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7 2 JUL 2009

Submission No 109

BY: ATSIA

Submission to the House of Representatives ATSIA Committee - Inquiry into Remote and community stores

July 2009

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The happiest and healthiest people in any society are those who control the important aspects of their lives. Once we appreciate this, it should come as no surprise that control over our lives is proportional to our status within society. This fact has amply been demonstrated for decades. When we look at the Northern Territory (NT) the people with the least control over their lives are black Territorians. As expected black Territorians are the most marginalised and vulnerable peoples, are also the most chronically ill, and have the highest mortality.

Most stores in the Northern Territory are commercially run businesses, and do little if anything, or the interest to reverse the alienation that people experience from governments, the media and White society in general. This need not be the case, there are other models that can reverse these negative stereo-types. Across the NT there are Indigenous townships where school attendances are higher than anywhere else in Australia, where children are much safer than in white towns and centres, and where substance abuse and youth suicide are non-existent. Yet these stories seem to be of no interest to the Rudd government. I would like to share a story of one store, which will be referred to as a co-op.

The Mapuru co-op

Since early 2002 the people of Mapuru, a small township in east Arnhemland, NT have continuously and successfully run their own food co-op. This co-op runs on a non-profit, trust and goodwill basis, with all benefits going only to community members. In the co-op people can only buy healthy foods and other necessities such as toilet paper, detergents, tooth paste, rubbish bags, etc. By community agreement no soft drinks, chips, lollies, chocolates or other foods considered bad for health are sold through the co-op. These stocking decisions reflect the community desire to provide a healthy alternative to the foods sold at shops in the nearby towns.

The co-op is deliberately located in the school building so students can learn Western maths within a real life context. The students learn to speak English when ordering food, and total sums of money before using the EFTPOS machine to take a payment. Such initiatives are preparing the students to take control of their lives.

Almost five years ago, in 2004 the Mapuru co-op won the National Heart Foundation award for Small Rural and Remote Initiatives. A wonderful achievement. They were successful because "This award celebrates their achievement for initiating and

independently managing a healthy food coop on their Homeland. While Mapuru residents hunt and harvest bush foods every day, food from the non-profit co-op supplements food collected in the bush. Residents see the key to healthy living and health enhancing decision making is living on our ancestral lands.”

The Mapuru residents are proud of their achievements. By far the most important outcomes are those that counteract the false views promulgated by government and media reinforcing publicly held views that destructively target these, the most marginalised peoples in Australia, treating them as incapable and as wards of the state through such measure and the NT Intervention.

Governments, particularly the Rudd Federal government have reinforced negativity and have done much to discredit the Mapuru co-op and their alternative model to Indigenous sustainability. Amongst the claims, Jenny Macklin's department recently reported to the mainstream media that the Mapuru coop had closed. Although this inaccuracy was reported to her department no apology was given, or action was taken to correct the inaccuracy.

Income Management

After two long years of the Intervention and Income Management, the Rudd government persists in refusing to allow the old age pensioners and others on Centrelink payments the right to shop with their Basics Cards at the co-op. The government instead forces them to fly by charter plane and shop at Galiwin'ku, on Elcho Island.

Other enterprise developments

Not long after the coop was setup and running successfully, the confidence of residents' skyrocketed because they had gained some level of control over their lives. Armed with this newly gained confidence the women in 2003 began an eco-tourism business. Seven years later the women continue to earn significant financial rewards by teaching weaving and other skills handed down from their ancestors to tourists who come from all over Australia. See: www.arnhemweavers.com.au. This business continues to slowly grow and expand at a rate dictated by the Mapuru women.

Recently, in June 2009 the Mapuru men guided a group of male adventurers over their nation estates demonstrating how to survive on the country. While summing up as these 'survivors' were about to depart, one of the Mapuru men said, *"You're not like other White people we meet. You are not like that government mob. They come for work and to make money. They check up on us, tell us to fill in forms, tell us what to do, and how to do it. You come here with love and respect. You listen to us, you sit with us, you eat with us and we laugh and talk together. We'd like you coming here. We want you to come back."*

Training is not the key

Neither of these businesses are operate on the usual business model. They are operating like new hypotheses are developed; testing ideas and directions. The Mapuru residents are continually discovering and experiencing the realities of running these businesses. Every one is learning and trying this new way. Every one at Mapuru wants to learn about western business and be independent of government welfare. Yet this is a slow process. Just as few, if any Yolngu manage and own their own western style businesses, few white people have a detailed understanding of Yolngu language and kinship. This is because Western and Yolngu world views are galaxies apart.

What is 'Business'?

'Business' is a term used by both Indigenous and Western cultures when referring to serious culturally specific activities. For Yolngu, business refers to serious ceremonials. These ceremonials act to reinforce the kinship and social governance structures that connect and define relationship between peoples within their cultures. For Westerners, business is the stuff that defines how they relate and transact with each other.

It takes decades, not weeks, months or years to learn about the 'business' of each others culture. Currently there are few, if any Westerners that appreciate the full complexity of Yolngu ceremonials and kinship. Yet government expect Yolngu to grasp the complexities of western business by undertaking short term vocational training.

Mapuru residents have been remarkably successful, and possibly unique at learning about Western business systems. To the best of my knowledge they operate the only Western style businesses in east Arnhemland that are entirely operated and managed by the local residents. They continue with increasing determination to learn about the '*hoya*'; the understandings that underpin Western societies and commercial business so they can forge a path to will ultimately lead to a sustainable future for their children.

Governments at state and federal levels say they want to 'Close the Gap' in health and opportunity between White and Indigenous peoples, but in reality they continue to fail as they have in the past. It seems clear this failure is due continue to their unwillingness to recognise and support initiatives where there is clear evidence of success, Mapuru residents hope that governments can hear and learn from this story.

Terms:

Mapuru: a small township in east Arnhemland.

Yolngu: a term the Indigenous or First Nations peoples from east Arnhemland call themselves