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Government needs to close respect gap with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights advocacy organisation ANTaR today called on government to engage more and listen to First Peoples to develop a better understanding of culture, connection to land, and health and wellbeing.

The call comes following the Prime Minister's comments yesterday about plans to close more than 150 communities in Western Australia where he said that government could not fund 'lifestyle choices'.

National Director Andrew Meehan said the Prime Minister's comments showed enormous disrespect and a complete lack of understanding of connection to land, the importance of culture, and the positive impact of both on health and wellbeing.

"The refusal to fund municipal and essential services for over 150 Aboriginal communities in WA is an extraordinary decision, and one that needs to be reversed," Mr Meehan said.

"No other small community in the country would put up with government refusing to fund municipal and essential services – that's a basic obligation of government to its citizens," he said.

"If government meets this obligation in other communities, why wouldn't it show the same respect to Aboriginal communities in Western Australia?" he asked.

Mr Meehan also said that there was ample evidence of the health and wellbeing benefits of living in homelands, particularly in relation to maintaining culture and connection to country.

He said that breaking Aboriginal connection to land and culture, and forcing people to move to regional towns will just increase exposure to drugs, alcohol, and crime, with no guarantees of adequate housing or employment.

"Government should be looking to work in partnership with Aboriginal people on sustainable development initiatives and maximising health and wellbeing gains from living on homelands," he said.

ANTaR is the only non-Indigenous organisation dedicated solely to supporting the aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and working to educate the wider community, shape public opinion, and speak up for justice, rights and respect for Australia's First Peoples