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Dear Senators

### **Enquiry into the appropriateness and effectiveness of the objectives, design, implementation and evaluation of the Community Development Program**

This submission argues that the naming of the program which is the subject of your Enquiry as the 'Community Development Program' is in fact a total misnomer. Currently there is almost nothing reflecting community development values, principles or practice underpinning it. Yet a genuine community development program could have a great deal to offer in remote Australia. This would require significant re-design of the program, which seems essential. This short submission indicates what kind of transformation is required to enable the CDP to become a really valuable program in remote communities and comments briefly on the engagement and change processes that would be required to achieve such a transformation smoothly. It speaks largely to your **Term of Reference (g), about alternative approaches to the current CDP**. Other submissions (eg Chaney and Gray, Kral) testify to the major problems associated with the current program.

### **Transforming the program to a community development approach**

Susan Kenny is Australia's foremost author on community development. As she says, community development is about people taking control of and responsibility for their own resources; she also points out the community development assumes, 'that disadvantaged people can only have control of their lives when the social structures and institutions that shape their life chances are changed' (Kenny 2006:21). This assumes some shift of power and some transformation of institutions occurs through community development processes. In relation to employment she says in particular:

'Australian government policies dealing with unemployment have focussed on the individuals who are unemployed, involving training, counselling and instilling a work ethic based on accepting their 'mutual obligation' to society to ensure that they are motivated and 'ready for work'. This at a time when the number of people looking for paid employment is in excess of the jobs available to them' (Kenny 2006: 21).

While written over 10 years ago, this remains true in the approach the Government is taking to the CDP program in remote Australia. She argues that this approach is just shifting the problem of unemployment

or insufficient work to individuals rather than recognising the systemic change that is really required. This seems extremely evident when we are looking at employment in remote communities. For the number of people who are CDP participants there simply are not sufficient jobs available in most remote locations (even allowing for some to out-migrate for work). Yet the CDP program appears to be identifying the problem as one of individuals not being job ready and hence responding to that analysis of the problem, rather than focussing seriously on creating a suitable economy in those locations to engage all those who are able to be productively employed. Whilst there is no doubt scope to employ more Aboriginal people in jobs currently taken by non-Aboriginal people in communities, through strengthening education and training, that strategy alone will not solve what is inevitably a growing challenge of rapidly expanding young populations in these places and insufficient full-time employment for them all.

Recently Mendes (2017:7) has also shown how governments misuse a veneer of 'community' to, 'adopt a top-down approach based on marginalizing local knowledge and expertise which reinforces government agendas and control'. He makes the point that such programs serve 'to pathologize disadvantaged groups by targeting changes in individual behaviour rather than identifying broad structural policy reforms that address systematic inequality' (p 7). This is precisely the case with the current CDP. It has marginalised local knowledge and expertise, and is all about compliance and control. **It needs to address the systemic issues of loss of voice, power and control by Aboriginal people which was emphasised strongly at the recent Uluru Forum.**

Others have argued that the way human services are provided now, in a manner which is reductionist and individualistic, 'runs contrary to the wisdom, accumulated knowledge, experience, evidence and ethics of social and community development work' (Lenette and Ingamells 2014: 92). What is required, they argue, is a more intensive social and community networking process that helps build or rebuild cultural, social and economic life and enable individuals to find a valued and fulfilling place in it. CDP currently exemplifies this reductionist and individualist approach, and as other submissions indicate, is having some very negative effects in many remote communities.

How then could this situation be changed so that people in remote Australia, predominantly Aboriginal people, could take control of their own resources? And how could the social structures and institutions be reshaped so as to shape Aboriginal people's life chances differently and help foster vibrant communities that enable their members to have a sense of value, agency and role?

Eversole (2015), like most development practitioners, argues that place-based approaches that respond to the 'circumstances, needs and wishes of local communities, rather than imposing a 'one size fits all' approach' (Carpenter 2017:168) are what is required. Such approaches put local people into the drivers' seat and 'strengthen the local fabric'. They provide a community development underpinning for economic development. This is what a new program could do if it were reshaped substantially. It could work with local community aspirations and support people to develop adequate livelihoods that meet their aspirations. It could strengthen the local fabric, and governance, to provide the base for economic development.

One example of a Community Development Approach which has done exactly that is evidenced by the Central Land Council's work with over 30 communities across Central Australia using rent and royalty payments. Interestingly, over its 11-12 year existence, this work has created numerous jobs in the remote desert communities, and at the same time has supported infrastructure and programs that communities need and want. In one small community alone its evaluators found that it created 24 new jobs and these represented around 20-30% of the community's full and part-time workforce (Roche and Ensor 2014: 82). This requires a level of community and regional governance to drive such programs. My experience suggests that Aboriginal communities and individuals have ideas and goals for the more sustainable development of their communities, but first government has to be open to them. It has to stop assuming Aboriginal people need to be pushed or forced to do anything – they will be very actively involved when

they engage in programs that meet their aspirations. They disengage when they feel disrespected, disempowered and coerced.

Aboriginal community organisations that I have visited in the course of 12 years of research, have many ideas about how their communities could be improved, how things could change for the better, and what sorts of initiatives they would like to develop. Yet in the last decade there has been a systematic dismantling of all but the strongest Aboriginal organisations through a series of policy and funding changes. Many of those organisations that remain and are successful have had to change their modes of operating to draw government resources into their communities; some have had to subscribe to programs like CDP which are fundamentally antithetical to their reasons for being. These reasons usually refer to some form of self-determination, self-reliance, collective improvement of their situation, economic development, community empowerment etc. Whilst the organisations generally hold to such values and ideals they find themselves, through CDP, transformed into organisations carrying out the government's control agenda, regulating the lives of individual members of their communities. There is a huge tension here. And importantly, while they are funded and busy doing this, they are unable to do the essential work of genuine community and economic development that they so much desire to do. This is the work that would start to change the systemic institutional challenges they face.

Thus, rather than keep focussed on 'narrow policy and narrow practice' such as exemplified by CDP, the program needs completely transforming to enable 'a return to a broader paradigm of community development work that allows for joined up, locality-based, capacity building work that is responsive to people, contexts and the specifics of issues emerging over time' (Lenette and Ingamells 2014: 100-101). This shifts the focus from a highly individualistic approach to a more community-oriented one, with a focus on **working for one's community's well-being** as well as one's own. The enormous success of the Indigenous Ranger programs across Australia that offer meaningful work and involve a community-oriented responsibility for looking after country are an example of this principle in action. But the principle could be met in many other ways, especially given the absence of services in remote Australia, the need to engage young people out of school time, support young mums, provide child care, care for the sick, disabled and elderly, document languages, improve financial literacy, maintain and improve infrastructure, and develop sustainable social and economic enterprises, to name a few very obvious needs. Some jobs are not available in remote communities because government is simply failing to provide services that other parts of Australia take for granted.

The key challenge is to recognise that at the present time the market is not going to meet the needs of everyone living in remote Australia. It can contribute significantly, and many Aboriginal people work in market-oriented business, whether in mining, tourism, arts, pastoral industry, carbon farming, transport or other services. But the market is currently insufficient to provide for the wellbeing of people living, as they always have and wish to remain, on their country. There may be innovative and niche opportunities such as Gubinge (Kakadu Plum) farming or similar specialist ventures, and these should be encouraged and supported. Most require sound partnerships between experts or researchers and Aboriginal communities to realise their potential.

Instead of an essentially individualistic and punitive model, an innovative approach would be to develop a genuinely Community Development model which:

- is place-based and can respond to the diversity of contexts in remote Australia through a flexible design;
- places control of resources to support community social and economic development in Aboriginal hands through Aboriginal community organisations and allows flexibility in its use;
- recognises the value of the local and Indigenous knowledge that such organisations can bring to this endeavour and works from a strengths-based, not deficit, approach;

- releases and builds the capacities and capabilities of communities to work towards their own agendas to meet their aspirations for self-determination and self-reliance over the long term; this includes helping strengthen local and regional governance;
- resources these organisations to link to external partners that can bring knowledge from elsewhere to support them in driving the kind of development they want to see, that would create the kind of jobs and economic base which is consistent with their own values and aspirations;
- enables innovative solutions to emerge through combining such diverse forms of knowledge together;
- recognises the healing required in many remote communities as part of this process (van der Watt 2017); and
- strengthens program accountabilities to communities for such an agenda.

Such a program could give new hope and opportunity for people currently unemployed in remote Australia.

As others have noted, the former CDEP program reflected some of these principles. The APONT submission to this Enquiry also goes a considerable way towards meeting them. However, I am arguing for a much stronger focus in any new program on effective community development and empowerment, strong local control over the resources for the program, and a strong emphasis on being able to support the necessary linkages to enable isolated remote communities access to the expertise they need to test the feasibility of their sustainable development ideas and help them put those that have merit into action.

### **The process of change to a new model**

There is clearly a level of change fatigue in Indigenous communities, so it may seem wrong to argue for more change, but it seems essential to transform the CDP to something that would really engage people and contribute to their communities' and their own wellbeing.

There are two key principles which must be followed in developing the change process:

- it must be properly negotiated with Aboriginal and other participants and their organisations;
- it must be carefully planned and introduced in a phased manner so that people are clear how the changes will occur and are given adequate time to prepare for and implement them.

The first principle is about how well Government engages with Aboriginal people and the organisations currently involved in CDP as well as other organisations that may have a role in a transformed program. In an earlier paper for the Close the Gap Clearinghouse (Hunt 2013, **attached**) I have documented what is required for good practice engagement with Indigenous people. I urge government to draw on the principles and approaches I have documented there in its engagement about any proposed changes to the CDP. These principles clearly did not inform the development of the current program; if they had, it might have looked very different and been more successful.

The second principle arises from recent experience whereby Government has tried to rush major policy, program and funding changes, and caused a high level of confusion and anxiety in Aboriginal communities and community organisations. The kind of change I am proposing needs to occur slowly and carefully and be very well planned so as not to cause more confusion and stress in communities as this would be extremely counter-productive.

Yours sincerely

Janet Hunt

### **Attachment**

Hunt, J. 2013. *Engaging with Indigenous Australia—exploring the conditions for effective relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities*, Issues paper no. 5 produced for the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, AIHW, October.

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