the driver of poverty when not well implemented.

For us to address poverty through education, it must also be recognised that people's experiences of schooling have not always been positive, and has often been used as a tool of historical oppression of Aboriginal people:

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<sup>31</sup> Royal Commission V3A P. 198

<sup>32</sup> (CESCR) Committee on Economic, s. A. C. R. (1999). Implementation of the international covenant on economic, social and cultural rights; General Comment No.13, United Nations.

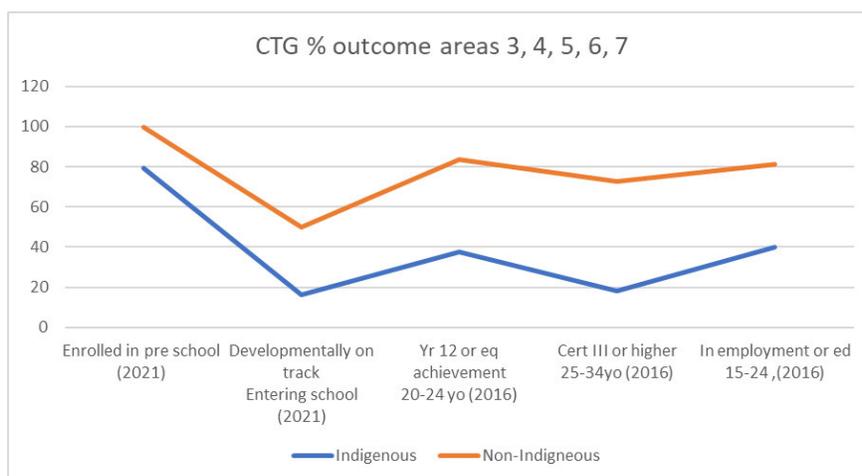
*“Formal education was often seen as a way to assimilate Indigenous populations, separating children from their families, their cultures, practices and languages”<sup>33</sup>*

There remain great challenges ahead to not only close the significant gaps that exist between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children and young people in education, but not enable them to thrive.

## Snapshot of Aboriginal Education data

Education attendance and outcomes<sup>34</sup>, as described in the Closing the Gap Report 2020 and NT Government Education Statistics<sup>35</sup>, show that from 2014-2019, there was no improvement in education attendance rates nationally.

The most recent data available to us reflects that Aboriginal students have worse outcomes than non-Aboriginal students, a pattern that continues across the life course (data extracted from the Closing the Gap data dashboard from 2021).



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<sup>33</sup> UNESCO United National Educational Forum 2016

<sup>34</sup> Closing The Gap Report 2020 – Australian Government <https://ctgreport.niaa.gov.au/sites/default/files/pdf/closing-the-gap-report-2020.pdf>

<sup>35</sup> <https://education.nt.gov.au/statistics-research-and-strategies/enrolment-and-attendance/2022-enrolment-and-attendance-statistics->

## The impacts of poverty on individuals in relation to education outcomes

Broadly speaking, the impacts on education outcomes for children and young people whose family experience poverty include:

- Children are developmentally not ready for school - lower education levels of low-income families make it difficult to support school readiness at an earlier age,
- Economic insecurity places huge burdens on families; reducing the availability of parents to interact with learning environments, more so with culturally unsafe ones.
- Children from poorer families face higher levels of discrimination due to their socio-economic circumstances e.g., lack of access to basic clothing and food.
- Shame experiences at school are key obstacles to education participation.
- For children with disabilities or learning difficulties, the remote education system and infrastructure is not adequately equipped to support them or their families, often leaving these students to anticipate and accept minimal expectations of themselves.

According to the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights<sup>36</sup> “children from higher socioeconomic backgrounds tend to be better prepared for formal education, both in terms of cognitive abilities and social behaviour. Across many countries, the family background of a student (parental education, socioeconomic status, conditions at home) remains the single most important predictor of learning outcomes”.

Studies have shown that education has direct and indirect impacts on both economic growth and poverty. It provides skills that boost employment opportunities and incomes while helping to protect from socio-economic vulnerabilities. An equitable expansion of education is, therefore, likely to reduce inequality.<sup>37</sup>

## Mechanisms to address/reduce poverty through education

Despite varying experiences with education, Aboriginal people continue to look to education as the answer to many social inequalities, as it represents great potential:

*“Education is the key; it keeps those young people strong”* respondent to APO NT engagement, 2023.

It is essential when assessing the effectiveness of education, we look more deeply at the quality of teaching and teacher attitudes. There has been an ongoing call to action from Aboriginal people to those in the education sector, to raise their expectations of students and families and to address the chronic racism experienced by so many people. Through recent engagement with members, organisations and individuals, APO NT has identified that majority of people have expressed their distress with the significantly high levels of racism and discrimination experienced at school (either for themselves and/or their children).

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<sup>36</sup> Pg. 5 Report titled “The persistence of Poverty” <https://www.srpoverity.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Report-Persistence-of-poverty.pdf>

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2017/06/millions-could-escape-poverty-by-finishing-secondary-education-says-un-cultural-agency/>

In the United States, longitudinal studies also show an increased likelihood of black children enrolling in tertiary education after having black teachers in early primary school<sup>38</sup>. Given this understanding, and knowing that only 18.4% of staff in the NT Education Sector are Aboriginal, we must act urgently to ensure more Aboriginal teachers and principals are leading the classrooms and schools.

Over the last four decades, there have been eight formal inquiries/reviews into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, with many more reviewing remote and rural education that directly relates to the NT context. General themes that have come out of these reviews are consistent with what Aboriginal people have continued to identify as requirements for children and young people to do well. These include:

- Commitment to and resourcing of bi-lingual education (two or both ways learning)
- Increasing presence and leadership of Aboriginal teachers and principals
- Effective pathways from school to employment
- Determining the appropriate curricula for children
- Having input and decision making at all levels of education

Many education environments are not safe nor culturally appropriate for Aboriginal students and families who should not be made to choose between education and culture. This is a source of significant stress for families, and the wider community. The initiatives that come from Aboriginal communities and/or Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, do not put people in positions where they are forced to make these decisions. As outlined in the Learning on Country Case study below, the two can co-exist and work together to generate quality education and employment, whilst revitalising and preserving culture.

Then fundamental shifts in improving education access and quality for Aboriginal children and young people are required. It is not a failing of the children or their families, rather it is a failing system that is the issue.

There is significant potential to turn around the education experience of so many Aboriginal children and young people, whilst at the same time, generate employment, support the revitalisation and preservation of many languages and cultures, and, in turn, breaking the cycle of poverty.

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<sup>38</sup> [https://www.nber.org/system/files/working\\_papers/w25255/w25255.pdf](https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w25255/w25255.pdf)

### **Case study: Learning on Country program**

An excellent example of a targeted culturally-appropriate education program that provides a pathway to existing employment opportunities is the Learning on Country (LoC) program, which is funded by the National Indigenous Australians Agency and administered by the NLC.

The program is delivered through a partnership arrangement between community ranger groups and schools in 15 NT remote communities (Maningrida, Galiwin'ku, Yirrkala, Laynhapuy Homelands, Ramingining, Milingimbi, Gapuwiyak, Umbakumba, Angurugu, Borroloola, Ngukurr, Numbulwar, Gunbalanya, Beswick and Barunga). It is targeted towards middle and senior school students and provides a practically-oriented educational, training and employment pathway using a combination of natural and cultural resource management activities and education resources. Communities, schools and Aboriginal ranger groups across the Top End have embraced LoC as the principal mechanism for delivering 'both ways' (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) teaching, learning and evaluation.

The LoC program is supported by site specific local LoC committees and in situ LoC coordinators. An all-Aboriginal LoC Steering Committee provides cultural and strategic guidance to the program. This governance arrangement means Aboriginal people decide and deliver the LoC activities (in partnership with rangers and schools) and set the strategic direction for the program.

The LoC employment pathway is beneficial for young Aboriginal people in remote communities because a 'both ways' education supports them to walk proudly and confidently in two worlds. It also benefits employers in various industry sectors involved in the sustainable use of land and sea (such as mining, pastoralism, forestry, tourism, fisheries, aquaculture, horticulture and wildlife utilisation, biosecurity, BorderForce and Norforce, and conservation management) because it is an employment incubator and succession planning tool to support these sectors by:

- Building confidence and capability and encouraging young people to consider taking up sectoral employment opportunities and community leadership roles;
- Increasing the availability of a job ready cohort of young Aboriginal people with transferable skills ready to transition into employment roles as they become available; and
- Reducing workplace recruitment disruption because replacements are drawn from the student cohort supported by the community rangers, better preparing them for the workplace transition.

The NLC would like to see primary school and lower middle school students having the same access to 'both ways' learning as the LoC senior school cohort. The Indigenous Language and Culture Curriculum is an existing accredited cultural curriculum designed for younger students. If implemented across the NT – or more broadly – this program would ensure a more balanced approach to educating young Aboriginal people and is a logical precursor to LoC employment pathways. Wide implementation of the program would require intergovernmental agreement and co-investment between the NT and Australian Governments.

**Recommendation 12: Fund an NT Aboriginal Independent Education Peak Body to ensure Aboriginal people have decision making roles at all levels within education.**

**Recommendation 13: Greater transparency regarding the use of funds invested by the Australian Government to the NT Government for education.**

**Recommendation 14: Ensure sufficient flexibility in delivering education policies and programs, including curricula, to allow for local circumstances and needs.**

**Recommendation 15: Commit to the delivery and adequate resourcing of bi-lingual learning / two-way learning at a minimum for remote Aboriginal communities.**

**Recommendation 16: Adult literacy programs are resourced and implemented in remote communities and/or where majority of adults do not speak English as their first language.**

**Recommendation 17: Support the reintroduction of secondary schooling in remote communities across the Northern Territory – with curriculum that supports transition pathways to boarding school and into employment.**

**Recommendation 18: Bolster the Remote Area Teaching Education (RATE) program to ensure it is fit for purpose, culturally appropriate and flexible to deliver training in the communities.**

**Recommendation 19: A life course approach to education engagement, investing in all stages in childhood and young adulthood, especially key transition points.**

**Recommendation 20: Expand and build on existing programs that demonstrate promising results, for example the Learning on Country Program delivered by Northern Land Council.**

## Welfare reform

A legacy of historic punitive, discriminatory policy has meant a lower level of welfare expenditure at the individual level that has done little to address the underlying, structural causes of disadvantage that cause people to rely on welfare for long periods of time, especially intergenerationally.

Some Government support payments having not risen at all over the last 20 years. The remote area allowance, for instance, has remained at the same level since 1990. The payment was first introduced as a recognition of the higher cost of living for people living in remote parts of Australia who are receiving Government assistance payments, such as the aged and disability pensions. However, while the gap in the cost of living has increased between remote areas and our major cities, this payment rate has not changed. This issue has been compounded by the fact that while payments like Jobseeker have increased in line with CPI, the cost of living in remote areas has risen faster. An additional factor, particularly in remote communities, is that there are significant numbers of people who, although eligible for Government support payments, are not registered for or receiving payments.

Key reforms that are necessary to reduce poverty, alleviate disadvantage among Aboriginal people receiving welfare and increase opportunities for people to gain employment in the NT include:

1. Place-based and community driven job creation and employment supports in remote areas, with a particular focus on transition to work for young people (refer to the APO NT proposal below for *Fair Work, Strong Communities*);

2. Increased investment in disability and mental health support services, including transition to work programs and supported employment options; and
3. Improved supports for single parents including universal paid parental leave and accessible, affordable options for childcare.

**Recommendation 21: The Australian Government to increase social welfare payments to alleviate deepening poverty in remote communities including:**

- **Welfare payments to be permanently and adequately increased to keep people out of poverty.**
- **An increase in the rate of the remote area allowance in line with higher cost of living of remote regions of the Northern Territory.**
- **Ongoing indexation of all payments in line with wage movements at least twice a year.**

**Recommendation 22: The Australian Government abolish all discriminatory forms of mandatory income management and replace with opt-in models that empower families and communities.**

## Remote Jobs

We know that since the signing in 2020 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, employment rates have worsened and in the NT the gap is the widest.<sup>39</sup>

For non-Indigenous people, NT has the highest employment rate in the country (86.2% of non-Indigenous people aged 25-64 employed, based on 2021 ABS Census data<sup>40</sup>). In contrast, for Indigenous people, the NT has by far the lowest rate of employment in the country, seeing a continued decline over the last decade from 42.8% of Indigenous people aged 25-64 employed in 2011, to 35.4% in 2016 and 34.3% in 2021.<sup>41</sup> Nationally, the employment rate for Indigenous people was 55.7% in 2021.<sup>42</sup> The Closing the Gap target is to see 62% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 25-64 employed by 2030.

This trend is highlighted in the 2018 Census CAEPR report. It states,

*‘That employment fell by around 15% for Indigenous men and 6% for Indigenous women between 2011 and 2016. At the same time, the Indigenous working age population increased by around 6%, leading to a significant deterioration in the employment rate.’<sup>43</sup>*

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<sup>39</sup> Australian Government, Productivity Commission, 2018-19, Performance Reporting Dashboard: Employment, accessed via [https://performancedashboard.d61.io/indigenous/indigenous\_indig\_employment]

<sup>40</sup> Analysis of 2021 ABS Census data by the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (unpublished)

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

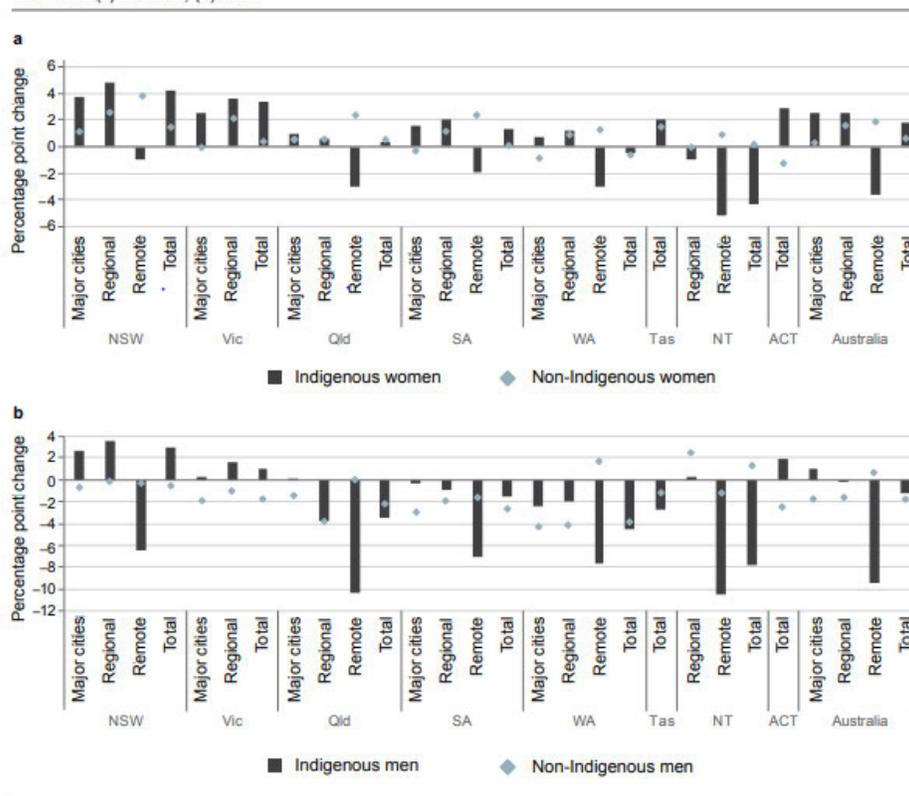
<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Venn,D, Biddel,N, 2016, [EMPLOYMENT OUTCOME: 2016 Census Papers](#), Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research ANU College of Arts & Social Sciences, pp.6

This gap is worse in remote settings:

*Indigenous employment rates in remote areas dropped substantially between 2011 and 2016: by 4 percentage points for women and 9 percentage points for men. As discussed above, this was partly due to the phasing out of the CDEP scheme. Employment performance was considerably worse for the Indigenous population than for the non-Indigenous population in remote areas, where the employment rate for the non-Indigenous population increased by 1 percentage point for men and 2 percentage points for women, resulting in a widening of the employment gap in remote areas by 10 percentage points for men and 6 percentage points for women.*

**FIG. 3.** Change in employment rate of people aged 15–64 years by state/territory and remoteness, 2011–16: (a) women; (b) men



Notes:

The figure above demonstrates this decreasing rate of employment for Aboriginal men and women, in remote settings compared with the other states and territories. For both Aboriginal women and men living in remote settings in the NT, there is a negative rate of employment, and it is the highest of all jurisdictions in Australia.

Reports by the Productivity Commission on Closing the Gap indicate the employment gap between Indigenous Australians and non-Indigenous Australians is growing.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Australian Government: Productivity Commission, 2021, Closing the Gap: Information Repository, [Socioeconomic outcome area 8: Strong participation and development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities](#).

This is not news for generations of Aboriginal people living under significant financial stress and it is certainly not news for APO NT and its members. Employment has been a long-term policy priority for APO NT, as voiced by Aboriginal people in the NT.

## Fair Work Strong Communities Proposal

While those in employment have fared better, employment opportunities are limited in remote areas of the NT and the gap between employment rates of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people is higher than in any other jurisdiction. Those faced with accessing the insufficient social welfare payments have had to navigate the remote Work for the Dole program – ‘Community Development Programme’. This program has not only disempowered communities, but it has also led to most people in remote communities having to do more work than people in non-remote non-Indigenous majority areas for the same basic social security payment. The program has also hindered employment opportunities due to many cases where people are receiving the payment for work, they should be employed to do, limiting genuine job opportunities in remote communities. Compounding this is the discriminatory mandatory income management programs like the Cashless Debit Card and the Basics Card, which stigmatise and exclude Aboriginal people from the cash economy. Acting as another barrier for those living in remote NT.

The APO NT Fair Work and Strong Communities (FWSC) proposal has put forward a model supporting Aboriginal people in remote communities to find pathways to employment and stimulate the local workforce economy. The proposal has the potential to significantly expand job opportunities in remote communities and give people an opportunity to earn a liveable wage. A key element is the creation of thousands of new fully funded jobs in Aboriginal controlled organisations through a Remote Jobs Investment Fund. This is of a sufficient scale to make a substantial contribution to closing the remote jobs gap.

Research in Australia has shown that increased wages has a direct correlation to improved consumption of healthy food. The FWSC proposal has potentially wider economic impacts in regard to food security. By increasing cash flow in remote communities, community members can afford to purchase sufficient and healthier food from community stores. This would allow stores to purchase larger quantities of healthy food and reduce the unit cost of healthy food for customers.

Since the abolition of CDEP in 2013, labour market programs in remote Australia have been based on the ‘activation’ model that operates in non-remote areas. This model focusses on building ‘employability’ amongst job seekers through regular appointments and activities, on the assumption that jobs will be available. Declining remote Indigenous employment rates reinforce the absolute failure of this approach.

In most parts of remote Australia, even if every local Aboriginal person was employed in available jobs, there are simply not enough mainstream jobs to go around. The problem is a jobs deficit in remote Australia and the solution is not simply relocation, as the UNDRIP outlines:

Recognizing the urgent need to respect and promote the inherent rights of Indigenous peoples which derive from their political, economic and social structures and from their cultures, spiritual traditions, histories and philosophies, especially their rights to their lands, territories and resources.

We know that the budget allocation of \$400 million per year for the administration of CDP alone is not a good investment. NIAA’s own evaluation in 2019 highlights minimal impacts on job outcomes, showing

that only 7% of participants got a job that lasted more than 6 months in duration. It is also worth noting that the cost of CDP was twice as much as the previous program Remote Jobs and Communities Programme as outlined in the performance audit by the Australian National Audit Office.

There is clearly a strong case to reconsider the financial investment into the current CDP programs. More importantly there is an urgent need to act to break the cycle of entrenched poverty and unemployment for the next generation of young Aboriginal people in remote Australia.

**Recommendation 23: The Australian Government to implement the recommendations from APO NT plan '*Fair work and strong communities*' proposal for a remote development and employment scheme' to enhance employment opportunities for Aboriginal people in remote communities.**

