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**Inquiry into community stores in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities**

**Introduction**

I have served the Mining and Pastoral Region since 2001 as a Legislative Council member for the Parliament of Western Australia. My electorate encompasses most of regional Western Australia (2,280,730 km<sup>2</sup>). It includes the Pilbara, Kimberley, North West, Eyre and Kalgoorlie Districts – where all of Western Australia's remote Aboriginal communities are situated.

The following submission is premised on this experience from my numerous visits to these isolated Aboriginal communities. It contains observations that spans almost a decade of engagement and interaction with the locals of Aboriginal communities such as Jigalong, Parnajinya, Punmu, Cotton Creek, Balgo, Warakurna and Ardyaloon – to name a few.

My submission will highlight the following points:

- The need to clearly identify the aims and objectives of stores in these remote communities in order that any course of action would appropriately address the current gaps in these communities (This includes subsidising the cost of freight and storage, appreciating the need for nutrition and good food over profit-making)
- The critical need for a clear coordinated effort from both the Federal and Western Australian State Governments in providing resource and support to these community stores
- The critical need for a permanent government presence in the managing and support of community stores to adequately monitor the issues of food supply, quality, cost and competition
- The need for ongoing support from the Government in the form of 'coaching' the locals to achieve certain levels of self-sustainability with initiatives such as growing produce and sustainable traditional bush food
- The need for ongoing nutritional re-education and support for these communities

**Model Communities**

I will describe three communities based in my electorate as references for my submission

**Community 1.**

A community of approximately 200 permanent and transient people is located within WA close to the NT border, Alice Springs is the nearest town centre some 730kms to the east, some community social assistance is given through Commonwealth and State personnel domiciled there, however no Police are permanently located in the community. Policing is managed with infrequent visits by NT and WA police.

Whilst the community tries to exclude alcohol and other drugs through bylaws, alcohol & substance abuse results in high levels of domestic violence and assaults is exasperated by limited and overcrowded housing stock. The store was burned down (arson).

**Community 2.**

A community of approximately 600 permanent and transient people located approximately 200 kms east of the WA town of Newman. Community social assistance is given through Commonwealth and State personnel domiciled there including a permanent doctor and recently the State has located a multi user complex in the community providing permanently domiciled police justice and child protection officers. Store run as private enterprise.

**Community 3.**

A coastal community of approximately 600 permanent people spread through three settlements over 30 kms approximately 200 kms north of Broome. Community social assistance is given through Commonwealth and State personnel domiciled there including permanently domiciled Police Officers. It has viable and sustainable tourist businesses including owning and running its own store. This community is worthy of exploring in greater depth by the committee.

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## Issues

### **Community Safety**

Providing a safe community and home environment is the single most important initiative if Government wants success with any program or policy implementation.

For example in Community 1, the general lawlessness of even a few has resulted in the store being burned down depriving the community of an important source of perishable and non-perishable food, this problem is multiplied by community members not hunting or gathering traditional foods either because it is not available or the people aren't capable of carrying out this important activity.

Community 2 was in a similar position to community 1 although its proximity to the Newman townsite and therefore access to alcohol meant that the violence was more frequent and involved more people. This resulted in the community demanding fast style food and sugar saturated drinks as an easy alternative to spending time preparing good food, including traditional food which is generally plentiful in this area. This situation changed dramatically with the introduction of a permanent Police presence which has been instrumental in enforcing a strict no tolerance attitude to breaches of the community's bylaws. The community now feels empowered and spends its meager earnings on community projects and programs.

***If the community is not safe then no program will work.***

### **What is the aim of the store?**

Before a store is established this question must be assessed and answered.

My view is that stores should be primarily for guaranteeing the nutrition of the most vulnerable within a community, primarily the young and old. It is not an exaggeration to say that most of the children within remote communities in WA suffer from some level of malnutrition; others likely to suffer this fate are expecting mothers and old people.

If the answer why a store should be established or maintained agrees with this proposition, it is worth the time and money invested, if not the next proposition should be; will this store assist the community to be/remain viable? If the answer is yes then this too is worth the investment.

If the answer is a double no to these propositions then it should be no to the store.

### **Isolation and associated risks to Consumers**

The isolation of remote communities immediately challenges the conventional notion of the way any store is run. Most stores operate on the capitalist notion of supply and demand, wholesale and retail prices – with the intent of profit-making. Even non-profit organizations ensure retail prices cover the cost of goods to avoid making a loss.

The application of such a model in Aboriginal remote communities is often not tenable due to such factors as freight charges, extraordinary overhead costs, long distances from supply sources and poor access resulting in interrupted and limited supplies. These charges are passed onto customers including sometimes unfair profiteering and potential abuse of a store monopolised by a private vendor often means communities pay exorbitant prices for basic necessities such as food and water and have very little selection of fresh produce but plenty of non-perishable items which lack nutrition and are high in fat and sugar (such as soft-drinks, biscuits).

An example of how a community store was able to exploit an Aboriginal community was when the normal drinking water supply had to be shut down for a number of weeks due to high bacteria levels. This meant the sole source of safe water emanated from the community store. The owner used this situation to exploit the community by charging \$10.00 for a 300ml bottle of water. The next nearest other store was over 200kms away.

The action of the store owner whilst morally wrong was legal and resulted in hardship to households who already have difficulty meeting the basic needs of their families. Other households who could not afford this water took the risk using contaminated water, unsuitable for consumption to feed their infants formula milk.

The store owner was able to exploit the community for the entire duration the drinking water supply was discontinued.

This particular case shows clearly private ownership of community stores with the monopoly of providing goods carries with it the risk of exploitation in remote areas due to the lack of price regulation and monitoring. The isolation of the communities can mean consumers, largely due to their

lack of understanding regarding consumer rights, limited consumer choice and the information regarding market prices as well as non existing governance can be exposed to unscrupulous practices and pricing.

Another example of isolation risks that occurs even in relative safe and functional communities (community 2) is that many households are able to feed their families healthy vegetables and fruits for only a few days. Towards the end of the pay period however, as the money reduces due to the high costs of items, and supply of fresh food dwindles, households revert to low cost food, which are also low in nutritional value and high in sugar used primarily as a 'belly-filler' for children however this is sometimes supplemented by bush tucker for communities such as Community 2 & 3.

The consumption of food high in sugar has adverse health implications for Aboriginal people as evidenced by a higher proportion of diabetic sufferers and mal-nourished children compared to the population outside of the remote communities. It is a well known fact that poor health in turn impacts adversely on the economic and social outcomes of Indigenous people.

A further issue with distance is that supply is often not regular and interrupted, which means fresh produce is not always accessible with limited availability of goods and choices.

### **Role of Governments**

Given that many remote community stores carry the risk of exploitation, highly over-priced goods and limited selection of healthy food and choices for the community. This situation requires the coordinated assistance, subsidy and support from both State and Federal governments in order that communities can access a regular supply of affordable food and household items including fresh produce and goods in town.

Government can also:

- ✓ Limit the supply of food high in fat and sugar
- ✓ Monitor the prices of goods
- ✓ Ensure efficient management of the store
- ✓ Provide coaching in business management
- ✓ Provide resource and training to grow own produce (such as eggs, vegetables, fruit trees)

Government needs to invest (this means long term subsidy) in these stores' safety and viability to ensure the issue of malnutrition is addressed, particularly in children.

Government support must be carefully considered in the context of local community preference, needs and taste. It should also be done in conjunction with community consultation and with the aim of allowing communities a sense of self-determination.

In the process of achieving the desired aims of health and economic outcomes, communities must be included in the process of decision-making, given opportunities to take ownership of the community store concept and types of goods ordered.

### **Coordination between jurisdictions**

My experience is that there is a lack of coordination between the Federal and State jurisdictions. This means resources are not utilised efficiently. Consequently, the use of resources and multi-management of models/projects in a remote community store yield little results.

Further, the lack of review and monitoring means there is often no follow-up to ensure the funding has achieved its purpose.

Continual review and on-going concerted government support, funding, subsidy and resources are crucial in ensuring that stores are meeting the needs of the community, thus increasing their health and economic status.

### **Conclusions**

Stores in remote communities are essential to assist in freeing **OUR** children of the plague of malnutrition and can be successful provided they are in SAFE and VIABLE communities. To achieve this aim the following needs to be also recognized and implemented:

- Clear identification of the aims and objectives of community stores in these remote communities. For example: To provide good quality, nutritious and affordable food to the community.
- The recognition of a need for permanent government presence in the joint-management and support of community stores in order to ensure the quality, cost and supply of food to the communities achieve the intended aims and objectives
- A coordinated effort from both the Federal and Western Australian State Governments in resourcing, supporting and managing these stores to ensure the aims and objectives are met in a timely and efficient manner
- The recognition of the need for ongoing support from government through 'coaching' the locals to achieve certain levels of self-sustainability with initiatives such as the growing of some produce and identification of nutritious traditional bush-tucker.
- The need for recurrent government subsidy for the cost of food and household items in order to achieve the identified aims.
- The need for ongoing nutritional re-education and support for these communities.
- The acknowledgement for the need of a realistic and ongoing allocation of funding and support resources.
- The need for ongoing consultation with each Aboriginal community in order that specific issues are identified and resolved.
- Targeted timeframes for the re-evaluation of the models against the agreed aims and objectives to ensure better health and economic outcomes for these communities

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to you important deliberations, I am happy to appear before the committee as well as travel to a place of convenience of the committee at my expense.

**Jon Ford MLC**  
Member for the Mining and Pastoral Region  
Western Australia