

# **Northern Territory Council of Social Service Inc.**



**‘Towards a Just and Prosperous  
Territory’**

**NTCOSS submission to the 2030 Strategic Plan  
February 2009**

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For further information please contact:  
Wendy Morton  
Executive Director  
NTCOSS  
PH 8948 2665

## INTRODUCTION

The Northern Territory Council of Social Service Inc (NTCOSS) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the 'Territory 2030' Steering Committee, as they work to produce a document which will shape the development and implementation of policy into the future.

While Australia's immediate economic future is clouded by the effects of the global financial crisis, the longer term future for the Territory remains bright. We enjoy boundless potential for the development of natural resources, and a reputation as one of the world's great tourist destinations. Our proximity to Asia leaves us ideally placed to exploit opportunities for trade and cultural exchange between our country and the populous and prosperous nations in our region. There is much to be positive about in considering the long term economic future of the Territory. However, there are some people who miss out on the prosperity and access to opportunities which the majority enjoy. NTCOSS is keen to ensure that all Territorians will enjoy an equitable share of the gains from future economic development.

In the NT, Indigenous Australians, people living with disability, people with drug and alcohol problems, and people with mental health issues, are among those currently missing out. Barriers to inclusion such as remoteness, poor health, lack of transport, and limited education must be tackled if all Territorians are to be enabled to make their full contribution.

In these circumstances, we applaud the NT Government's decision to embrace the concept of 'social inclusion'. Enabling everyone in the community to contribute to the economic and social development of the NT is the surest path to the achievement of a just and prosperous Territory. Although 'social inclusion' is a complex notion, it has a simple basis. The great majority of those who are 'socially excluded' from society lack the material resources to gain access to the many essentials of life, as well as social and civic involvement: They live in poverty.

The idea of 'social exclusion' is a useful tool for developing social justice policies because it includes - and extends beyond - people's immediate living standards. It focuses on the factors that lead to social disadvantage as well as the end results. It is an illuminating principle for policy development across portfolios such as employment, human services and social security and housing, because it encourages 'joined up government'. The effects of policy action in these areas can be measured using social exclusion concepts such as exclusion from education and employment. Social exclusion provides a framework for the development of targets and benchmarks to give effect to policy commitments to end poverty and social disadvantage. (ACOSS, Future of the Sector, 2007).

The demographics of the Territory's population are changing, as the proportion of Indigenous Territorians continues to grow. We will also see a steady increase in the number of older Territorians. It is important that the government's planning for service provision into the future fully comprehends the needs of Indigenous Australians, and of the ageing. NTCOSS has identified three key areas for action: Indigenous disadvantage, housing shortage, and alcohol abuse. These will be examined in more detail later in this paper.

## **THE NATURE OF SOCIAL EXCLUSION**

### **1. Structural inequalities**

While there are many factors that lead to social exclusion, NTCOSS emphasises the need for the 2030 strategy to address the structural and institutional issues which contribute to social exclusion in the NT. As outlined in NTCOSS' Budget Submission for 2009-10, there are a number of structural inequalities that inhibit social inclusion for all Territorians, particularly those living on low incomes. The structural and institutional aspects of housing and homelessness, health and well-being, education, employment and training, transport, and service delivery must be addressed in order to ensure that all Territorians have the opportunity to be socially included.

The increasing cost of basic items such as fresh fruit, vegetables, and fuel is a serious barrier to social inclusion. According to ACOSS, nationally over the last three years the price of food has risen by 15%, rents and household energy bills by 17% and fuel by 41%. The NT, in particular, has seen significant cost increases in the housing sector, with figures released by the Real Estate Institute of the NT towards the end of 2008 revealing record low vacancy rates and soaring rent prices. The inadequacy of Commonwealth support payments such as Newstart Allowance and Parenting Payment (Single) compounds the problem of affordability.

### **2. Intergenerational Disadvantage**

Social exclusion is most severe in circumstances where children are born into a cycle of entrenched poverty characterised by dependence on government income support, an unstable housing situation, and disengagement from education. To reduce the levels of intergenerational disadvantage throughout the NT, it is critical that all Territorians have the opportunity for a quality early education. Improved educational outcomes result in greater job choices, as people become more competitive in the employment market. It is also essential to provide adult literacy and post-secondary education and training opportunities in local areas, and to ensure that the local community has a stake in their planning and delivery.

### **3. Place-based Disadvantage**

People who live in low socio-economic areas of the NT are at an increased risk of social exclusion. The development of co-ordinated and targeted plans for areas of concentrated disadvantage is critical. Areas of concentrated disadvantage have greater numbers of people living on disability/sickness support payments, and higher levels of long-term unemployment. Furthermore, people on low incomes living in remote, regional and rural areas of the Territory are at an increased risk of social exclusion due to the geographical isolation and lack of services, support, and adequate transport options in these areas.

The first step in successfully engaging communities in social inclusion activity is to work with local communities so that they are determining their own priorities for action within the framework of the social inclusion agenda. Experience from other states and territories suggests that developing local leadership is fundamental to achieving social inclusion outcomes at a local level.

#### **4. Transitional Disadvantage**

There are particular ‘critical transition points’ in life where low income and disadvantaged people are at further risk of social exclusion and homelessness. In the NT, these situations occur at times when people are exiting prison, state care, public housing (evictions), school, and hospital. At these times people often face an unknown housing future, uncertain employment opportunities, and limited income. They are at high risk of homelessness and poor health, both of which compound the other. ‘Wrap around’ support services must be put in place to ensure people get support when they most need it – otherwise they will remain trapped in cycles of poverty, homelessness or crime.

It is important to emphasise that people on low incomes are not a homogenous group. They can include young people, people with a disability, refugees and migrants, single parents, the elderly, and people with mental illnesses and chronic health issues. However, there is a definite interconnectedness amongst the different factors which indicate social exclusion. Poor health is more likely to occur amongst people with low incomes, and those who feel that they have little stake in our society. The absence of affordable and accessible public transport, particularly in regional and remote locations, is not simply an indicator of social exclusion: It is a cause.

#### **‘JUSTICE’ – RATHER THAN ‘LAW AND ORDER’**

A significant shift in prevailing social attitudes is needed to successfully promote a philosophy of social inclusion across the Territory. Popular opinion in regard to the health of our community appears to be focused too much on ‘law and order’ rather than on ‘justice’.

As a society, we must resist the popular rhetoric demanding that the government be ‘hard on crime’. The aim must be to create a healthy, functional community where all are enabled to contribute. We need a targeted approach to ensuring we have ‘less criminals’ rather than ‘more prisons’. It has long been recognised that spending money ‘upstream’ of the problem is the most effective – not to say compassionate – method of improving the situation. We must acknowledge the factors that are likely to see people end up in the criminal justice system, and address these through early intervention and prevention, thereby reducing the need for punitive measures in the long run.

Law and justice must be seen in the broad context of general community well-being, rather than through the narrow prism of the criminal justice system. Undue focus on punishment and incarceration is a short term response which does not serve the community well, and is contrary to evidence-based research. The NT Government has both the opportunity and the responsibility to promote a more enlightened attitude within the general community.

## **THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT'S POSITION ON SOCIAL INCLUSION**

In February 2008, Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard addressed the Centre for Social Impact in Sydney, making a plea to those present to have greater regard for the nation's most important resource – its people:

“If we want Australia's long term future to be competitive, we have to invest more in human capital – the skills and talents of our own population. Our long term prosperity depends on securing the full participation - economic and social – of all Australians. We have to find new ways to support that participation. That is why social inclusion matters.”

Ms Gillard further observed that to be socially included, all Australians must be given the opportunity to:

- secure a job
- access services
- connect with others in life through family, friends, work, personal interests and the local community
- deal with personal crises such as ill-health, bereavement, or the loss of a job, and
- have their voice heard

The federal government is currently developing a social inclusion strategy. There are obvious advantages in ensuring that the NT policy dovetails with the Commonwealth government's initiative.

## **SOCIAL POLICY RESEARCH ON SOCIAL INCLUSION**

A 2007 study by the Social Policy Research Centre in NSW sought to identify some of the characteristics of a 'socially included' life. The authors identified such practical things as having a substantial meal at least once a day; having a decent and secure home; having access to medical and dental treatment when necessary; being able to pay utility bills; having regular social contact; having some emergency savings; and simply being treated with some respect by the people around them. Sadly, far too many Territorians are denied one or more of these things.

NTCOSS notes that considerable work has already been done in many of the areas targeted for particular attention in the development of the 2030 strategy. Accordingly, we recommend that the 2030 Committee take account of a number of critical documents which have examined some of the immediate challenges facing the Territory. The *Little Children are Sacred* report, for example, offers a range of insights about the circumstances on remote Indigenous communities which may be of assistance to the steering committee. Similarly, the NT Government's *Closing the Gap of Indigenous disadvantage* document provides some direction in respect to improving, Indigenous health, housing, and education.

## ACOSS STATISTICS ON DISADVANTAGED AUSTRALIANS

According to the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) report *Who is Missing Out?*, the most disadvantaged people in Australia are Indigenous people, sole-parent families, unemployed people, those with disabilities, and those who are renting. The study found that of the people on Commonwealth support payments, those on Newstart Allowance, Parenting Payment and the Disability Support Pension, were the most likely to experience hardship.

ACOSS defines the bottom 40% of Australian households as low-income households. This includes households with annual family incomes of less than \$40,000, and individual incomes of less than \$30,000. Households whose major source of income is government income support payments are clearly in the 'low income' household bracket. The most recent available figures (2004) for the NT indicate that more than 23,400 Territorians have Government income support payments as their major source of income.<sup>1</sup> While the raw statistics identify the number of low income households, they cannot capture the human misery of living in poverty and being unable to provide adequately for a family.

NOTE: NTCOSS is currently working with the Territory Growth Planning Unit to obtain information from the Australian Bureau of Statistics on 'Equivalent Household Income' in order to have the relevant data for the NT to more accurately determine the levels of poverty using household income levels. This information, which will allow for a meaningful comparison with the rest of the country, will be made available to Government and to the 2030 Steering Committee as soon as it is available.

NTCOSS recommends that the NT Government establishes high quality statistical information which can be used to assess the success of programs designed to alleviate poverty. The Australian Bureau of Statistics must be encouraged to increase the sample size of its Household (income and expenditure) surveys, to guarantee the integrity of this data and its application for policy development.<sup>2</sup> To underpin the 2030 strategy, it is essential to effectively map poverty and income levels into the future. Clear goals and benchmarks are fundamental to a successful Social Inclusion Strategy, since targets serve to build public support for action and enable measurement of progress.

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<sup>1</sup> (Over 5,700 people were receiving the Disability Support Pension, almost 6,000 Parenting Payment Single; more than 10,000 on Newstart Allowance, and over 1700 on Youth Allowance. Two-thirds of the Newstart and Youth Allowance beneficiaries had been receiving long-term payments.)

<sup>2</sup> The Social Policy Research Centre's recent report (Poverty in Australia: Sensitivity Analysis and Recent Trends (updated 2006/07)) produced a comparison of poverty data for states and territories. However, given small sample sizes for both the NT and the ACT—these territories figures had to be combined, thus combining one of the poorest and one of the wealthiest jurisdictions, rendering the data meaningless. While poverty levels would obviously be much higher in the NT, this cannot be demonstrated. The specific data used in the analysis are taken from the three most recent *Household Expenditure Surveys* (HES) conducted by ABS in 1993-94, 1998-99 and 2003-04 based on the different exclusions examined. The latest of these surveys was conducted in conjunction with the *Survey of Income and Housing* (SIH) and another SIH was conducted in 2005-06.

## SETTING TARGETS

The concept of social exclusion provides a framework for the development of targets and benchmarks to measure the effectiveness of policies designed to reduce poverty and social disadvantage. We applaud the NT Government for its willingness to encourage the setting of targets and timeframes as part of the 2030 process. This will help to ensure that the focus is placed on the achievement of practical outcomes.

NTCOSS would suggest that there is great merit in taking account of national benchmarks in setting targets – for example in the areas such as alcohol consumption, incarceration rates, or homelessness, where the Northern Territory has alarming rates far in excess of the national average. In the circumstances where it will take some years before we begin to approach national standards, NTCOSS recommends ‘interim targets’ to ensure that steady progress is made towards the ultimate. We would like to see targets set at levels which might be regarded as being ‘ambitious but achievable’.

As an example, the broad objective of the British Government’s social inclusion strategy (from ACOSS, Future of the Sector, 2007), is to ‘achieve a fairer, more inclusive society in which nobody is held back by disadvantage or lack of opportunity.’ The Government has developed and refined a series of specific targets to ensure that measurable progress is made.

The key anti-poverty targets adopted by the British Government in 1999 committed the Government to:

- eradicate child poverty by 2020;
- halve child poverty by 2010;
- reduce child poverty by at least 25% by 2004.

Its broader social inclusion targets identified the intention to:

- reduce the proportion of children in workless households;
- improve the educational attainment of school students;
- reduce the proportion of households living in sub-standard accommodation;
- increase the employment rates of disadvantaged groups such as people with disabilities, lone parents and mature age people, and in disadvantaged local communities;
- reduce smoking rates and drug use;
- reduce homelessness;
- increase the proportion of mature-age people able to live at home independently;
- improve life expectancy of mature-age people.

More specific targets were also set in Public Service Agreements. For example, the Department of Work and Pensions is required to ensure that by 2010 all children aged 3 to 14 have access to a child-care place from 8AM to 6PM on weekdays.

The above examples from the UK could serve as a useful guide for setting targets for the NT. In addition, many NTCOSS member organisations and peaks will be making submissions to the committee under separate cover. We would urge that the steering committee take particular notice of the recommendations of these organisations in relation to their fields of expertise.

## **SOME KEY ISSUES**

There are a number of over-arching issues in the NT which much be addressed if our society is to become genuinely inclusive. These include: (i) the extent of Indigenous disadvantage, (ii) the lack of appropriate and affordable housing, and (iii) the damage wrought by alcohol abuse across the Territory.

### **1. Indigenous disadvantage**

Many of the Territory's most disadvantaged citizens are residents of remote Indigenous communities. This geographical isolation results in a lack of service and support in these locations, as well as a critical absence of affordable transport options. The increasing cost of fuel in recent years contributes to making the price of goods in remote communities prohibitively expensive. It also exacerbates the difficulties in making fresh fruit and vegetables available in these locations – a key consideration if the gap between Indigenous health standards and those of the general community is to be successfully narrowed.

While the scope of the Government's 2030 strategy is much broader than the matter of Indigenous disadvantage, addressing this issue will be a key component. The NT Government's 'Closing the Gap on Indigenous Disadvantage' strategy provides some direction in respect to improving, Indigenous health, housing, and education. 'Closing the Gap' has the advantage of sitting outside of departmental boundaries, and thus facilitating whole-of-government responses, as well as broad community support. The 2030 Strategy provides an opportunity to reinvigorate and build on the work of Closing the Gap.

### **2. The lack of appropriate and affordable housing**

Rental costs in the NT are now so high that welfare organisations are reporting an increase in working families approaching their services for assistance. The community sector has identified the need for government to address the issue of housing shortages and overcrowding. However, these issues should not be considered in isolation, since they are closely related to the priorities of getting children to school and of reducing antisocial behaviour.

Organisations report that their clients are presenting with ever more complex issues which demand the provision of flexible services designed to meet widely varying individual needs. In this climate of increased demand for services and ongoing funding constraints for many organisations, the challenge remains one of delivering quality services to the many Territorians in need.

NTCOSS recommends approaches informed by the principles of prevention, early intervention, rehabilitation and support as the key to providing long-term solutions to deeply entrenched problems.

### **3. Alcohol Abuse in the NT**

The Northern Territory has a significant alcohol problem – with its per capita alcohol consumption of 17 litres of pure alcohol per person - almost twice the national average of 9.4 litres per head. This is not just a problem for Indigenous Territorians, as there is evidence of significant alcohol misuse across the whole population. Excessive alcohol consumption brings with it a raft of related harms – such as domestic violence, sexual assault, drink-driving and family breakdown. These all have an enormous financial impact on the health system in terms of loss of productivity, cost of road accidents, and the costs of crime. The NT must work towards reducing alcohol consumption to the national average. International evidence indicates that when alcohol consumption declines, so too does alcohol-caused harm such as murder, manslaughter, suicide, and injuries that require hospital admission.

We need to work to reverse the culture of excessive alcohol consumption. The NT has a strong basis for addressing alcohol misuse and alcohol related harm through its Northern Territory Alcohol Framework whose aims include: reducing the overall consumption of alcohol and harmful patterns of drinking; reducing social disorder, family disruption, and encouraging responsible alcohol consumption. In this regard, it is critical that the government continues to facilitate quality data collection and evaluation to inform the development of alcohol policy. NTCOSS recommends the further implementation of measures consistent with evidence-based strategies around the hours of trading of liquor outlets, the number of takeaway liquor outlets and the price of alcohol. While this action will be politically unpopular, the NT Government should not be deterred from this path. Great political courage will be required to confront the vested financial interests who benefit from the alcohol epidemic, and to overcome a popular culture which reinforces excessive consumption.

### **THE VALUE OF SOCIAL INCLUSION IMPACT STATEMENTS**

NTCOSS is concerned at the potential for social justice considerations to become marginalised in the development of new policy. It is crucial that the principles of social inclusion be honoured in policy initiatives designed within the portfolios of economic development, telecommunications, and mineral exploration. The philosophy of social inclusion requires a whole-of-government approach to ensure that the idea is not simply consigned to the traditional silos of health, education and housing. To ensure that the notion of social inclusion is not submerged beneath the weight of other policy considerations, NTCOSS strongly recommends that the government adopt a system of Social Inclusion Impact Statements (SIIS) or Poverty Impact Statements.

‘Poverty Impact Statements’ are a key feature of the Irish Social Inclusion Strategy. They require government agencies and local authorities to assess policies and programs at the design, implementation and review stages. The process is designed to assess the likely impact that new policies and programs will have on poverty, and on inequalities which are likely to lead to poverty. The Department of Health and Human Services in Tasmania has identified the importance of Social Impact Statements in “providing the framework within which predications can be made regarding the potential positive and negative impacts of a proposal while it is at the planning stage” so that desired outcomes can be maximised and the costs or losses to communities minimised.

## **THE VALUE OF SOCIAL INCLUSION IMPACT STATEMENTS continued**

Two major projects underway in the Territory provide the government with a practical opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to social inclusion. The newly announced City of Weddell could become a best practice model for social inclusion. The interests of the most vulnerable in our community should help to inform the development of the new city, not just in health, housing and education, but in construction, mining, and telecommunications as well. Thoughtful planning will encourage the development of an inclusive and sustainable community, and save money into the future.

In the medium term, the development of the Inpex gas plant will provide considerable stimulus to economic growth in the Territory. NTCOSS believes that it is crucial for the government to develop a strategy which will see the benefits from this development flow through to those who experience the greatest level of disadvantage. We believe that waiting for a 'trickle-down effect' is not sufficient, and that the needs of those people who are socially excluded must be expressly built into the planning process.

The Territory 2030 documentation states that the Steering Committee will 'reconvene on a periodic basis to review Government's progress against the plan.' The incorporation of Social Impact Statements into the review process would ensure that the interests of disadvantaged Territorians are not overlooked.

## **TOWARDS A MORE INCLUSIVE 2030**

NTCOSS would like to emphasise the important role the Chief Minister must play in leading a whole of government and community approach to social inclusion. The Chief Minister must sponsor strategies to break down policy silos and get government agencies working together to alleviate social exclusion for all Territorians and assist them in connecting to community.

NTCOSS recommends that the NT Government adopt the following broad principles for a social inclusion strategy:

- Poverty should not be entrenched;
- People should not have to accept substandard situations;
- Access to services should not depend upon the ability to pay;
- Disadvantage should not be locational;
- Disadvantage should not lead to stigmatization; and
- Individuals and communities should not be disconnected or excluded.

In addition, the Victorians Government's social policy plan entitled *A Fairer Victoria* (2008) identifies some key outcomes of an effective social inclusion strategy:

- Better, more accessible mainstream services;
- Support for disadvantaged groups;
- Support for disadvantaged places;
- Involving communities in decisions affecting their lives; and
- Making it easier to work with government

## CONCLUSION

In the years prior to the global financial crisis, Australia enjoyed unprecedented growth. However a small, but significant number of Australians are entrenched in poverty and have seen little benefit from the boom. Additionally, the needs of those people who have been recently displaced by the economic down turn must be addressed if the Territory is to continue to develop. Society as a whole has a moral obligation to assist its more disadvantaged members. As the Deputy Prime Minister has pointed out, the skills and abilities of *all* Australians must be harnessed for this country to prosper into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

We believe that the NT Government must invest in the future and ensure that Territorians are not condemned to the misery of unemployment, poverty and social exclusion. These circumstances see people less likely to gain an education and employment, more vulnerable to misuse of alcohol and drugs, and more likely to end up in prison. They are thus denied the opportunity to contribute to the economic and civic prosperity of the NT.

A social inclusion strategy that will improve the lives of Territorians on low incomes, must have at its heart a commitment to reducing poverty in the NT. Building a truly inclusive Territory will require a whole-of-government approach, since every action of government has implications for those who live in the NT. Economic initiatives must be complemented by strategies to create and increase social and civic participation across Northern Territory communities.

NTCOSS wishes the steering committee well in its task, and would ask to be involved in further discussions in respect to working towards a just and prosperous Territory

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Appendixes:

NTCOSS Pre-budget Submission 2009-2010

ACOSS National Conference Papers 2008