



OPINION:

ENTER EVALUATION 2011

November 2011

Prepared by:
Michele Harris

'concerned Australians'
www.concernedaustralians.com

Northern Territory Emergency Response – Evaluation 2011

OPINION

A number of questions arise from reading the recently released Evaluation NTER Report by FaHCSIA¹. The Evaluation cleverly incorporates seven separate reports from consultants and highly respected institutions and in doing so produces a solid body of work. These reports are directed at evaluating the effectiveness of the NTER measures.

The Advisory Group appointed to the Evaluation, is made up of specialist advisers and eminent researchers who have been appointed to work directly with the seven chapter authors. Surprisingly, not a single Aboriginal leader with the experience of having lived in a prescribed community for the period of the NTER has been included in this group. Since the task of this body is to provide advice to the authors, surely advice on the cultural impact of the measures would have been invaluable, if not essential information.

Throughout the Evaluation there is a noticeable absence of any in-depth traditional insights to the issues under analysis.

To assist in providing background information, a survey of the perceptions of over 1,300 prescribed area community dwellers and 699 service providers is undertaken by FaHCSIA. An evaluation of the results of these surveys is made by consultants, Gillian Shaw and Peter d'Abbs, with a write-up by Dr. J Putt and FaHCSIA. This information is provided to each of the consultants who write the last seven chapters of the Evaluation. The survey was undertaken for the purpose of learning whether community safety is perceived to have improved over the last three years. The two pieces of research are referred to as the Community Safety and Wellbeing Research Study (CSWRS) and the Community Safety Service Provider Survey (CSSPS).

In the CSWRS survey, that was conducted across 16 different communities, we are told that in most cases access to communities was facilitated by the Government Business Managers (GBMs), even though in a few other circumstances the arrangements were made through others including traditional owners. Why permission for undertaking the surveys was not directed away from Government officials and respectfully directed towards the Elders of all communities is not explained. Clearly any opportunity to conduct an independent survey was lost. It was recorded by a quote that, *a number of community members commented that they appreciated the opportunity to 'tell their story to government'*.^{page 94}

Reference to this survey takes place throughout the various chapters that follow though no particular comment on the survey itself is made. We are not provided with the names of the affected communities. The questionnaire is based on statements that ask about social changes that have occurred over the last three years. One wonders just how people would perceive the past 'three-year period' as a significant time frame and why it was chosen. Is this meant to link with the introduction of the Shires, or what is the significance to the respondents?

That sixty local Aboriginal people were hired to assist in the delivery of the survey is salutary. We are told that these local 'researchers' were engaged to play a number of roles including that of '*brokers*' to encourage people to participate.^{page 95} The use of 'brokers' should be

carefully examined. Fewer responses may be the preferred result and again, working directly through community Elders would seem to be a more acceptable approach.

The survey itself is one of perceptions and opinions. It uses words that have not been defined, for example, 'better' and 'properly'. Is the school *better than it was 3 years ago?* ^{page 99} What does this mean? Has it more desks? Is it directed towards the academic results? There is no way of knowing to what the response is referring. How do you respond to the survey questions? The answers to these questions can be very misleading, especially questions that ask whether, *More kids are being looked after properly than they were 3 years ago.* ^{page 99} First of all, what does the respondent perceive as 'properly' which in itself is value-laden, but also if this is being perceived as a government conducted survey, the responses will most likely be filtered, and the same goes for other areas that border socially unacceptable behaviours. We are told that from the survey it was perceived that more children were attending school. From other government monitoring sources we know that fewer children across the prescribed communities are attending school than they were in 2008.

The problems of interpretation are highlighted when we are told that community safety was considered to have improved by 72.6%, but on examination of the qualitative data, people described their personal lack of safety at night as being related to scenarios such as *harm from wild animals, cars and lack of street lighting, as opposed to concern about physical violence.* ^{page 101} It may well be, therefore, that those who considered there had been improvements in safety may have been referring to repaired street lighting or recent dog culls.

There are numerous comments from the different consultants to the Evaluation providing diverse insights to the increases and decreases of perceived safety in communities. In a later chapter, the Australian Institute of Criminology consultants point out that in FaHCSIA's survey of service providers' perceptions of community safety, 'safety' is perceived to have increased in just over 41% of remote communities whereas in towns 54% of workers perceived it to be less safe. ^{page 169}

At the same time, the statistics regarding hospitalisations for assault reported by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare appear to show no great change for pre- and post-NTER periods. ^{page 170}

According to police data there have been significant increases in offending, mainly associated with the NTER measures. However, we are told by the Institute of Criminology that, *recorded crime is invariably a measure of police activity and data collection as well as actual criminal behaviour.* ^{page 171} The Institute goes on to explain,

Analysis of police incident and offence data shows there have been clear and marked increases in the number of recorded offences in most major offence categories in Northern Territory Indigenous communities since the introduction of the NTER. The increases appear to be strongly linked to the increase in police resources in NTER communities, through additional police deployments and through the establishment of Themis police stations, which provided a police presence in 18 communities and surrounding areas for the first time. ^{page 172}

In the seven reports, found in chapters 4 to 10, reference is regularly made to the Community Safety and Wellbeing Research Study (CSWRS) and the Community Safety Service Provider Survey (CSSPS) surveys, but there is no reliance on the statistical data provided. The Allen Consulting Group report, Chapter 4 of the Evaluation, provides a very good analysis of coordination and engagement between service providers, as well as conducting a series of surveys directly related to the subject matter. However, virtually no analysis is provided on the views of community members with regards to coordination or engagement. This may well be by design, but it is an essential part of the overview that is missing. The omission may have resulted because we are told that only three communities could be visited because they were otherwise engaged in the government consultation process.

The report references the leadership training provided by FaHCSIA, and by omission, appears to imply that prior to the Intervention there were no leaders in communities. There is no mention of traditional Elders having any role previously or in the future. In fact the survey results back up the complaints by communities that there is *limited involvement by communities in their own management*.^{page 149} In other words, capacity building within communities is not happening.

In one survey, undertaken by the Allen Consulting Group, we learn that *many respondents indicated that community engagement approaches have 'never' (39%) been effective in developing good relationships with the community, or have only been effective 'some of the time' (49%)*.^{page 136} This is after four and a half years working alongside communities, but it would seem not *with* communities.

This report refers back to the comment made by the NTER Review Board of 2008 in that, *the emergency response 'diminished its own effectiveness through its failure to engage constructively with the Aboriginal people it was intended to help'*.^{page 139}

With regard to the GBMs' responses to their effectiveness in achieving engagement through community approaches, *the survey identified that GBMs had been largely ineffective (52% answered 'never' and 41% answered 'some of the time')*.^{page 143}

The disregard for the existing culture, during the period of the so-called Intervention, is stunning. Service providers', GBMs' and non-GBMs' responses to a survey indicated that *local cultural traditions were 'never' considered (35%), considered 'some of the time' (43%) or considered 'most of the time' (18%)*.^{page 136}

In other words, it is clear from this section of the report that the Government is planning to continue to implement its newly designed model of community governance without due regard to culture or without respectful engagement with existing leaders.

In the implementation process, not only is there grave dissatisfaction from within communities, but there is also dissatisfaction between the various government agencies regarding failures of coordination.

A majority found that coordination approaches were 'never' effective (37%) or only effective 'some of the time' (50%). This suggests that substantial improvement is required in the way that agencies work together in the delivery of NTER initiatives.^{page 133}

The Allen Consulting Group report has clearly identified the growing concerns regarding the inequity of development and funding between the Remote Service Delivery (RSD) communities and the non-RSD communities. There appears to be little understanding of the relationship between those communities identified as RSDs, and their surrounding homelands, or non-RSD communities. The failure of Government to resolve these issues in an equitable manner will adversely impact upon the communities to be developed and will undermine Government's relationship with them.^{page 151}

The timing of the report was valuable in that the community consultations were taking place across the Territory at the same time as surveys were being conducted for this report, and comments on the processes are particularly relevant,

Consultation activities are perceived as being scheduled with little notice and seen as working to 'Canberra' timeframes, which do not allow for communities to discuss ideas and solutions to problems at the pace and in the manner they are accustomed to. This tension arises largely from the need to meet government's decision-making and budget timeframes.^{page 152}

Where many gaps have been identified through this section of the report, there is much valuable advice provided to Government. With regard to improving engagement the following suggestions are made by respondents:

- *retaining staff in communities for longer periods to build trust and rapport with community members*
- *ensuring that consultations are undertaken as both an early and an ongoing part of the policy formulation process*
- *minimising fly-in, fly-out consultations*
- *being flexible about timeframes for consultation by providing adequate notice prior to meetings and sufficient time during discussions*
- *continuing the IEO [Indigenous Engagement Officers] initiative to build stronger community linkages*
- *engaging through existing structures and using resources already available in communities.*^{page 138-39}

While these suggestions are valuable, they are made within the current context of community engagement and on their own they are not enough. The Local Implementation Plans (LIPs) currently being developed in RSD communities will be very valuable, but only if they are designed to operate with communities within their own cultural context and with respect for and engagement with community Elders.

The Allen Consulting Group report makes clear that similar planning must take place with the non-RSD communities as early as possible. The critical first stage in the process of genuine re-engagement with these communities involves working with them to identify their realistic goals and then to ensure the long-term funding to achieve them. Even through the surveys undertaken in the Evaluation, it is confirmed that the smaller, non-RSD communities, are

perceived to be safer places to live. This finding flies in the face of current Government policy which directs development and investment away from smaller communities.

In the past, and before the era of the Intervention, many communities had developed highly beneficial programmes that functioned well. It has been the failure to acknowledge these programmes that has caused much bitterness in communities. In discussion regarding alcohol restrictions, it is the Australian Institute of Criminology that reminds us that *the notion of restricting alcohol use among Indigenous people is not new; indeed, most of the NTER communities had some form of alcohol restriction in place before the NTER.*^{page 178} In fact the NTER Review Board expressed concern that the restrictions were interfering with the actions already taken by the communities themselves.^{page 179}

It is because almost 80% of communities had some form of self-imposed alcohol restrictions that it is difficult to assess the effectiveness of the NTER measures. The perceived changes are no doubt different from one community to another and many informed suggestions have been made as to how the next phase should proceed.

The National Drug Research Institute called for *a broader range of treatment models and complementary, well-resourced intervention strategies as well as the need for more rigorous evaluation conducted in cooperation with Aboriginal-controlled organisations.*^{page 178} It recommended increasing the price of cask wine as an effective way of reducing alcohol consumption and also expressed a belief that solutions are best when they are locally based and *built on acknowledgement and ownership of the issues by Indigenous people.*^{page 178}

Within communities there is a strong belief that safety is increased through the engagement of night patrols. The Institute informs us that, *while night patrols have been in operation in the Northern Territory since the 1980s, there is little information available to assess their impacts and outcomes.*^{page 190}

In 2010, the Australian National Audit Office assessed the effectiveness of the management of night patrols in the Northern Territory and noted *the critical importance of community involvement and support to the success of night patrol services, as well as the importance of relationships between night patrols and the police.*^{page 192} This is an important message to those focusing on the required adjustments to community management; ownership at a local level is the primary requirement.

In attempting to evaluate community safety using surveys of perceptions, the Australian Institute of Criminology is clear about the limitations of its findings. *This review has not been able to consider the influence of local community activities on perceptions, or the way in which NTER measures have impacted and manifested at a local level. The survey results presented in this review are indicative of levels of consensus across the surveyed...*^{page 199} It does, however offer a challenge for the future *to develop and maintain sufficiently disaggregated data to support quality, targeted research and robust evaluation designs able to generate evidence to support the development of policy responses amenable to local needs and circumstances.*^{page 199}

Throughout the Evaluation there has been considerable focus on the need for better data collections. The Australian Institute of Family Studies report makes it clear that Australia's current data collection management is inadequate in reaching definitive conclusions

regarding the safety and wellbeing of children - *it is important to note that without a nationally representative prevalence study of family dysfunction or child abuse and neglect in Australia, we do not have good data for comparisons between jurisdictions, or adequate historical data (from prior to the implementation of the NTER) to see whether levels of child abuse/neglect are changing. ... Therefore, any evaluation of the NTER should be considered in the context of the risks faced by all children, regardless of jurisdiction or Aboriginality, across Australia.*^{page 288}

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) notes at the beginning of its report that from its own analysis and from evaluations by consultants, Allen and Clarke, the *child health checks were not an effective mechanism for reaching the unscreened population*^{page 215}
...

However, they report that over ten and a half thousand children had voluntary health checks and we are advised that the three most common diagnosed health problems were: *oral health problems (43%), ear disease (30%) and skin problems (30%).*^{page 215} It was also noted that such conditions *can have long-term consequences for children's overall health and wellbeing, as well as their education (particularly those related to ear disease).*^{page 215}

Where originally child health checks had been designed to identify child sexual abuse, the focus changed to voluntary health checks and has led to the need for further follow-up and specialist referrals. While the health checks are often referred to by Government as a great positive outcome from the Intervention, what is rarely discussed is the large number of children who, more than four years later are still waiting for follow-up.

With regard to audiology services the report states,

- *175 children who received an audiology referral at their health check were waiting to be seen by an audiologist*
- *466 who received a referral from their ENT consultation were waiting to be seen*
- *88 required audiology follow-up care after their ENT surgery*
- *1,646 were identified as requiring ongoing monitoring.*^{page 219}

We are told that of the 468 children recommended for surgery just over 40% are still waiting.

However, there have been significant improvements to infant health and there are increasing numbers of health professionals being employed. Having said this, health checks raised expectations and simply highlighted the inability of the system to address the depths of the problems that were uncovered. They also brought to attention the extreme neglect of the preceding period.

The evaluators concluded that even with adequate follow-up, medical intervention in the context of ongoing poor social determinants, particularly inadequate housing, may improve the health of children in the short term, but will have little or no impact at a population level, as children simply get reinfected or continue to live in conditions that promote or exacerbate chronic illness.^{page 221}

While it is acknowledged that the social determinants have an important role in improving health outcomes, improvements in access to medication and treatments for specific diseases, in particular for chronic diseases, have been instrumental in gains in life expectancy over the past decade.^{page 221}

Improving access to primary health care and to hospital care is critical. But as cited by the report, *the need for trained Indigenous health professionals remains a critical challenge.*^{page 226}

The report by the Institute of Family Studies strongly supports these views and recognises the need to first address fundamental needs such as housing, access to good food and shelter before attempting to address the complex problems of protection, but equally recognises the need for cultural considerations. *Culturally based interventions that target risk factors that utilise both Western and traditional know-how have the most likely chance of succeeding in achieving long-term sustainable change in the over-representation of Indigenous children in child abuse and neglect data.*^{page 288-289}

While in the main, this Evaluation has given little focus to the importance of Aboriginal culture or to its Elders, we are told that *programs for Indigenous people in Canada have now started to focus on utilising teaching and healing practices that encourage reclaiming the traditional roles of healer and elder and emphasise relationships with family, community and the broader society.*^{page 262}

We are told that, *a Northern Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency [NAAJA] submission described how customary law made the family responsible for an issue and that, if that responsibility could be recognised in Northern Territory courts, families could better manage many issues.*^{page 282}

The NTER Review Board found through the community consultations that were conducted in 2008 that neglect was recognised within communities, *but there was also frustration over the lack of community involvement in initiatives and the lack of knowledge at the community level of what was being done to address the safety and wellbeing of children.*^{page 271} Community members felt disempowered by the process.

As already mentioned, the advisory body to this very Evaluation failed to include a single Aboriginal leader from any one of the 73 'prescribed communities'. It seems that very little has changed.

The failure of ensuring community involvement is simply recognised as an ongoing form of discrimination; informed consent has simply been disregarded.

Reference is made to the 2010 report by the Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee in which it was noted, *that many commentators, Indigenous people and community representatives saw income management as simply an example of ongoing discrimination against Indigenous people and were especially critical of the 'humiliating' administrative processes of the scheme.*^{page 278}

The 2008 NTER Review Board revealed the deep sense of disempowerment experienced by those in communities, and where their attempts to address their own issues had been all but dismissed by government.^{page 282} The sense of isolation is one that is extremely damaging

and leads to high levels of depression within communities. The high rates of self-harm are gravely concerning and most especially when it involves children. In the three years between 2006 and 2009 there were 15 child suicides and 14 of them by hanging.^{page 286}

What continues to be most disturbing is the information that is *not* provided in the Evaluation and this applies most especially to the section on *Enhancing Education*. In my reading of this section there is no analysis of the changes that have taken place as a result of disallowing the bilingual learning programme in schools. In the recent consultations this was the most repeated request from communities – the reinstatement of the bilingual programme as it had been previously operating in nine schools. Interestingly the request has come not only from these nine particular communities, but from many other communities as though the demotion of Aboriginal languages is personally insulting to all Aboriginal people.

Comment made that the attendance rates were particularly low during 2010 appears to be attributed to the long and particularly difficult wet season. There is no indication in the report that this may be the result of the imposed 4-hour English programme, as has been suggested by many teachers and community members. By ignoring this issue, there is a sense of total disregard for the rights of Aboriginal communities in regard to the education of their children, a right that is enshrined in international law, in conventions to which Australia is a signatory.

While the report examines in great detail the NAPLAN results in Northern Territory schools, as well as its impact on enrolment, the report includes the following statement,

Nevertheless, with relatively small numbers of students involved (around 600 in Year 3 and fewer in other year levels), NAPLAN results may vary with no explanation other than 'volatility'. Combined with relatively low participation rates and only three years of data, the discussion of 'trends' is tentative at best. Data are required for subsequent years before more substantive conclusions about changes in NAPLAN results can be made.^{page 322}

In fact early in the report it is recognised *that NAPLAN is but one instrument that could be used to assess student achievement and that it may not be the most appropriate for use in schools serving the NTER communities.*^{page 299} That recognition is very important since all NAPLAN tests are conducted in the English language and are not culturally sensitive. It is the case that children who are participating in a second or third language will be seriously disadvantaged. Why then is there so little flexibility and why the determination to insist on NAPLAN as the model for testing? Maybe this is why there is such resistance to bilingual learning as students will not reach their full potential in the English language until later years. As has been found with refugee on-arrival English classes and with other testing, the students are severely disadvantaged because of cultural biases of mainstream testing. Aboriginal children will certainly be disadvantaged by NAPLAN testing, and other options should be explored.

Other barriers that threaten the stability of Northern Territory education are the serious problems of attracting teachers to communities, and then offering them opportunities that encourage longer-term commitments.

Teaching positions ... are often filled by recent graduates or junior teachers who, being inexperienced, are often unprepared for the challenges of remote placements, including working with Indigenous students.^{page 300}

We are told that, *one-third of teachers in Northern Territory schools have five or more years of teaching at the same school, compared to 13 per cent in NTER schools.*^{page 301}

There are 150 principals in the NT and only four of them are Indigenous. Some 20 years ago there were at least 9 Aboriginal school principals in Arnhem Land alone. There appears to have been considerable movement in the wrong direction.

However, the report concludes that much has been done to improve the situation and refers to the completion of new school buildings, the introduction of teacher support programmes as well as the implementation of Early Childhood programmes in some communities. Reference is also made to the impassable roads which prevent access to schools during the wet season although no recommendation is made that it is well and truly time to roll out a programme of sealing roads.

For all the detail of this report there is no substantive focus given to the 45 Homeland Learning Centres (HLCs). It is a disgrace that there are still over 800 children who do not have access to full-time qualified teachers and that this situation has not taken a significant place in the analysis of NT education. Again, this is an area where the rights of Aboriginal children are being denied and have been denied for very many years.

Equally 'blanket measures' have generally been associated with a loss of control and a removal of rights. The notion that 'one size doesn't fit all' was lost with the introduction of the Intervention.

Income Management (IM) took away the rights of people to spend their money as they wished, irrespective of whether they were good parents who had paid their bills and managed their monies appropriately. The ramifications for such groups was that they could no longer pool their monies with others and buy food in bulk nor could they use cheaper outlets, such as Op-Shops. The NTER Review Board in 2008 suggested that voluntary IM would be more acceptable. The programme was relaxed, but IM remains in place as a 'blanket measure' with a new set of guidelines.

The Colmar Brunton report is cautiously positive about improvements brought about through IM, but states that, *income management has only been in place for four years and it may be too soon to be definitive about improvements and successes, as they can only be determined on the basis of a generational change supported by quantitative evidence rather than qualitative or anecdotal evidence. It should be noted that the new model of income management is currently being thoroughly evaluated and further modifications will be made to the program if it is demonstrated that changes are required.*^{page 362}

Another area where there was anger regarding the removal of rights was associated with the 5-year compulsory leases as well as the decision by government to end the permit system and further reducing the control of communities over their land.

The KPMG report clarifies the implications of the leases,

The five-year leases acquired by the Australian Government provide the legal basis for accessing particular NTER communities, and underpin emergency investments by providing the security of tenure necessary for specific NTER sub-measures. The sub-measures include:

- *the implementation of legally enforceable tenancy agreements over community housing*
- *the GBM Accommodation project, Safe Houses, and the Community Stores Licensing and Aboriginal Benefit Account [ABA] stores infrastructure project*
- *CCU [Community Clean-Up] works and SIHIP [Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program] refurbishments and upgrades, including the removal of asbestos.*^{page 394}

It is of concern that there was no attempt to negotiate such agreements with communities and although undoubtedly this would have taken time, it would have provided a better basis for a genuine development partnership. To some degree this will become a requirement after June 2012 as the Government is still trying to achieve longer-term leases in a considerable number of communities.

The KPMG report suggests that the removal of permits by government, that was so distressing to communities, was simply a matter of reducing the red tape. It also says that, *there is no evidence to suggest, however, that any class of persons now involved in the implementation of the NTER was previously excluded from communities, meaning that it cannot be concluded that changes to the permit system have been responsible for opening access to Aboriginal communities for public servants.*^{page 394}

Analyses in these reports include a tendency to provide long-term optimism, whereas on the ground and at the current time, there is much distress. Again, the Brunton report refers to the conversion of CDEP jobs to 'gains in employment' and states that 2,241 jobs were *created in Australian and Northern Territory government positions.*^{page 334}

The problem with this information is the failure to emphasise the ramifications for the remaining approximate five thousand who remain unemployed. We are told that *4,100 job placements were brokered via Job Network and JSA [Job Services Australia] providers in prescribed areas.*^{page 363} We are not told however, how long these placements have been for and whether the figure provided includes multiple short-term placements as we are led to believe from people on the ground. Transferring people from CDEP employment where 'top-up' wages were often part of the package, to being unemployed was a very harsh move, especially for older community members who had been proud CDEP employees for a number of years.

However, the economic sustainability of the CDEP job conversions is questionable, given that most are related to community services. Although public sector employment is valid and necessary and has important multiplier effects beyond the number of actual positions created, it very much depends on ongoing government funding. In addition, while it was assumed that training and work experience would enhance career mobility beyond the entry-level jobs created, limited employment opportunities combined with a lack of NTJP [Northern

Territory Jobs Package] funding mean there is little chance of career progression or mobility.^{page 363}

There had been high expectations that during the home repairs and the home building programmes, there would not only be opportunities for Aboriginal people to obtain jobs, but also to be able to access apprenticeships. These expectations were never realised to the extent to which they had been envisaged. The KPMG report tells us that, *although no formal training or certification was provided directly through the program to CDEP and Work for the Dole participants, seven apprentices were given the opportunity to receive formal trade qualifications through employment with a contracted trade team, and a total of 35 Indigenous people were employed as part of CCU teams.*^{page 391}

Training expectations had been particularly high and there was considerable disappointment because of the few opportunities available and because workers in some cases were on work-for-the-dole payments.

KPMG refers to a CLC survey which revealed a very mixed response to working and training opportunities. Some *expressed frustration that building, repairs and maintenance work was being allocated to contract workers using predominantly non-Indigenous labour instead of utilising community-based work crews. FaHCSIA notes that the requirement for a large-scale program of works to be delivered in a relatively short period of time impacted on the ability to maximise local employment in all instances.*^{page 391}

Brunton concludes,

Sustainable economic development would require removing barriers to genuine commercial ventures, such as poor transport infrastructure, inadequate education/training services (that currently fail to engage people) and current land tenure arrangements that fail to provide the long-term leases necessary for organisations to be assured a reasonable return on investment. Enabling initiatives would also be required, such as comprehensive mobility programs (that successfully engage job seekers), the enshrinement of the merit principle as the sole basis for employment, and Commonwealth procurement guidelines that relax mandatory procurement procedures for Indigenous-owned enterprises (note that this change to procurement practices is now in place).^{page 364}

The Northern Territory Emergency Response Evaluation of 2011 is a very large body of work that contains some excellent reporting. In an overview of this Evaluation it is important to acknowledge the detail that has been provided to so many different aspects of the Intervention. The model for change incorporates issues of everyday family life, of education, health, safety, law and order, money management, housing, employment and training, development of communities, land leases, and engagement and coordination of programmes. One would have to acknowledge that on first reading, the planned changes are nothing less than “all encompassing”. But on further reflection, the combined reports show quite clearly that the people for whom all these changes are being implemented have not had any real part in their planning to date.

Perhaps then it is generous to believe that these changes have been made for the people. In fact there appears to be a determined drive to open up the northern part of the country, in a way that is irrespective of the views of the people.

On review, what we have learnt from the Evaluation in regard to the inclusion of local people in the decision-making processes to date:

- No leading representative from a prescribed community was invited onto the Advisory Group to this Evaluation
- A failure to acknowledge Elders as leaders in communities
- No acknowledgement of the relationships that exist between RSD and non-RSD communities
- Limited involvement by communities in their own management and a failure to focus on capacity building processes.
- An almost total disregard for the existing culture by GBMs, public servants and service providers.
- A disregard for Customary Law even though NAAJA was prepared to draw attention to its value.
- The arbitrary introduction of programmes that have disempowered communities irrespective of the impact on the people
- The removal of bilingual learning programmes against the wishes of the people
- A determination to impose the NAPLAN assessment on second-language Aboriginal children even though it is conducted in the English language and is culturally insensitive.
- A disregard for Aboriginal children in Homeland Learning Centres who do not have access to full-time education.

Perhaps some of the most disturbing elements of the Evaluation report relate to the often lauded Child Health Checks. These health checks were in the end voluntary and undertaken in good faith. To know that, more than four years later there are still children awaiting follow-up and in some circumstances, surgery, is truly disgraceful. This could not possibly happen to any other ethnic group in the country. That there are so many children who have suffered, and are suffering painful otitis media (middle ear infection), is totally unacceptable. As for school attendance, where is consideration given to children who are no doubt already experiencing varying levels of hearing loss or who are suffering pain?

That elements of extraordinary disadvantage do not surface in the Evaluation is even more concerning. That there are so many school-aged children in Homeland Learning Centres without access to full-time qualified teachers appears to have escaped the scrutiny of the Australian Council for Educational Research. Many of these communities have been waiting for schools for close to thirty years.

Perhaps the one small chance for hope lies in the development of the Local Implementation Plans (LIPs), whereby community reference groups are joined by government and NGO service providers to explore long term goals for individual 'growth town' communities. Most

of these community meetings were expected to be completed this year, but progress seems to have come to a halt. The Evaluation states,

...some LIPs are not considered to be tailored to individual communities. The Coordinator General noted that the next steps are to enhance LIPs by defining actions more precisely, establishing deadlines for delivery and adding greater clarity about the desired outcomes and performance measures. The Northern Territory ROC [Regional Operations Centre] has agreed that a LIP refresh will occur as a matter of priority in Northern Territory RSD communities.^{page 147}

While this seems the first, and so far, the only hope of real engagement with communities in determining their future, there does seem to be a very protracted process taking place. It is hard not to wonder if these LIP processes have been put on hold until after the legislation to extend the NTER has been passed into law. While genuinely negotiated and implemented LIPs would be a big step in the right direction, we have to remember that at this point in time they are planned to only affect the 'growth towns' but will have no impact on the non-LIP communities.

When we remember that this Evaluation has clearly pointed out that smaller communities are far happier and those living there express a considerably higher degree of safety, we must ask why government policy is fixated on ensuring that the funding processes greatly disadvantage these smaller communities in favour of their identified 'growth towns'.

The Evaluation addresses the issue of funding 'silos' and short-term funding as both are working against future long-term planning. The use of ABA monies is also questionable. It is time to review funding arrangements in general and it is well over time to hold an independent review on the use of ABA monies.

Much has been done in the Northern Territory as part of a wide non-negotiated programme of change. The provision of information has been poor because of failures in the data collection processes, as has been the failure of engagement and consultation. The Evaluation has filled in many of the gaps in the story, while it has highlighted that many of the claims of success made by the Federal Government, are far from being evidence-based and are exaggerated. What is not exaggerated, however, is that Aboriginal people and Aboriginal culture have been sacrificed to a Canberra planned imposition that may well have been of great benefit if only it had been fairly negotiated with the people and their leaders. Is it too late for rescue? That will depend on the Federal Government's preparedness to loosen its control and to allow local strategies to be developed in all communities through the inclusion of community reference groups, while encouraging genuine and respectful partnerships with due regard for cultural practices.

Reference:

¹ Australian Government. 2011. *Northern Territory Emergency Response Evaluation Report 2011*. http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/indigenous/pubs/nter_reports/Pages/nter_evaluation_rpt_2011.aspx