

# **KALACC Directors Statement on the Threatened Closure of Remote Aboriginal Communities – April 2015**

The Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre [KALACC] is the organisation which represents the traditional owners and cultural bosses from the 30 language groups across the Kimberley. KALACC Directors at a recent Board meeting have resolved as follows in relation to the threatened closure of remote communities:

## **We Don't Want to Be Consulted! We Demand Genuine Dialogue!**

How can the Western Australian Government speak for five months about closing down our communities and not talk with us for five months? Some people say that consultations will start on 01 July – but KALACC only hears this second or third hand because no one from Government has bothered to speak directly with us. When will we be consulted? And when the consultations take place, will the Government sit down with us, the cultural bosses and elders representing the Kimberley, and talk directly to us? We don't want a 'tick a box' consultation. We demand a genuine dialogue with Government and a genuine input and say on the future of our lives and our communities. We acknowledge that there are problems and issues to be addressed, but no one understands the solutions to these problems better than ourselves, the people living in the remote communities.

## **Remote Communities Closures Are a Direct Attack Upon the Oldest Living Culture on the Planet**

The threatened closure of remote communities in the Kimberley is a direct threat to everything that KALACC represents. We represent the oldest continuing culture on this planet, with 40,000 years of continual cultural practice, across 30 language groups, five cultural blocks, ranging from Salt Water to Desert, Fresh Water to Rangelands.

- 1) Remote community closures are a deep rooted threat to our fundamental spiritual connection to land, and it is this spiritual connection that makes us Aboriginal people;
- 2) We must respect our Law, Language and Land. This is our strength and it is our identity. It is who we are;
- 3) KALACC represents 30 language groups across the Kimberley. We stand together as one. All the people of the Kimberley are united as one against the forced closure of remote communities;
- 4) Forced relocations of our people are assimilationist echoes of the colonial past and have no place in the modern world. People were forced off their lands in the late 60s and they all remember the experience. Hundreds of people lived literally in shacks and shanty towns. How can a repeat of that even be contemplated?;
- 5) If people are forced off their land and away from their communities they will lose their identity. Without identity they will be lost souls drifting in the wind and not rooted to their foundations;
- 6) White Australia has a black history – It is the Australian Identity. The thing that makes our nation unique amongst the peoples of this planet, is our Aboriginal identity and connection with country and remote Australia;
- 7) The Kimberley is Aboriginal Land – determined by Native Title. It always was and always will be Aboriginal land. The development of community and industry in the Kimberley has been on the backs of Aboriginal people.

Communities need support to continue to make an active and vibrant contribution to the ongoing development of the Kimberley.

## **Community Wellbeing, Culture, Resilience and Good Social Outcomes**

All of us are committed to the goal of improving social outcomes for our people. No one is more committed to this than the elders and the cultural bosses of the Kimberley.

There are social problems in the Kimberley and that is why KALACC contacted WA Coroner Alistair Hope in February 2007 and called on him to undertake a major Coronial Inquest. Governments on both sides of politics have failed to meaningfully respond to the recommendations from Coroner Hope across three major Kimberley Coronial Inquests. These failings are not the failings of the community, they are the failings of Governments to meaningfully respond to the Coroner.

There is a raft of evidence that shows that connection to country and to culture is the single most important and effective means of improving well-being outcomes for Indigenous people. Culture and land are not liabilities. They are single biggest asset and strength that we as Aboriginal people have. People in communities are generally stronger and happier than people living in town. Suicide and incarceration rates in the Kimberley are appallingly high and totally unacceptable in a first world nation like Australia. The majority of this problem exists in towns – not in remote communities. If remote communities are shut down, then appalling rates of suicide and incarceration will only get worse.

As a nation we entrust the Productivity Commission to measure things for us and, in relation to Aboriginal people, we entrust the Productivity Commission to measure progress on Closing the Gap. The **2014 Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Report** unequivocally asserts that culture is a key asset and recommends that the way forward is to invest in *Things That Work* to close the gap, especially culturally based programs.

If the Western Australian Government is genuinely motivated by a desire for improved social outcomes in remote communities, and is not being driven solely by financial considerations, then we call on the Western Australian Government to heed the strong advice from the Productivity Commission and to take a strengths based approach, not a deficit approach, and invest in *Things That Work* – particularly, cultural resilience and pride.

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# Attachment: Excerpts from the **2014 Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Report**

There are a number of major reports and bodies of research which emphasise the important linkages between Aboriginal culturally based programs and social and emotional wellbeing. The latest one of these is the Productivity Commission's **2014 Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Report**

Other Reports which we refer to include:

- **Working Together, Recommendations for across-government and inter-sectoral universal prevention initiatives to promote well-being and resilience and to reduce self-harm and suicide among Aboriginal youth**, A briefing paper prepared by the Aboriginal Suicide Prevention Steering Committee, 8 May 2001;
- Three major Kimberley Coronial Inquest Reports prepared by WA Coroner, Alistair Hope [2007 – 2010];
- Kimberley **Hear Our Voices Report**, March 2012;
- **The Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, Families and Communities** ; Supplementary Paper to **A Contributing Life: the 2012 National Report Card on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention**, March 2013;
- The **Elders Report**, April 2014;
- The **2014 Closing the Gap Progress and Priorities Report**, February 2014;
- **National Coalition for Suicide Prevention Response to World Health Organisation World Suicide Report: An Assessment of Australia's Progress in Suicide Prevention**, September 2014;
- **The Third Conversation: Has Anything Changed? The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Roundtable Report**, September 2014;
- **Effective strategies to strengthen the mental health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people**, Issues paper no. 12 produced for the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse [Pat Dudgeon, Roz Walker, Clair Scrine, Carrington Shepherd, Tom Calma and Ian Ring] November 2014
- Professor Michael Chandler's 30 – plus year research history in to the pattern of Indigenous suicide in Canada;
- Murdoch University Three Year **External Review and Evaluation of the Yiriman Project**, December 2013.

We look forward to the upcoming release, in the near future, of the National Mental Health Commission's review and evaluation of all mental health services across the nation. We have reason to believe and reason to be optimistic that this landmark report will give due emphasis to the important role that culture plays as a positive contributing factor towards Indigenous wellbeing.

The purpose of this current document is to assist the reader to have immediate and ready access to some sections of the **2014 Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Report** which deal directly and immediately with the issue of the role of culture in providing positive outcomes for Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing. We offer no commentary in this document. Rather, it is simply a series of excerpts from the **2014 OID Report**.

**Overcoming  
Indigenous  
Disadvantage**  
Key Indicators 2014

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**Report**



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Steering Committee  
for the Review  
of Government  
Service Provision

The Productivity Commission in its **2014 Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Report** states as follows in section 3.20:

### **Community involvement**

Community involvement in program design and decision-making is closely related to self-determination, one of the determinants of good Indigenous governance (see section 5.4). The Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development found that self-determination led to improved outcomes for North American Indigenous people:

When [Indigenous people] make their own decisions about what development approaches to take, they consistently out-perform [non-Indigenous] decision makers. (Harvard Project nd)

The former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Tom Calma, considered that much of the failure of service delivery to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians was a direct result of the failure to engage and to support and build the capacity of communities:

Put simply, governments risk failure if they develop and implement policies about Indigenous issues without engaging with the intended recipients of those services. Bureaucrats and governments can have the best intentions in the world, but if their ideas have not been subject to the 'reality test' of the life experience of the local Indigenous peoples who are intended to benefit from this, then government efforts will fail. (Calma 2006)

Community involvement is a key factor in the success of most case studies in this report. Some specific examples of successful community involvement include:

the Yiriman Project in WA, under which Elders take young people on trips back to country 'to immerse them in the stories, songs and knowledge that are their cultural heritage'

Box 5.4.3 Yiriman Project Winner Category B: Non-incorporated projects and initiatives

The Yiriman Project started in 2000.

The 2012 IGA report noted that: 'The Yiriman project takes young people and elders on trips back to country to immerse them in the stories, songs and knowledge that are their cultural heritage.' This builds young people's confidence and improves their self-worth and has helped to curb the suicides, self-harm and substance abuse in the participating communities.

Project outcomes as summarised by Taylor (2010) are:

- the healing of young people as they walk on country and look after it

- the opportunity for young people to develop and assert culture, language and bush skills
- meaningful employment that values and maintains culture.

The key feature of success is 'the clarity of purpose given to the project by the elders' and 'strong leadership, cultural legitimacy and external administrative support' (RA 2013).

Sources: Reconciliation Australia 2013, *Sharing Success: Stories from the 2012 Indigenous Governance Awards*, Reconciliation Australia, Canberra, ACT, [http://reconciliation.org.au/iga/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/IGA\\_2012\\_Analysis\\_Report\\_web.pdf](http://reconciliation.org.au/iga/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/IGA_2012_Analysis_Report_web.pdf) (accessed 3 June 2014); Taylor, F. 2010, *Partnerships in the Youth Sector - Building Stories in Our Young People: The Yiriman Project*, The Foundation for Young Australians, Melbourne, Victoria, <http://www.fya.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/What-Works-PYS.pdf> (accessed 3 June 2014).

The Productivity Commission in its **2014 *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Report*** states as follows in section 2.14:

Culture underpins many of the outcomes across the framework, and the links across the strategic areas for action, and between these areas and the COAG targets and headline indicators, are particularly strong.



**Table 2.2.1 Wellbeing framework elements**

<i>ABS Indigenous wellbeing framework</i>	<i>Māori wellbeing framework</i>	<i>National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework</i>
Culture, heritage and leisure	Subjective wellbeing (life satisfaction; sense of control; health status; connections)	Health status and outcomes (health conditions; human function; life expectancy and wellbeing; deaths)
Family, kinship and community Health	Social wellbeing (whānau <sup>a</sup> contact; access to help; voluntary work; trust; experience of crime and discrimination)	Determinants of health (environmental factors; socioeconomic factors; community capacity; health behaviours; person-related factors)
Education, learning and skills	Cultural wellbeing (knowledge of cultures and ability to access in time of need; use and proficiency in language)	Health system performance (effective/appropriate/efficient; responsive; accessible; continuous; capable; sustainable)
Customary, voluntary and paid work	Economic wellbeing (material standard of living; paid work; housing problems)	
Income and economic resources		
Housing, infrastructure and services		
Law and Justice		
Citizenship and governance		

<sup>a</sup> There is no common definition of Whānau, but it is described as connection to a person, either through a common ancestor or through a common purpose or goal (Tibble, A and Ussher, S 2012, *Kei te pewhea to whānau? Exploring whānau using the Māori Social Survey*, Statistics New Zealand).

Sources: ABS 2010, *Framework for Measuring Wellbeing: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, 2010*, Cat. no. 4703.0, Canberra, ACT; Statistics New Zealand 2014, *Te Kupenga 2013 data dictionary*, <http://www.stats.govt.nz/~media/Statistics/surveys-and-methods/our-surveys/te-kupenga-data-dictionary/te-kupenga-2013-data-dictionary-pdf> (accessed 20 May 2014); AHMAC 2012, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework 2012*, Department of Health, Canberra.

## Culture and wellbeing

Two clear messages from consultations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are that:

- no single indicator can adequately reflect the importance of culture in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians
- culture underpins many of the outcomes across the framework, and the links across the strategic areas for action, and between these areas and the COAG targets and headline indicators, are particularly strong.

In previous editions of the OID report, the cultural indicators were spread across the strategic areas for action, to reflect the way culture pervades every aspect of the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. For this report, the cultural indicators have been grouped together under the ‘Governance, leadership and culture’ strategic area, to allow for a more detailed discussion of the significance of these indicators as a group. In addition, the ‘Governance, leadership and culture’ strategic area has been moved from ‘last’ to ‘first’ in the diagram, to emphasise the importance of cultural outcomes to all other outcomes in the framework.