



NTCOSS submission to the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into Expenditure on Children in the Northern Territory

July 2019

The Northern Territory Council of Social Service (NTCOSS) is a peak body for the social and community sector in the Northern Territory (NT), and an advocate for social justice on behalf of people and communities in the NT, who may be affected by poverty and disadvantage.

NTCOSS has a broad membership base, which is made up of non-government (NGO) and community organisations, and Aboriginal Community Controlled organisations (ACCOs), as well as other organisations and individuals with a commitment to social justice issues for people and communities who are socially and financially disadvantaged in the NT.

Like the communities serviced by this sector, the social and community sector is heterogeneous, with some members that work with specific client groups, and other members that are very large, complex, and work across the social services. Some of NTCOSS' members are specialists in one area, and may refer clients with other issues to relevant agencies including crisis accommodation and/or domestic violence counselling.

The diversity of the social and community sector across the NT is in part a response to meeting the changing needs of a complex and culturally diverse population. For example;

- The NT has the highest proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia<sup>1</sup>
- Twenty per cent of the NT population was born overseas<sup>2</sup>
- More than 100 Aboriginal languages and dialects are spoken in the NT<sup>3</sup>, and the most common languages other than English in the NT are Indigenous languages Kriol and Djambarrpuyngu<sup>4</sup>
- The NT has the highest rate of people experiencing homelessness in Australia<sup>5</sup>
- The NT has the deepest poverty rates, with nearly 45% of all Aboriginal households living below the poverty line<sup>6</sup>

Organisations in the social and community sector operate in the NT's major centres, rural towns, and some of the most remote regions in Australia, providing an 'essential and irreplaceable role in building and maintaining community cohesion, providing opportunities for engagement, volunteering and relationship building. Their impact is felt socially as well as economically'<sup>7</sup>.

In responding to the Productivity Commission's study on Expenditure on Children in the NT, this submission refers to all early intervention and harm prevention services for families and children. In defining harm prevention, this paper primarily refers to services that sit within the early secondary (or targeted) interventions, and the tertiary interventions of the public health model. However, NTCOSS recognises the critical importance of access to stable housing, health care and education in harm prevention for families and children. NTCOSS considers that programs such as preschool/school readiness, education support, and nurse-family partnership programs are relevant harm prevention

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016 Census QuickStats, Northern Territory [https://quickstats.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census\\_services/getproduct/census/2016/quickstat/7?opendocument](https://quickstats.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2016/quickstat/7?opendocument) accessed 18<sup>th</sup> June 2019

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

<sup>3</sup> Aboriginal languages in NT <https://nt.gov.au/community/interpreting-and-translating-services/aboriginal-interpreter-service/aboriginal-languages-in-nt>, accessed 18<sup>th</sup> June 2019

<sup>4</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016 Census QuickStats, Northern Territory

<sup>5</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census of Population and Housing: Estimating homelessness, 2016 <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/2049.0>

<sup>6</sup> Land Rights News – Northern Edition in School of Regulation and Global Governance, 2017, 'Deepening Indigenous poverty in the Northern Territory', Australian National University <http://regnet.anu.edu.au/news-events/news/7002/deepening-indigenous-poverty-northern-territory>

<sup>7</sup> p.5 Gilchrist, D. J. and P. A. Knight, (2017), *Value of the Not-for-profit Sector 2017: An Examination of the Economic Contribution of the Not-for-profit Human Services Sector in the Northern Territory*. A Report for the Northern Territory Council of Social Service, Darwin, Australia

services. We emphasise the cost-effectiveness of investment in early intervention and prevention programs, which with appropriate resourcing have the potential to achieve significant beneficial long term outcomes for individuals and communities.

NTCOSS acknowledges that the range of different agencies providing and funding services across the NT, including the Commonwealth Government, the NT Government and the NGO sector (including both for-profit and not-for-profit organisations), has resulted in an uncoordinated approach to working with children and families; a confounding number of disparate service providers and programs, particularly in many remote Aboriginal communities; duplication of services in some areas, and gaps in services in others.

It is important to note that apparent duplication of service delivery may in some instances be intentional and necessary; established to offer specific or specialist support for specific groups of people, and to respond and be accountable to local need. The social, cultural and environmental heterogeneity of communities in the NT, including in Aboriginal communities, gives rise to distinct and complex needs across and within communities. This in turn has implications for types of services and service delivery, and on how individuals and communities will access and use those services. NTCOSS recommends that the Productivity Commission takes a nuanced approach to an understanding of the context(s) in which services are being delivered, when analysing service delivery across the NT.

### Role of Aboriginal Community Controlled Corporations and non-government organisations in delivering children and family services

First and foremost, it is essential that any programs and service delivery for Aboriginal people recognise their sovereignty, and that Aboriginal people and communities must have control and agency over matters affecting them.

Given the high number of child and family programs that are targeted towards Aboriginal people, there is a preferred role for ACCOs in delivering these services. The NT Royal Commission identified various benefits of engaging and building the capacity of ACCO service providers, including:

- Overcoming the power imbalance that comes from ‘the dominance of public finances in Aboriginal affairs’
- Overcoming intercultural complexities
- Improved outcomes for children and families
- Greater capacity for meaningful engagement with community members
- Increased local Aboriginal employment
- Growing leadership capacity<sup>8</sup>

Organisations operating at the local level are generally best placed to plan, operate and control effective programs and services that respond to local need. However, it has been identified that in some areas there may be a lack of capacity by local organisations to deliver particular types of child and family services (primarily intensive, tertiary-end services). It is therefore essential to build the capacity of local/regional ACCOs through investment in genuine partnerships that adhere to the Aboriginal Peaks of the NT (APONT) partnership principles; appropriate resourcing for capacity building; and transition arrangements to help build the capacity of ACCOs to take on full service delivery. Tools and principles such as the ‘Partnership Audit Tool’ produced by the Secretariat of

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<sup>8</sup> p265 – 270 Report of the Royal Commission and Board of Inquiry into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory, November 2017, Vol. 1

National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care, and the APONT Partnership Principles should be used to ensure genuine partnerships and commitment to local community empowerment.

### Joint funding framework

While a shared network governance approach and joint funding framework were highlighted as priorities, there is a lack of consensus about what such a framework should look like amongst NTCOSS stakeholders. However, the following key principles and priorities were identified:

1. The Right of Aboriginal people to self-determination  
Local ACCOs must be supported to engage with processes associated with a joint funding framework, and community voice and ownership is essential. Processes should not be a barrier to Aboriginal participation and ownership of the decisions being made and people must have genuine agency in these processes and be substantive decision makers.
2. Place-based approaches  
Place-based approaches are necessary in order to respond appropriately to local capacity, priorities, and strategies. Accordingly, the Commonwealth and Northern Territory Governments need to delegate decision-making authority at local levels, including the authority to share/pool funding. NTCOSS acknowledges the work being done through the NT Government Department of the Chief Minister on Local Decision Making. However, this does not include the Commonwealth and therefore does not, at this stage, have the same level of resourcing and commitment as a tripartite approach.
3. Clearly articulated parameters of authority  
The parameters of authority and roles need to be clearly articulated and understood by all parties, particularly where sub-committees/working groups are established. This includes an understanding of whether the role of participants is primarily an oversight body, or an operational body to design and implement programs. Rules guiding the relationship between all participants must be understood and agreed to.
4. Economic Participation, Employment and Professional Development  
In order to deliver improved equity across the NT, development of funding allocation formulas including loading for costs associated with remote service delivery and building a local, skilled workforce will be advantageous. Quantifiable outcomes, agreed timeframes and performance reporting systems, and mutual accountability (including accountability to community) are also necessary. Targets for Aboriginal employment outcomes must be realistic, sustainable and underpinned by continuing professional development. The long term goal must be to build a skilled and sustainable, local workforce and this will require significant financial commitment.
5. Ongoing engagement with ACCOs/NGOs  
A shared governance approach and ongoing engagement between Commonwealth and NT Governments, and ACCOs and NGOs in the design, development, implementation and oversight of joint funding framework(s) is essential. As identified by the NT Royal Commission, shared responsibility and accountability to communities is key to reaching durable agreements, and to delivering better outcomes and opportunities for children and families in the NT.

Given the current approach being undertaken through the Barkly Regional Deal, arguably the most significant attempt to achieve greater collaboration and coordination in the NT, it has been suggested that this be used as a pilot site prior to rolling out joint funding frameworks. Initial stakeholder feedback also suggests that the process used to develop the Child and Family Centre in Katherine,

including collaboration between the Commonwealth and NT Government has been positive, and may serve as a useful example of a joint approach.

### Contracting for Services

Competitive tendering has had well-documented, negative impacts, particularly on smaller ACCOs, unable to compete for funding against larger, mainstream NGOs; negative impacts on organisational mission; and loss of collegiality and collaboration between organisations competing for the same funding pool. Alternative contracting arrangements such as relational contracting, or outsourcing contracting to NGO specialists with the capacity to engage with communities have the potential to provide a less corrosive process than competitive tendering. However, it is essential that transparency and accountability are maintained.

Stakeholders identified that negotiating service agreements with funding bodies continues to be a major obstacle to delivering services. It was also observed that the period of negotiation for service agreements and contracts is often too short, impacting on the capacity of organisations to consult meaningfully with their stakeholders on service agreements and plans. Furthermore, it does not allow for the development of meaningful partnerships, where appropriate. There is a distinct power imbalance in this situation, where government departments have allocated funding to deliver contracts, whereas non-government organisations attempt to cover the cost of often onerous contract processes through administration fees. The administration fees that organisations build into funding submissions is often criticised, however small NGOs in particular need to recover these costs. The lack of capacity to negotiate and consult with stakeholders frequently results in NGOs accepting service agreements that steer projects away from grassroots imperatives and control.

Key priorities identified include co-design, collaboration, less micro-management, recognising the value of relationships, drawing on real expertise and grounded knowledge from service providers and users, place-based solutions, capacity building amongst ACCOs and other NGOs so that negotiated agreements reflect stakeholder needs and aspirations, and more time to develop and sustain programs. The NT Government's transition to five year contracts is a positive move towards ensuring that effective services are of sufficient duration to produce optimal outcomes.

### Evaluation and Performance monitoring

Despite a shift towards evidence-based service delivery in the NT, there is still a deficit of evidence-based programs, particularly in an Aboriginal context. This highlights the importance of building appropriately resourced evaluation into program delivery, particularly for non-health ACCOs and NGOs. Historically, non-health organisations have often been poorly resourced to understand how and in what circumstances their work impacts upon people's health. Measuring and communicating these organisations' impact on health and wellbeing requires time and resources, both of which have presented as barriers for this sector. Given the overall limited number of evidence-based programs, emphasis must also be placed on assisting organisations to build an evidence base (including long term investment), particularly for smaller, community based organisations with limited capacity.

Data collection, data management and data sovereignty are all significant issues for non-health organisations. Consideration of data collection, management and use should be at the core of service agreements. Commonwealth and Territory funders should consider bilateral approaches to issues such as program outcome measurement and database development. Ideally funding agreements and contracts would provide a dividend with respect to knowledge making that transcends individual agreements. Defining presenting reasons, inputs, outputs and outcomes is important and needs to demonstrate consistency. At present stakeholder feedback reflects a mismatch between the types

and quality of data collected by individual programs and agencies. To an extent anecdotal feedback suggests that a significant component of this issue is structural and reflective of agreements.