

Submission

Northern Territory Government Outstation Policy Discussion paper

Introduction

In submitting this paper I wish firstly to outline my background and experience. I have worked for thirty-six years as an educator mainly in the tertiary sector. This includes lecturing at The University of Melbourne where I taught an interdisciplinary subject introducing students to the knowledge foundation and governance structure of the Yolngu, the people of North East Arnhem Land. I am presently researching the dynamics of Yolngu traditions, the topic of my Masters Degree at The University of Melbourne. I recently completed a Graduate Diploma in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies at Charles Darwin University in which I developed a deep admiration and respect for Yolngu Languages and Culture, my specific area of study. I am now assisting a small but powerful group of Yolngu women and men who are, with NT Government support, establishing a viable, sustainable and long term business enterprise that will enable them, and their children if they so desire, to remain on their land and in the place they know and love as their home. The following comments therefore relate more specifically to the area of North-East Arnhem Land than to the Northern Territory as a whole.

Criteria for eligibility of outstations for government support

Small communities employing a range of successful initiatives to deal with the problems associated with living on a 'remote' settlement should be eligible for government funding irrespective of the size of their population at any one time. Places like Mount Theo that provide effective educational and social services should not be required to reduce their dependence on government service provision. However, when individual outstations opt to reduce dependence they should be supported. In the homeland I am working for, people are already receiving funding and support from the NT Government. This is noticeably empowering and the men, women, and young adults involved are 'tickled pink' with the visits and support of government representatives. They are dealing with the growing number of their paying guests with increasing skill and confidence as a result. Ultimately they want to become less reliant on government services saying - "We do this with our own sweat".

An important criterion for 'Eligibility for support' should be that the dance, song, history, painting and the complexities of the local environment associated with a place are alive and well, or able to be revived, in the place under consideration. Major-General Dave Chalmers, who led The Intervention says, 'Over time, we as a society have undervalued indigenous culture and in many places it has been lost. And where it has been lost people have lost their compass, they've lost their framework of life. It's not being replaced by a mainstream Australian framework, and people are in limbo. We need to be paying a lot more attention to traditional healers and traditional lawmakers, the role they played, and play, in people's lives' (The Weekend Australian, p27, November 22-23, 2008). We need to develop an indigenous- oriented policy framework that addresses Dave Chalmers concerns and that nurtures and maintains indigenous values and ways of living.

Considering the range of different access options for different communities such as those between coastal and inland areas, there needs to be thorough research undertaken before a necessarily flexible set of criteria is compiled to produce a definition of 'adequate access'.

What happens elsewhere in the world? How do other 'remote' communities, in Iceland or South Georgia for example, survive both the geography and extremes of climate and still maintain the

way of life they have chosen to lead? How are the costs associated with providing access covered in such places?

An agreed definition of ‘outstations’

Any new definition requires a rethink of what ‘outstations’ are and what happens there. ‘Outstations’ should really be seen as places of learning. The verb ‘educate’ is defined in the New Oxford Dictionary as ‘give intellectual, moral and social instruction’. ‘Outstations’ are places where people develop knowledge and acquire important life skills. This is precisely what the ‘elders’ at Mount Theo are doing. Mount Theo is in reality a highly successful and economically valuable indigenous resource and educational facility. Young people are gaining self-discipline, dignity, and self-respect because they are learning to accomplish complex and challenging things. They are being taught by people who deserve their respect, and whose authority they will accept because these ‘elders’ can and do demonstrate their authority. The ‘elders’ are in fact highly educated individuals who were in their turn given intellectual, moral and social instruction when they were younger. They did not develop their localised and disciplined knowledge in a town or city, or in a conveniently situated ‘hub’ classroom, but in close and extended contact with their land and with other people living there. The process of formal instruction, being imparted again and again at Mount Theo is enabling young people to enter the non-indigenous ‘formal education system’ and to gain full-time and part-time employment. Functional ‘outstation’ living is a formal education system in its own right. ‘Being cared for’, ‘cultural healing’ and ‘empowerment’, are nice ideas but they mask a proven recipe for success in almost any educational institution anywhere: effective instruction in an appropriate environment.

How relevant is the ‘return to country’ definition? Forget ‘de-centralised’. Each ‘outstation’ is its own centre. These settlements are powerful, discrete entities within a complex multi-dimensional mesh of connections that defies diagrammatic representation, let alone a written explanation. ‘Outstations’ are not seen by residents as ‘de-centralised’ and this needs to be taken into account if future policies are to succeed.

Forget size – it provides no indication of the worth and value of a place in terms of the maintenance of indigenous knowledge and life-skills. Indigenous people can embody the history and knowledge located in particular areas, large or small. The highest degree of knowledge is held by older people. There may be very few such individuals within an ‘outstation’ community but their contribution to educational and cultural maintenance is vital.

Forget ‘strong traditional orientation’. ‘Traditional’, unfortunately, harbours the old-fashioned notion that traditions are not dynamic and that they do not or cannot evolve. Remember Amanda Vanstone’s insulting description of ‘outstations’ as ‘cultural museums’ or Helen Hughes’ incessant assumption throughout her book ‘Lands of Shame’ that Aboriginal traditions have not evolved. (Hughes practices her own form of ‘exceptionalism’ when she continually employs the concept of ‘tradition’ as a tool to separate indigenous people from the wider Australian society.) All societies have traditions and traditions can and do incorporate change. Functional ‘outstations’ are dynamic communities that arguably have accommodated far greater levels of change than most small non-indigenous communities.

Forget ‘cultural’ or try grouping the word with ‘educational’. I get the uncomfortable notion that somehow Aboriginal people are regarded as having ‘culture’ while non-Aboriginal people have ‘education’. If French, German, or Japanese people who trace their ancestry back through hundreds of generations are educated and are giving their children an education in their respective languages and within their respective societies why are Australian indigenous people assumed to provide ‘cultural’ but not educational knowledge and skill development?

A new definition to replace 'outstation' might include the words 'Indigenous Cultural and Educational Resources Centre' (ICERC).

The suitability of a standardised hub or hub and spoke model

The following suggestions are based on research by Frances Morphy (CAEPR January 2005) who has lived and worked in North-East Arnhem Land for over thirty years and whose was instrumental in achieving a favourable outcome for Yolngu in the recent Blue Mud Bay Case. She has impeccable credentials in offering a set of guidelines for policy development.

Morphy suggests replacing SRAs with regional Partnership Agreements with homelands or groups of related homelands (ICECs?) in the context of Regional Authorities, and supporting existing homelands resource agencies to develop as community resource agencies. This should include the development of services to several related communities in tandem, rather than to each small community in isolation. In the process grant funding should be applied for at least three years allowing time to plan and implement medium and long term projects. Delivery of Government funding needs to be streamlined to relieve the administrative burden.

Support community initiatives to grow the small business sector. Coordinate training and non-indigenous education around local business and development plans. This creates meaningful and purposeful engagement of people and is directed towards community based objectives. I have seen the development of a business plan in action. The Stepwise program is a form of training in itself. There are possibilities, as part of this process, to add on tailored and innovative literacy and numeracy programs for adults. This is what the people I work with say they want.

I suggest that one should ensure that accountability is built in to process at all levels of implementation. People who make and implement policy must, at all levels, be held accountable for their action or inaction. They should be recognised for their success and any failure to deliver services must be assessed as to the reasons why. Appropriate action can then be taken to rectify things. Policy must include clear statements of the ways in which and under what structure the people who are responsible for delivery of a particular service will indeed be held to account. This may be as simple as the regular reporting of one's success or failure to a board, or notification of previously unidentified problems in a formal review context such as a designated meeting in which minutes are kept and later made available for public scrutiny. Was this money actually spent? Where was it spent? Has it achieved the intended outcome? If not, why not? What needs to be done? When and how? Who by? Is further research into the issue required? The 'gap' that now requires 'closing' would have been considerably smaller if accountability had been built in to policy development, implementation, and to the delivery of services at all times in the past.

A framework for outstation service delivery levels

Appropriate evaluation factors must take into account the level of indigenous education occurring on a settlement and acknowledge the formal structures in which this occurs, for instance, in the conduct of ceremonies. One must acknowledge early childhood development that takes place when young children are in the presence of knowledgeable adults. For instance, when children and young adults are attending what we call 'funerals' they are engaged in a powerful, structured indigenous learning experience. The knowledge gained may later be passed on to non-indigenous people under the auspices of an indigenous economic enterprise.

Appropriate evaluation factors in determining service levels should take in to account existing 'models' that are at present delivering successful outcomes. In North-East Arnhem Land these

are numerous and diverse. However, while the program at Mount Theo has achieved recognition in your Discussion Paper, the small community of Mapuru has not. Mapuru, where much has been achieved and where 40 students attend school regularly, does not receive the educational resources it deserves, let alone the services of a full-time teacher. This is a monumental failure of Government to deliver services and until it is rectified Government processes designed to decrease indigenous disadvantage will continue to lack credibility.

The 'outstation' at Garrthalala in the Laynhapuy homelands region of North-East Arnhem Land can be viewed as a 'model' incorporating the services of an external agency. In 2006 Geelong Central Rotary assisted in reducing the cost of building an extension to the new Garrthalala School by as much as \$176,000. If people are devising ways to make things work for themselves then they deserve a high level of Government support and encouragement.

A policy framework for 'outstations' must include provisions for the delivery of services that maintain and further develop the ability of individuals within communities to contribute to the Arts Industry and therefore to the broader Australian economy. In 1994 the Australia Council commissioned a report entitled *But What Do You Do For A Living*. The report found that the contribution to the national economy contributed from all creative sources, (except rural Aboriginal art) was about \$720 million (David Langsam 'Aboriginal Art: Australia's Hidden Resource' Art Monthly no 87 pages 4-5). Langsam notes that the total value to Australia's economy of all Aboriginal arts and crafts at the time was at least \$100 million. Langsam reports that the ABS put together figures which showed that the economic value of documented exports of all visual art came to \$22.4 million in 1994-95. Currently Aboriginal art accounts for 70% of the export market in fine art. Small 'outstations' are major contributors to the high quality and maintenance of this industry and to the significant return it provides to the Australian economy. On this basis alone, small 'outstations' should not be ranked low in priority for delivery of government services. The September 2007 Memorandum of Understanding needs to be reviewed and re-negotiated.

Additional comments - Making informed decisions

Are you aware of the nature of long-standing indigenous governance structures that may impede policy developments and implementation? Do you know their origin and history? Do you know how and where to recognise them? Do you know how they operate? Do you know what they achieve? If not, then you are not in a position to assume that Government policies and their implementation will be successful.

The structure of governance in North-East Arnhem Land has a proven, long-standing stability. This was recognised by the High Court in the recent Blue Mud Bay decision. It will not simply 'go away' at some point in the future. Indigenous representatives, who have a good understanding of non-indigenous ways of thinking and/or have a non-indigenous education and are practiced in operating between indigenous and non-indigenous realms, need to be employed on a salaried basis to advise on policy development and implementation. These people exist and are often leaders in their communities. They need to be representative of the various and different clan groups and 'outstation' communities. They are the ones that know what indigenous governance structures involve.

In *The Age* (Insight p3, September 27, 2008) Multhara Mununggurr is reported as declaring that people are 'fed up' with non-homeland indigenous leaders speaking on their behalf and influencing government opinion. These strong and vocal 'outstation' voices will not be silenced by imposed Commonwealth and NT Government policies. 'Outstation' representatives need to be involved in the decision making process now or Government policies will fail.

A Commonwealth Government funded program is required to educate non-indigenous policy makers, service deliverers, educators, and others in the complexities of indigenous knowledge, education and governance to enable them to work with, and for, indigenous communities on a more educated and informed basis. Do you know what Yirritja and Dhuwa mean? Can you explain why 'Yothu –Yindi' is not just the name of a popular Arnhem Land band? What does 'Yothu-Yindi' mean? Yothu-Yindi is the prime element in Yolngu governance. It is described by Yolngu as the glue that binds Yolngu society together. Government policy makers need to know what this means or their policies will come unstuck. Some mining companies, albeit on a small scale, now require non-indigenous employees to participate in 'cultural' education programs.

The education program for those involved in policy development and implementation must reflect the rigour and intellectual complexity of the North-East Arnhem Land governance they are dealing with. This is a good business strategy – not an impractical, romantic, feel good idea based on ideology as opposed to practical common sense. It makes very good sense. Imagine a large corporation employing shareholders' funds and charged with the responsibility of increasing the productivity of another large organisation that then goes about the process completely unaware of fundamental elements governing the structure and operation of the target organisation.

Governments should become familiar with indigenous knowledge and structures of governance and work creatively with them – rather than against them. The world is watching.

Mary Rudd

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