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MEDIA STATEMENT

Australian Council of Social Service

Wednesday November 23, 2011

Cooperation not intervention: a call for a new direction in policies affecting Indigenous Australians in the Northern Territory

Aboriginal peak bodies, community welfare and public health groups from around the country are calling for a new direction in policies affecting Aboriginal Australians based on cooperation, not 'intervention'.

The groups support new investment in secure jobs for Indigenous Territorians but raise concerns about the proposed extension of a program that withdraws social security payments from parents whose children don't attend school regularly.

"While some aspects of the Government's announcement that it will maintain investment in the Northern Territory are encouraging, particularly strategies to generate local jobs, the proposed expansion of the SEAM program that withdraws income support payments from parents whose children aren't attending school suggests that a punitive, top-down approach to social problems is still being pursued," said ACOSS CEO Dr Cassandra Goldie.

"The Governments focus should be on positive approaches to engage families and that take into account the barriers to participation in school in remote communities. An important part of this is ensuring that there are qualified, culturally competent social workers on the ground in remote communities, able to assist parents to address causal factors as to why kids are not going to school," said Priscilla Collins, CEO, North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency.

The strong message from recent consultations with Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory is that people want reliable services, schools and jobs in their own communities, not that they think simplistic 'get tough' policies are the answer.

The Government's evaluation of the NTER, released this month, says that:
'blanket imposition of Income Management —in combination with other changes, such as local government reform, shire amalgamation and loss of local councils; changes to the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) program; the loss of the permit system; and changes in land tenure, contributed to people's feeling of a loss of freedom, empowerment and community control.'

Our organisations share the widely held concerns in the community that too many children are missing out on a good education either because they do not attend every school day or because schools are not resourced to teach well. Policies should be based on what communities and governments know actually works on the ground.

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In the 'Stronger Futures' consultations, community members suggested introducing Aboriginal culture into the curriculum, involving elders and parents more in school activities, developing mentoring programs for parents, and doing more to attract and retain good teachers. This fits with what the research shows works. Aboriginal communities and peak organisations have also been calling for the reinstatement of bilingual learning for the same reason, because it works.

The Improving School Enrolment and Attendance through Welfare Reform Measure (SEAM) trials in the NT and Queensland are yet to be evaluated. There is no evidence they have been effective yet the scheme is costing over $200,000 per school per year to administer. A similar trial in Halls Creek in Western Australia was evaluated, and failed largely due to lack of engagement between the school and the local community.

The evaluation report into the NTER concludes that:
'There has been no observable improvement in school attendance between 2006, before the NTER was introduced, and 2010, the last year for which data are available.'

"It is deeply disappointing to see the Federal Government aligning itself with policies such as compulsory income management and SEAM. These are costly distractions from the real task of reducing inequality and exclusion. You don't build people and communities up by attacking their dignity and their right to self-determination," said John Falzon, CEO, St Vincent de Paul Society National Council of Australia.

Although the announcement of new jobs in the Northern Territory is welcome, it should be noted that more than 2000 waged positions within Community Development Employment Projects still operating in NT communities are set to be abolished from April next year.

The Public Health Association of Australia Vice-President Vanessa Lee added, "It is time for governments to recognise the diversity in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across Australia and to work with each of the communities in a co-operative way to get better health outcomes."

The suspension of income support payments, like the blanket scheme of compulsory Income Management for long-term recipients of Newstart and Parenting payments in the Territory, discriminate against the poorest and indirectly against Indigenous Australians who form the majority of people affected.

Truanting is not confined to families on social security payments and Aboriginal parents are not the only ones with responsibilities to get their children to school. Under a new Northern Territory anti-truanting law, parents can already be fined almost $2,000 for a first offence. Together with suspension of income support, this risks depriving children of the essentials of life – too much pain for too little gain.

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The groups concluded that instead of extending the punitive approach the Government should take a new road. It should withdraw the current legislation and engage with communities and their community organisations and peak bodies on whether they want to replace policies such as SEAM and income management that were imposed on them compulsorily, with voluntary or 'opt in' income support arrangements and support services tailored to the needs of each community.

Supported by:

ACOSS – Australian Council of Social Service
APO NT - Aboriginal Peak Organisations of the Northern Territory
An alliance comprising the Central Land Council (CLC), Northern Land Council (NLC), Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance of the NT (AMSANT), North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency (NAAJA) and Central Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service (CAALAS).
NTCOSS – Northern Territory Council of Social Service
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NT COGSO - Northern Territory Council of Government School Organisations
PHAA - Public Health Association of Australia
St Vincent de Paul Society National Council of Australia
UnitingCare Australia
Catholic Social Services Australia
National Welfare Rights Network
Family Relationships Services Australia
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