

Outstations policy a fresh attempt at assimilation

- **Dr Thalia Anthony**

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Thalia Anthony: "Townships promote inactivity, malnutrition, social dysfunction and other social disadvantages."

Evidence shows that indigenous wellbeing declines in townships.

On the eve of the Northern Territory Government announcing plans to, in effect, close down indigenous outstations, a report was released that showed indigenous people in Arnhem Land outstations and homelands had the most sustainable lives and communities.

The *Healthy Country, Healthy People* report shows the physical, emotional, social and cultural health benefits experienced by these people. It is therefore incongruous that while the Federal Government espouses a "closing the gap" agenda, the Northern Territory Government is undermining these health outcomes.

The Arnhem Land study finds that Aboriginal people participating in customary and contemporary land and sea management practices, particularly those living in traditional homelands, are much healthier than those in townships. The report's authors note that "pressure to centralise remote indigenous populations and services into townships has increased, despite evidence suggesting this would lead to worse health outcomes". Townships promote inactivity, malnutrition, social dysfunction and other social disadvantages.

The researchers from Charles Darwin University reveal that health outcomes associated with living on and managing traditional country include major reductions in risk of cardiovascular

disease, diabetes and other chronic diseases. These diseases not only severely disrupt indigenous society, they also require large public expenditure for treatment.

Participants in natural and cultural resource management practices report a more nutritious diet and a greater degree of physical activity. Cultural management also provides potential markets for environmental investment.

Rather than foster and support these homeland communities and outstations, both the federal and Northern Territory governments have sought to undermine their existence. Under federal policy, there is a ban on expenditure for housing on Aboriginal outstations and homelands, apart from some repairs and maintenance. This policy was entrenched in the memorandum of understanding between the Australian and Northern Territory governments on indigenous housing, accommodation and related services, which was signed in the dying days of the Howard government in September 2007.

The Northern Territory Government's announcement this week furthers this understanding. The plan to consolidate services into 20 large communities will threaten up to 580 remote outstations. This will force indigenous people into townships, which will undermine their traditional, healthier lives and provoke social dysfunction in the townships.

The attempts to oust outstations also run against the Australian Government's recent endorsement of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which supports self-determination.

Outstations resonate with aspirations of indigenous self-determination. According to Gregory Marks, who has been an adviser on Northern Territory policy for the past four decades, the outstations emerged in the 1970s in response to the assimilation policy and changes in pastoralism that pushed indigenous people into settlements and onto urban fringes.

Many of the outstations are a reaction to the confinement that settlement life imposed on indigenous people. Outstations allow indigenous people to nurture their economies and culture.

The only basis for the outstation policy is ideological: to push indigenous people into the mainstream and engender assimilation. It operates hand in hand with the Northern Territory intervention that focuses funding priorities on a limited number of prescribed communities.

The Northern Territory and federal governments are reimposing colonial forms of containment that prevent indigenous survival beyond government-regulated boundaries.

The policy of undermining outstations is a threat to indigenous wellbeing and is against evidence-based research that recommends the preservation of outstations.

Marks notes that the ideological campaign against outstations has provided an unproductive distraction from constructive policy development. Government investment needs to be measured in terms of health, cultural and natural resource management outcomes. The outstation policy exposes the "closing the gap" policy as mere rhetoric, with dangerous political prejudices.

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