

Submission to the Committee Secretary, Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs,
PO Box 6100 Parliament House Canberra ACT 2600

Submission from Alison Stevens

I write to express my concerns about the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) legislation and the Stronger Futures Plan.

Five years pornography and the sexual abuse of children, allegedly perpetrated by aboriginal men living in remote communities was cited as the impetus for the implementation of the Northern Territory Intervention. Now, concerns about these issues seem to have diminished and issues of health, education, and housing are cited as the reasons for continuing this punitive legislation. **Like many Australians, I am confused by the political rhetoric and appalled by the living conditions that my fellow Australians who live in remote Australia, must continually endure on a daily basis.**

I believe The NTER legislation is racist and not based on any proven evidence, makes attacks on Aboriginal land, further dismantles community control, refuses to acknowledge customary law and is punitive legislation that targets Aboriginal people. The Stronger Futures Plan represents more of the same.

I don't believe the Intervention has worked. After five years, we no longer read or hear of success in dealing with child sexual abuse nor do we read about effective measures making any difference in the lives of aboriginal people living in remote communities in the Northern Territory. **In five years, attempts at self-harm and suicide have more than doubled, imprisonment rates are soaring, and overcrowded living conditions and poor health continue.**

I don't believe the Stronger Futures Plan will work and I am calling for a withdrawal of the Northern Territory Emergency Response legislation, the abandonment of Stronger Futures and a greater commitment to the implementation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

Specifically, the government must listen to the widespread complaints of disempowerment and hardship that come from the people who are affected by this legislation. Listening means an effective consultation process conducted at community level, by community, in local languages in conjunction with the resourcing of effective leadership and mentoring programs that will enable communities to communicate effectively with government.

Specifically, the linking of social security entitlements with school attendance is ineffective and punitive, targeting many Aboriginal people who already live below the poverty line in under-resourced communities. The measures completely exclude those people who do not receive

government benefits, not uncommon in the overcrowded living conditions endured in remote Australia.

Government must withdraw from entrenching income management as part of the national welfare system and safeguard community and town camp land for Aboriginal people. Community living areas and town camps should not be made available for unrestricted private ownership.

The development of hub towns contradicts the evidence which shows that people living on homelands, generally have better health, fewer suicides, and better overall quality of life. Articles 23, 26, 28 of UNDRIP, supports the rights of Aboriginal people to live on their lands, own, control and use the lands, waters and resources and when the land was taken without their free, prior and informed consent they have right to compensation. According to UNDRIP, customary law must be respected and Indigenous people have the right to their own legal systems and customs as long as they accord with international human rights law.

Aboriginal people living on remote communities must be provided access to economy systems. This means government should stop paying salaries to the great range of external and ineffective service providers. Instead, establish long-term mentoring and skill building relationships and direct funding into supporting community initiated and community managed organisations and services and remunerating local community people for all the voluntary or under-paid work they do.

Australian governments cannot continue to think on a short-term, racist basis. They cannot continue to be considered a laughing stock in the international arena of human rights.

Australian governments must begin to show courage and long term commitment to indigenous Australians based on the principles of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Again, I call for a withdrawal of the Northern Territory Emergency Response legislation, the abandonment of the Stronger Futures plan and a greater commitment to the implementation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.