

# **Submission on the Northern Territory Government Outstations Policy Discussion Paper**

**Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTAR)**

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## **1. Introduction**

This submission is provided by Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR), a national advocacy organisation dedicated specifically to the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In 2004, ANTaR adopted Indigenous health rights as its central national campaign. ANTaR's Healing Hands campaign foreshadowed the successful campaign

of the Close the Gap Coalition of which ANTaR is a founding member. ANTaR has also been active in campaigning on overcoming violence and abuse in Indigenous communities and in opposing the racially discriminatory aspects of the Northern Territory Emergency Intervention.

ANTaR appreciates the opportunity to provide comment on the issues outlined in the Northern Territory Government's Outstations Policy Discussion Paper.

## **2. Summary of recommendations**

In light of the significant economic, social and cultural values generated for Aboriginal communities by outstations and homelands, it is recommended that the Northern Territory Government should:

1. Build on the strengths of outstations and homelands to enable them to provide viable and sustainable futures for Aboriginal families and individuals based on strong social, cultural and economic values;
2. Ensure that a proper evidence-based approach is adopted in developing a policy framework for outstations and homelands that:
  - ◆ addresses the many research and knowledge gaps concerning outstations and homelands;
  - ◆ is informed by a cost/benefit analysis of the social, cultural, economic and environmental values of outstations and homelands, including their contribution to health and wellbeing and the protection of families and culture;
  - ◆ investigates best-practice in needs-based services and infrastructure delivery to outstations and homelands;
  - ◆ addresses the need for flexible funding arrangements; and
  - ◆ includes local area, community-driven planning processes developed in consultation with communities, Outstation Resource Agencies and shire councils.
3. Provide support for Aboriginal community controlled structures such as Outstation Resource Agencies (ORAs) and community-based planning groups where outstation and homeland support is provided through shire councils;
4. Seek to negotiate with the Australian Government to secure long-term Commonwealth funding for outstations and homelands on the basis of need and equality of access and for the retention of the current functions of the CDEP scheme.

## **3. Characteristics and context of outstations and homelands<sup>1</sup>**

There is something in the order of 10,000 people, or about one quarter of the total population of discrete Aboriginal communities in the NT, living on outstations and homelands. Individual communities typically have populations less than 100 with an average population of about 20. The majority (88%) are classified as very remote although many are within close or commutable proximity to larger communities or centres. The size and circumstances of outstations and homelands is highly variable.

Outstations and homelands have less overcrowding than larger communities, with an average of 4.8 residents per dwelling, compared to 6.2 on larger communities. They have far fewer

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<sup>1</sup> The figures in this section are taken from ABS (2006). *Housing and Infrastructure in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities, Australia 2006*, unless otherwise specified. It should be noted that there are likely to be deficiencies in the data.

educational and health facilities, and education and health services are mainly accessed at larger communities and regional centres. Basic infrastructure (water, electricity, sewerage and rubbish disposal) is in place in almost all communities. Telecommunications access is poor, particularly access to the internet. Public transport is also virtually non-existent.

The Aboriginal population of the Northern Territory is highly mobile and the factors that contribute to high mobility are particularly significant at the outstation or homelands level. People may move away from their communities for days, weeks or months at a time to different communities or into regional centres for a range of reasons – family and cultural matters, including deaths, access to health and other services, schooling needs, work, dealing with courts or the imprisonment of a family member, etc. People resident in larger communities may also go to stay with family at outstations or homelands for periods of time.

A further important demographic characteristic in remote areas is the high level of population growth and the high projected growth over the coming decade and beyond. Although figures aren't available for outstations and homelands, an estimate based on communities within prescribed areas under the NTER projected an increase in population of approximately 20% by 2021.<sup>2</sup>

These key characteristics – the diversity of outstations and homelands, the high mobility of residents, and the projections on population increases – caution against an approach that imposes strict criteria on the definition of outstations and homelands, or on the delivery of municipal and essential services to them. Rather, there is merit in viewing outstations and homelands as part of a spectrum or network of interlinked Aboriginal communities to which such services should be provided on the basis of need and equality of access.

#### **4. Key decisions already made**

Considering the extent and significance of outstations and homelands, it is of concern that the Northern Territory Government's discussion paper on outstations has been released after key policy decisions regarding the future of outstations and homelands have already been made:

- The 2007 MOU between the Australian and the NT Governments on Indigenous Housing passes responsibility for municipal and essential services to outstations to the NT Government; freezes the Commonwealth's contribution to funding for outstations at its existing inadequate level of \$20m per year till 2010/11; and rules out further Australian Government funding to construct housing on outstations.
- On the back of this, the Northern Territory Government appears to have written off the future prospects for outstations and homelands and declared the limit of its support:

*“There will never be enough resources to meet the complex service demands of outstations and the Australian Government will not provide funding to construct housing on outstations. Consequently, the Northern Territory Government will not support the establishment of new outstations”.*

These key policy decisions covering areas of overall limits on resourcing and growth, and housing and services, have been made without any consultation, negotiation or significant engagement with outstation and homeland communities or the broader network of communities with which they are interconnected.

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<sup>2</sup> Northern Territory Emergency Response (2008), *Report of the NTER Review Board*, October 2008. p17.

If we add to this picture proposed changes to CDEP<sup>3</sup> which will see it significantly altered in remote areas,<sup>4</sup> then a policy framework is emerging that appears to envisage a process of winding back the outstation/homelands movement by making them increasingly untenable.

## **5. Outstations and homelands at a crossroad – proceed with caution!**

This submission strongly argues that should a policy framework that makes outstations and homelands increasingly unviable be realised, there is clear evidence that there will be negative impacts on Aboriginal health and wellbeing, ironically, in direct opposition to the commitments of both the NT and Australian Governments to close the gap on Aboriginal disadvantage. There will also be negative impacts on Aboriginal employment and enterprises, as well as future prospects for developing sustainable on-country economic development. It will also place further pressure on the ability of Aboriginal people to maintain cultural knowledge of and connection to traditional lands and to carry out customary land management practices – activities which also provide conservation and other benefits to the broader community.

Further, current evidence suggests that the conditions to which Aboriginal residents of outstations and homelands would be moving to in larger communities remain inadequate, with insufficient services and increased overcrowding and social dysfunction.

And all this will occur in the absence of an evidence base for the current policy changes and without proper understanding and consideration of the cultural, social, economic and environmental benefits of living on country.

However, at another level, history appears to be on the side of the homelands movement. One of its hallmarks is the strong resolve, realised as practical expressions of self-determination and taking responsibility for their lives, that communities have demonstrated in establishing and developing outstations and homelands, in some cases with little or no government support. This has also been the result of reasoned, determined action to reconnect with traditional lands and cultural responsibilities in rejection of centralised, institutionally-controlled settlements and the conflict, dysfunction and ill-health that has characterised such communities. Such resolve appears undiminished and it is neither a sensible nor appropriate role of government to now try to undermine it.

Government policy, on the other hand, has been all over the shop, only consistent in the inadequate levels of funding and support provided. With the change from assimilation to self-determination, government policy in the early 1970s encouraged the homelands movement. It was further strengthened in the 1980s with the introduction of CDEP and again in the 1990s through infrastructure and other support from ATSIC. With ATSIC's demise in 2005, the political climate swung against the homelands movement under criticism by the then Minister, Amanda Vanstone, who questioned whether government should continue to provide services and infrastructure. Her successor, Mal Brough, who as Minister may have been expected to take over the blowtorch of his predecessor, found himself supporting "safe and healthy"

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<sup>3</sup> The Community Development Employment Projects scheme (CDEP) has been central to the economies of outstations and homelands (see below).

<sup>4</sup> *Increasing Indigenous Employment Opportunity*. An Australian Government Discussion Paper, October 2008. Can be found at [www.fahcsia.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/vIA/cdep/\\$file/Increasing\\_Indigenous\\_Employment\\_Opportunity.PDF](http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/vIA/cdep/$file/Increasing_Indigenous_Employment_Opportunity.PDF)

outstations “no matter how small”<sup>5</sup> and approved the establishment of new housing in decentralised, clan-based homelands rather than locate the housing within in the overcrowded and conflict-torn community of Wadeye.<sup>6</sup> We now appear to have Labor governments at both the Territory and national levels putting the screws back on outstations and homelands.

Aboriginal residents of such communities would be entitled to feel hard done by, even betrayed, by the apparent fickleness of governments and bureaucrats.

In consideration of the history and current context of outstations and homelands, including the significant economic, social and cultural values generated for their Aboriginal residents, this submission argues that the Northern Territory Government should:

- Build on the strengths of outstations and homelands to enable them to provide viable and sustainable futures for Aboriginal families and individuals based on strong social, cultural and economic values;
- Ensure that a proper evidence-based approach is adopted in developing a policy framework for outstations and homelands that:
  - ◆ addresses the many research and knowledge gaps concerning outstations and homelands;
  - ◆ is informed by a cost/benefit analysis of the social, cultural, economic and environmental values of outstations and homelands, including their contribution to health and wellbeing and the protection of families and culture;
  - ◆ investigates best-practice in needs-based services and infrastructure delivery to outstations and homelands;
  - ◆ addresses the need for flexible funding arrangements; and
  - ◆ includes local area, community-driven planning processes developed in consultation with communities, Outstation Resource Agencies and shire councils.
- Provide support for Aboriginal community controlled structures such as Outstation Resource Agencies (ORAs) and community-based planning groups where outstation and homeland support is provided through shire councils;
- Seek to negotiate with the Australian Government to secure long-term Commonwealth funding for outstations and homelands on the basis of need and equality of access and for the retention of the current functions of the CDEP scheme.

One suspects that a reconsideration will occur. However, this submission strongly recommends that the Northern Territory Government regards the policy development process outlined in the Discussion Paper as an interim measure and keeps open the future options for expanding, not restricting the growth of outstations and homelands and the potential benefits to Aboriginal health and wellbeing and long-term sustainable futures that having people on country represents.

## **6. Cultural and human rights considerations**

Outstations and homelands represent an integral component of Aboriginal residential patterns

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<sup>5</sup> ABC News Online, 19 June 2006. Can be found at:  
<http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200606/s1665835.htm>

<sup>6</sup> *The Australian*, 15 December 2007. Can be found at:  
<http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,22927269-5013172,00.html>

in the Northern Territory which are firmly underpinned by cultural and social values based on family relationships and the traditional lands and responsibilities to which these pertain. They are in essence an expression of Aboriginal cultural identity and the desire to exert control over their lives. Moreover, they are examples of Aboriginal people seeking to be self-reliant and to achieve outcomes through their own efforts.

As such, the signalling in the Discussion Paper of the NT Government's intention to seek to prevent the establishment of new outstations by refusing government support represents an unwarranted restriction on fundamental rights, including that of self-determination, and an apparent abrogation of government responsibility towards its citizens. It seeks to freeze in time what is essentially a dynamic cultural movement seeking to reside on traditional lands which its members own, and to respond to changing circumstances, including those of existing and emerging land uses, economic and employment opportunities, educational aspirations and new technologies and service delivery methods.

The approach of the Australian and Northern Territory Governments towards outstations and homelands goes against the kinds of minimum rights outlined in the *United Nations Common Understanding of Human Rights Based Approach to Development Cooperation*,<sup>7</sup> which sets out the necessary elements of policy development and service delivery under a human rights based approach and highlights the need for engagement and participation. It also runs contrary to community development principles which aim to identify and build community capacity to develop and sustain positive change.

## **7. An alternative vision**

Instead, the Northern Territory Government should be seeking to maximise the engagement and participation of Aboriginal people in policy development and service delivery. It should seek to do so across the spectrum of communities and to provide maximum flexibility in the structure and availability of funding for community services and infrastructure. It should also seek to leverage the positive potentials evidenced by existing successful outstation service delivery initiatives by extending support for Aboriginal community controlled structures such as the Outstation Resource Agencies (ORAs), including support for strengthening governance and community accountability structures. This would be an investment in what are important institutions of Aboriginal governance that also provide significant opportunities for expanding Aboriginal employment, training and enterprise development.

## **8. ORAs and the value of community control**

Outstation resource Agencies (ORAs) are similar in some respects to the Aboriginal community controlled health services (or ACCHSs), which are independent, community controlled organisations providing primary health care services to Aboriginal communities, including many outstations and homelands. As with ORAs, ACCHSs typically service a range of communities within a service hinterland. Both provide essential community services that are government funded, but also provide a range of community supports that are unfunded by government and that would not otherwise be provided by mainstream government agencies, including the new local government shires. In the case of ORAs this can include such things as assistance with outstation resident's mail, payment of bills, access to phones and the internet, and emergency support in times of illness and death. They may also provide assistance with police and courts matters and other contact with government agencies as well as being a contact point for external agencies and visitors.

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<sup>7</sup> *Social Justice Report 2007*, Report of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner. Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Sydney. p19.

There are a number of lessons from the ACCHSs experience that are relevant to the current discussion. The first relates to the fact that ACCHSs have become leaders in the delivery of comprehensive primary health care (PHC), so much so that community control is now the preferred model for the delivery of PHC services to Aboriginal communities in the NT.<sup>8</sup> This has in part occurred because of the existence of an effective Aboriginal health planning structure – the Northern Territory Aboriginal Health Forum, (comprised of the Northern Territory and Australian Government health agencies and AMSANT, the peak body for NT ACCHSs) – that enabled relationship building and is able to make decisions regarding the expenditure of Aboriginal PHC funding.

ORAs have similarly led the way in innovative service delivery and support to outstations and homelands. However, there is no similar planning structure of which ORAs are a part. Spending decisions have always been strictly controlled by government – up to the present by the Australian Government, but from now on by the Northern Territory Government. Until there is an effective outstation and homeland planning structure that includes ORAs, incorporates their views and expertise, and that can genuinely influence decision-making, then outstations and homelands will remain subject to the vagaries of political expediency.

A further important lesson concerns community control. In the ACCHSs context, Aboriginal governing committees provide leadership and action from and by their communities to improve health – they are the antithesis of the passive welfare culture. If we are truly to achieve the goals of closing the gap on Aboriginal disadvantage then it will require empowering the leadership of Aboriginal communities.

Finally, it needs to be acknowledged that community control produces structures and processes that provide cultural safety and cultural security to the Aboriginal people who have to deal with them. This is particularly significant in the context of outstations and homelands where Aboriginal cultural considerations and traditional authority pertaining to the use and access of these areas are strong.

Such considerations need to be addressed in relation to the new shires that provide services to a significant number of outstations and homelands. As this is a new structure this may take some time to sort out, although anecdotal evidence suggests that the new shires are not as responsive to the needs of outstations and homelands and do not provide the kinds additional supports and assistance that the old community government structure did.

The identification of need and delivery of services and infrastructure to outstations and homelands should be decided by local area, community-driven planning processes developed in consultation with communities, Outstation Resource Agencies and shire councils.

Ultimately, whatever the decision-making and bridging structures that are developed for the delivery of government services, the voice of outstations and homelands must be included.

## **9. Benefits and opportunities of outstations and homelands**

Published research and other evidence has demonstrated that outstation and homelands are associated with significant benefits in terms of improved health, wellbeing, livelihood potential and social and cultural outcomes, and therefore contribute positively to closing the gap on Aboriginal disadvantage.

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<sup>8</sup> *Pathways to Community Control: an agenda to further promote Aboriginal community control in the provision of primary health care services.* (2008). Northern Territory Aboriginal Health Forum, Darwin.

Improved health and wellbeing outcomes include reduced risk of chronic disease, including diabetes and cardiovascular disease; reduced parasitic and infectious disease; reduced obesity and overweight levels associated with higher activity rates and better diet (including bush tucker); improved mental health and reduced suicide and self-harm; lower hospitalisation and alcohol-related injury rates; and lower levels of substance abuse, including petrol sniffing.

Outstations and homelands are also associated with reduced levels of stress and family violence and other factors that contribute to the risk of child abuse and neglect, and violence against women.

Most significantly these benefits are strongest in the areas of greatest concern to government – substance abuse and associated violence, injury and death, chronic disease, social and emotional wellbeing, and the safety of women and children.

In addition to these benefits, recent research has shown that Aboriginal people employed in natural and cultural resource management work (NCRM or 'caring for country') experience better health outcomes and it was noted that potential health gains could be achieved by increased investment in this area.<sup>9</sup>

There are also cultural and other benefits of living on country, particularly associated with the ability of Aboriginal people to maintain cultural knowledge of and connection to traditional lands and to carry out customary land management practices which provide conservation benefits to the broader community. It should also be noted that the knowledge of the land and environment gained as traditional ecological knowledge is of significant value in a range of environmentally-based employment and enterprise opportunities that outstations and homelands are in a position to take advantage of, including those associated with natural and cultural resource management (NCRM) and protected area management (see below).

## **10. Economic development**

Employment is an important social determinant of health. It also underpins the viability of communities, and has been a focus of debate concerning the value and future of outstations and homelands.

There has been increasing recognition of the very significant potential for developing Aboriginal enterprises and employment on traditional lands. This could include:

- NCRM enterprises and associated employment and training;
- Traditional art-based enterprises;
- Cultural tourism enterprises;
- Pastoral, agricultural and horticultural enterprises.

The existence of significant areas of traditional lands as existing or former cattle stations, and large areas protected as national parks or Indigenous Protected Areas presents many opportunities related to the development of Aboriginal natural and cultural resource management expertise and associated enterprises.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Burgess, C.P; Johnston, F.H (2007), *Healthy Country: Healthy People. Indigenous Natural and Cultural Resource Management and Health*. Menzies School of Health Research, Darwin, NT.

<sup>10</sup> Altman, J.C. (2007), *Alleviating poverty in remote Indigenous Australia: The role of the hybrid economy*. Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Topical Issue No. 10/2007.



There are many successful examples, such as the Bawinanga Sea Rangers (Maningrida); the Yirralka Land and Sea Management (NE Arnhem Land); and the Tjuwanpa Rangers group (Central Australia).

Significantly, new opportunities are continuing to emerge which are not necessarily predictable with current knowledge. For example, the innovative West Arnhem Land Fire Abatement Project (WALFAP)<sup>11</sup> was only made possible by recent research which demonstrated the reduced greenhouse gas emissions of traditional burning patterns in comparison to the alternative of unmanaged wildfires. The project produces a tradable carbon offset by employing Aboriginal traditional owners to burn the land using traditional burning techniques. It has the additional benefits of conserving environmental and cultural values of the landscape. In other words, it is a project that is generating positive economic, environmental, social and cultural outcomes. This model has potential to be expanded to other parts of the Northern Territory and beyond and should receive closer attention from the Northern Territory Government in terms of its own responsibilities and commitments towards reducing greenhouse gas emissions at the Territory level.

These few examples caution us not to limit our expectations of the economic potential of outstations in terms of current understanding or on narrow economic criteria, but to work harder at developing new initiatives based on a hybrid economy model of sustainable on-country economic development.

The evidence also suggests that even in those outstations and homelands where outcomes are currently not as positive, the opportunity cost of providing resources and support to address the potential causes of under-performance and increase the capacity of such communities is likely to be greater than that of abandoning support and forcing residents to move to larger communities.

## 11. CDEP

Employment is a key social determinate of health and wellbeing, and is a key challenge in creating sustainable communities and 'closing the gap' on Indigenous disadvantage. The Community Development Employment Projects scheme (CDEP) has been central to the economies of many outstations homelands. Whilst it is acknowledged that CDEP is not a perfect solution or an endpoint for employment in remote areas, its major advantage has been its ability to provide community development and enterprise assistance in contexts where there is not a developed labour market.

Prior to the recent changes introduced under the Northern Territory Emergency Intervention, CDEP employed 7,500 people who, on average earned \$100 per week (or 60%) more than those on unemployment benefits. There were approximately 50 CDEP organisations in the NT – community-based Aboriginal organisations that carry out a broad range of projects and activities in communities, including municipal and essential services, housing, infrastructure and maintenance services, human and aged care services, art enterprises, health and nutrition programs, caring for country and land management programs, and tourism and other enterprises.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Chapter 12 of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner's *Native Title Report 2007*, available at: [http://www.hreoc.gov.au/social\\_justice/nt\\_report/ntreport07/chapter12.html](http://www.hreoc.gov.au/social_justice/nt_report/ntreport07/chapter12.html)

<sup>12</sup> Altman, J.C. 2007. 'Neo-Paternalism and the Destruction of CDEP'. *Arena Magazine*, Aug-Sep 2007.

One of the central problems with CDEP has been its use by governments to avoid funding full-time positions for municipal and essential services in remote communities. In this respect the transition of such CDEP-funded positions to full-time government funded positions is long overdue. However, it is naïve to think that there will be a swift transition to conventional jobs by the remainder of remote area residents still currently on CDEP. The proposed changes to CDEP are therefore of considerable concern and raise uncertainty for the future of many outstations and homelands and their residents.

The Northern Territory Government should continue to pressure the Australian Government to retain the current employment and community development functions of CDEP and to ensure that any reform of the scheme does not result in deleterious impacts on employment, community services and economic enterprises in outstations and homelands.

## **12. Education**

Education is an important social determinant of health and of an individual's employment and broader life potential. The provision of education services to outstation and homeland communities has attracted considerable debate, particularly concerning the extent of services provided and the standard of educational outcomes.

Outstations and homelands experience significant educational disadvantage. Education services within outstations and homelands are mainly provided through Homelands Learning Centres, which only provide visiting teachers with support from local assistant teachers. In contrast, there are approximately 30 schools in other communities in the Northern Territory with less than 30 students that are serviced by full-time resident teachers. Most of these include non-Indigenous students. Children from outstations and homelands that are close enough to schools in nearby larger communities can also access such schools, however there are no government-provided school bus services. This is in contrast to rural and regional areas in other parts of Australia where such services are normally provided. Outstations and homelands are also poorly served by Distance Education services, mainly due to inadequate resourcing and staffing, the lack of materials appropriate to language and cultural context, and the lack of access to reliable telecommunications. None of the outstation and homeland communities provide secondary school education.

These are issues of equality of access. The Northern Territory Government has to evaluate its own education policy framework and whether outstations and homelands are receiving equitable and adequate resources and access, particularly given the extent of educational disadvantage they experience.

Evidence shows that given adequate resources, including quality teaching, educational outcomes for remote Aboriginal students should not have to be compromised. Of many examples one that stands out is a teacher who developed an award-winning program in Maningrida incorporating Indigenous knowledge with Western science. His students found 45 new species of spider, learned to manage disease among camp dogs and incubate crocodile eggs.<sup>13</sup> It is also the case that school attendance is usually much higher at outstation and homeland schools. The now well-publicised homeland of Mapuru in Arnhem Land boasts a 100% attendance rate for its 40 students. Yet this community has been denied a permanent teacher and relies on untrained teacher assistants.

It seems absurd in a situation where communities have demonstrated the desire and capacity for quality education and where remote technologies are rapidly developing and already

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<sup>13</sup> ABC News, 22 August 2007. Top science gong for Arnhem Land spider man. Can be found at: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2007/08/22/2011445.htm>

providing education to myriad remote and very remote (mainly non-Indigenous) communities and cattle stations, that access to teachers or to the alternative of Distance Education is denied. Even more absurd is that we have seen the argument proffered that the lack of such access in outstations and homelands necessitates the need to access conventional education services by travelling away from the community.

There may well be circumstances in which such an option may be necessary as well a case for some children to have access to boarding schools or other schooling away from their home communities, but this should be a matter of choice, not because of the lack of any alternative.

### **13. Response to propositions and additional issues**

Much of this submission has addressed issues that bear generally or indirectly on the matters raised in the Discussion Paper. The following provides brief responses to some of the propositions and additional issues for which comment was sought.

#### *Eligibility criteria*

Eligibility criteria should remain flexible and left to community-based decision-making at a local or regional level.

#### *Outstation definitions*

The definition of outstations and homelands should remain flexible around criteria such as population, family relationships and cultural factors and should not be defined on the basis of the number of permanent residents.

#### *Hub and spoke model*

Discussion of a "hub and spoke" model seems to be stating the obvious – that the full range of services cannot practically be provided in every community regardless of size. The critical issues are how decisions are made on what services are provided centrally and what are provided locally, and how equity of access is to be decided.

#### *Outstation service levels*

Identification of outstation service levels should be based on identified need via local area, community-driven planning processes developed in consultation with communities, Outstation Resource Agencies and shire councils.

### **14. Conclusion**

It is acknowledged that the Discussion Paper is framed within the restrictive constraints imposed by the Australian Government's decision to withdraw from its responsibility to provide municipal and essential services to outstations and homelands and to provide inadequate resources to the Northern Territory Government to take over that responsibility.

Clearly there is not enough money earmarked across the board, let alone for outstations. The recent housing initiative announced in the Northern Territory exemplifies this shortfall, with new housing being offered in only 16 out of the 73 communities prescribed under the Northern Territory Emergency Intervention. In other words, there will be no new housing, and hence no reduction in overcrowding, in the vast majority of (approximately 600) Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory. This is a telling statistic, particularly in terms of the acknowledged links between overcrowding and ill health, family violence and child abuse. Yet, the Northern Territory and Australian Governments are envisaging the movement of residents from less-overcrowded outstations and homelands to larger more-overcrowded communities.

The Northern Territory Government must commit to providing services and infrastructure to

Aboriginal communities on the basis of need and in fulfilment of its commitments to close the gap on Aboriginal disadvantage. Outstations and homelands must not be excluded and we argue that they are in fact an essential aspect of achieving such commitments. Evidence shows that homelands and small communities can be viable in terms of providing sustainable hybrid economies which bring benefits in better health and wellbeing and hence less demand on the wider health system, and less impacts from alcohol and other substance abuse and the consequent chronic disease, ill-health, injury, death, and disruption of families and children that accompanies such abuse. A proper assessment of the costs and benefits of outstations and homelands is urgently needed to further substantiate the need for increased resources.

If the Northern Territory Government truly “values the contributions of outstations to the economic, social and cultural life of the Territory” then it must do more than acquiesce to the Australian Government’s ill-advised abandonment of outstations and homelands. It is hoped that consultation on the current Discussion Paper will mark the beginning of a greater engagement and partnership with outstation and homelands communities and assist in steering policy-makers and the government towards a more just and equitable outcome.