

Let Aboriginal communities have a say over Intervention

Jacqueline Phillips

National Director, Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR)

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Three years on and the Northern Territory Intervention remains an unnecessarily blunt and coercive response to the complex social problems in remote Aboriginal communities.

This week marks the third anniversary of the Northern Territory Intervention. On Monday night, the Senate passed legislation to partially restore racial discrimination protections and modify aspects of the Intervention, including income management.

In doing so, it made profound changes to the Australian social security system which will impact upon poor and socially excluded Australians across the country, black and white.

The Intervention was announced on 21 June 2007 by the Howard Government. Without consultation, radical changes were made to the daily lives of Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory communities.

While few denied the urgent need to act, many were shocked and angered at the failure to engage communities in developing solutions.

Indeed, the independent Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) Review reported in 2008 that 'one of the impacts of the NTER was to fracture an already tenuous relationship with government.'

On its election in late 2007, the Rudd Government committed to 'resetting' the relationship with Indigenous Australians. Hopes were high that this would require a significant re-think of the Intervention, and lead to its transition into a sustainable community development strategy.

Instead, the Intervention has continued under the Rudd Government as a highly bureaucratic, blunt, and inefficient response to very complex social issues.

The partial reinstatement of racial discrimination protections is a significant improvement on the previous situation but it comes almost a year after the Government's original deadline. Further, many Intervention measures remain beyond legal challenge, including the compulsory five year leases over land.

While some improvements have been made, the Rudd Government's approach maintains some of the most coercive aspects of the Howard Intervention. This includes extraordinary Government powers to vary and terminate funding agreements and control the management and assets of Aboriginal service organisations.

More than \$2 billion has now been spent over the three years of the Intervention. The new income management scheme alone has a \$350 million price tag in the Northern Territory.

The lack of positive results shows all too clearly that top-down approaches which do not engage communities in addressing the problems they face will have limited, if any, positive effect.

A recent report by the NT Children's Commissioner revealed a system chronically underfunded and in crisis, with 1200 matters not investigated within the required time frame last year. The Federal Government's own NTER monitoring report published this week shows that confirmed incidences of child abuse have more than doubled and domestic violence incidents increased by 75%. While these figures may be due in part to increased police and reporting, the evidence suggests that violence and abuse have not reduced as a result of the Intervention, despite this being its rationale.

The evidence base for income management also remains weak and highly contested, as the recent Menzies School of Health report has demonstrated. This quantitative study of sales data from community stores shows that income management has not led to an increase in fruit and vegetable sales, contrary to Government claims.

Three years since the announcement of the Intervention and only 13 houses of the 750 promised have been completed. The dogged pursuit of long-term leases from communities in exchange for services has come at a high price, producing significant delay and inefficiency in implementation.

ANTaR maintains that there is a better way.

The *Little Children are Sacred Report* made 97 recommendations to protect children from abuse and address the urgent social issues being faced by communities.

'The thrust of our recommendations', Patricia Anderson and Rex Wild wrote, 'is for there to be consultation with, and ownership by the communities, of those solutions.'

These included concrete proposals to both respond to and prevent child abuse and neglect. These included strengthening child sexual abuse crisis services, expanding parenting and family support services and developing programs to reduce the risk of victims becoming perpetrators.

Recognising that poverty, alcohol and drug abuse, housing shortages and unemployment are all key risk factors for child abuse and neglect, Anderson and Wild's recommendations were broad in vision and scope.

They ranged from investing in child and adolescent mental health services and family support services in communities, reforming education programs to improve attendance (with smaller classes and flexibility in timing of the school year) and consulting with communities to develop individual community alcohol management plans.

Government consultations on income management were conducted last year, but communities were offered such limited options that the process could not be described

as genuine engagement. More generally, the Government's top-down and coercive approach means there is little community ownership of solutions.

The Government has committed to ongoing evaluation of the Intervention, including the new income management scheme. It is vital that this process enables rigorous policy scrutiny, and opens the way for serious consideration of alternative responses.

Three years on, and the recommendations of the *Little Children are Sacred* report remain a good place to start.