

INQUIRY INTO OVERCOMING INDIGENOUS DISADVANTAGE

Organisation: National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical
Commission (NATSIEC)

Name: Mr Graeme Mundine



**National Council of
Churches in Australia**
NATSIEC

18th January 2008

23 JAN 2008

Ian West MLC
Chair
Standing Committee on Social Issues
Parliament House
Macquarie St
Sydney NSW 2000

Dear Mr West,

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage in New South Wales. We congratulate the Standing Committee on Social Issues for inquiring into this vital area.

Please find attached the submission from the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Commission (NATSIEC) a commission of the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA).

We look forward to the outcomes of your deliberations and would welcome the opportunity to present to the committee in person.

Yours sincerely,

Graeme Mundine
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Anglican Church

Antiochian
Orthodox Church

Armenian
Apostolic Church

Assyrian Church
of the East

Chinese Methodist
Church

Churches of Christ

Congregational
Federation

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Orthodox Church

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Orthodox Church

Lutheran Church

Mar Thoma Church

Religious Society
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**National Council of
Churches in Australia
NATSIEC**

**National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical
Commission (NATSIEC)**

of the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA)

**Submission to the
Inquiry into Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage in New
South Wales**

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Background to NATSIEC

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Commission (NATSIEC) is the peak ecumenical Indigenous body in Australia. It is part of the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA). With NATSIEC's guidance, the churches are working together for a fair deal for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, and for the healing of our nation.

All the commission members of NATSIEC are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the first peoples of this land and sea. They represent a cross-section of church-related Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups from the Anglican Church of Australia, the Churches of Christ, the Lutheran Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Salvation Army, the Coptic Orthodox and the Uniting Church in Australia.

NATSIEC's Mandate:

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Commission shall:

- Provide a forum for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to speak and take action on issues of faith, mission and evangelism; of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander spirituality and theology; of social justice and land rights.
- Serve as a unified voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as they relate to member churches and international ecumenical bodies.
- Help rebuild self-esteem, pride and dignity within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- Promote harmony, justice and understanding between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the wider community.
- Provide a basis for further political action by church-related Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups, other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and the member churches of the National Council of Churches in Australia.
- Administer all funds of the National Council of Churches in Australia relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- Share in furthering the objectives and promoting the programmes of the National Council of Churches in Australia.

This submission will focus on implementing the Millennium Development Goals within Australia; comments on the Federal Northern Territory Intervention and comments on opportunities for strengthening cultural resilience.



Indigenous MAKE POVERTY HISTORY.

The Millennium Development Goals

In 2000, world leaders came together and made a commitment to measurable progress towards peace, security, disarmament, human rights, democracy and good governance.

In particular they committed to halving poverty by 2015. This statement of both commitment and confidence in humanity was the **Millennium Declaration**. Out of this declaration arose the **Millennium Development Goals** (the MDGs). These are eight goals which are measurable and have a time limit. The goals address poverty, hunger, education, maternal and child health, the prevalence of diseases including HIV/AIDS, gender equality, the environment, debt, trade justice and aid.

The MDGs focus on the alleviation of poverty for the poorest of the poor and for those in least developed countries.

The World leaders in supporting these goals were saying that despite all the conflict and poverty in the world there is hope and that ending poverty is a question of will. We, as global citizens, must want to ensure a more equitable and peaceful world. In the words of Kofi Annan:

“We should never despair. Our problems are not beyond our power to meet them. But we cannot be content with incomplete success and we cannot make do with incremental responses to the shortcomings that have been revealed. Instead, we must come together to bring about far – reaching change.”

Kofi Annan in his report to the General Assembly of the United Nations, in March 2005, makes the point that development, security and human rights go hand in hand. He calls this Larger Freedom.

“Larger freedom implies that men and women everywhere have the right to be governed by their own consent, under law, in a society where all individuals can, without discrimination or retribution, speak, worship and associate freely. They must also be free from want – so that the death sentences of extreme poverty and infectious disease are lifted from their lives – and free from fear – so that their lives and livelihoods are not ripped apart by violence and war. Indeed, all people have the right to security and development.” (Kofi Annan, A/59/2005 page 5)

The Millennium Development Goals and Indigenous Peoples

The MDGs do not specifically target Indigenous Peoples but Indigenous Peoples around the world are most affected by extreme poverty and usually rank at the bottom of most social and economic indicators.

Indigenous Peoples constitute more than 370 million of the world's population and make up approximately 90 percent of the world's linguistic diversity (Nicolaisen 2005).

Indigenous Peoples are largely invisible in the debate about the MDGs. The MDGs are outcomes focused and there is a danger that in defining and measuring poverty in such a way that the specific causes of poverty amongst Indigenous Peoples will not be addressed.

The MDGs must be aligned with poverty reduction strategies that address the particular needs of Indigenous Peoples. Without the meaningful participation of Indigenous Peoples their marginalisation and exclusion will continue.

“while MDGs have the potential for assessing the major problems faced by Indigenous peoples, the MDGs and their indicators for achievement do not necessarily capture the specificities of indigenous and tribal peoples and their visions” (Nicolaisen 2005).

In practical terms this means that Indigenous Peoples must be involved in describing and defining what poverty is to them. Key Indicators must be devised by, and be meaningful to, Indigenous Peoples. Non-Indigenous Peoples must examine the structural exclusion that occurs at all levels of power and decision making. Measuring how many dollars a day somebody lives on will not encompass the wide gamut of factors that leads to indigenous poverty including; colonisation, loss of traditional lands, loss of languages, loss of traditional law and loss of cultural practices – to name a few.

Even then the MDGs will not go all the way to relieving poverty and we make the point that they are one tool to raise awareness and focus on measurable outcomes in order to ensure that we as a society do not shirk our responsibility to ensure that what is the right of every human being - to live free from poverty - is guaranteed.

How do the MDGs affect Australia?

Because Australia is a “developed” country, the MDGs do not specifically target Australia. However even though Australia is a rich country there are those who live in poverty and who do not enjoy the same level of health, wealth and even life expectancy as that of the majority of Australians.

Several reports, both domestic and international, show that The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples of Australia score worse on almost every key social and economic indicator than their non-Indigenous counterparts.

Describing poverty in mostly financial terms does not describe the full extent of poverty that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders experience. It is true that key indicators for poverty show that Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples do suffer similar standards of health and wellbeing as the poorest of the poor, including those in least developed countries and Africa. This gives us a clear picture that poverty is a very real and debilitating experience for many of our people. But it is vital to remember that behind the statistics of low income, unemployment, lack of education and family violence there are stories of dispossession; cultural annihilation; loss of languages; stolen generations and lack of recognition of our ownership of this country.

Poverty is relative and to appreciate the disadvantage that Indigenous Australians suffer, we must compare the key indicators which describe the poverty experienced by Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples with the key indicators describing the experiences of the rest of Australia.

Therefore NATSIEC has proposed a set of “indigenised” MDGs, which highlight key areas of disadvantage in Australia and give us the opportunity to work as hard for our own poor as we do for those overseas. We have called this campaign *Make Indigenous Poverty History*.

How can we Make *Indigenous Poverty History*?

There are no easy answers to poverty. Many initiatives are underway and much good work is being done to alleviate the poverty of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, around the country. But it’s not enough and it’s not quick enough. The MDGs put a measure and a time line on relieving poverty. As an International Community we are standing up and saying we have the resources and we have the will to make life better for those in our societies who are suffering the most. We must also have the will here in NSW. We are a rich country both in resources and in compassion and a sense of justice. We have to work together to bring all the citizens of this great country to the same standard of living. We can do this by working back from the 2015 targets:

“Each country should map key dimensions and underlying determinants of extreme poverty by region, locality and gender as well as undertaking detailed needs assessment “ (Nicolaisen 2005).

This means we must know about the plight of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. We need to go beyond the headline news, the sensationalism and the blaming of Indigenous peoples themselves. We must understand the statistics and we must highlight the reports that are already being done and ensure that solutions are implemented now so that in 2015, we can measure the improvement in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. But above all we must remember that poverty is not about some abstract measurement, it’s about real people, with real stories and experiences, it is about mothers, fathers, children, families and communities.

The Australian Millennium Development Goals

The Australian MDGs presented here are not presented as absolutes. Rather they are for discussion. However, their key relevance and importance for the committee to consider is that they are time bound and measurable. They avoid the ‘we must do something’ trap and replace it with ‘this is what we are going to do, and this is how we will be held accountable’.

Australian Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger

Target 1: Remove, by 2015, the differences in income between Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Peoples and non - Indigenous Australians

- Indicator 1: No Australian lives below the Australian poverty line
- Indicator 2: Indigenous Australians share the same household and individual income as non – Indigenous Australians
- Indicator 3: Indigenous Australians share the same rate of home ownership as non – Indigenous Australians

Target 2: Eliminate by 2015, the number of people who suffer from hunger and malnourishment

- Indicator 4: Eliminate the incidence of underweight and malnourished children under five years of age.
- Indicator 5: No Indigenous Australian lives below the minimum level of dietary energy.

Australian Goal 2: Achieve universal education

Target 3: Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of schooling

- Indicator 6: Net enrolment ratio in primary and secondary education
- Indicator 7: Literacy rate of Indigenous Peoples at all ages is equal to that of non-Indigenous people.
- Indicator 8: Increase the year 12 retention rate to the same level as non-Indigenous people.

Australian Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women

Target 4: Eliminate gender disparity all levels of education and participation in the workforce no later than 2015

- Indicator 9: Rate and level of Post – School qualifications of Indigenous women are the same as for non-Indigenous women.
- Indicator 10: Share of women in the labour force is the same for Indigenous women as non-Indigenous women

Target 5: Reduce the rate of incarceration of Indigenous women.

- Indicator 11: Number of Indigenous women incarcerated is reduced.

Target 6: Ensure proper representation and participation of Indigenous Women at local, State and Federal levels

- Indicator 12: Proportion of seats held by women in Local, Council and National parliaments.

Australian Goal 4: Reduce child mortality

Target 7: Reduce the under-five mortality rate by 2015 of Indigenous children.

- Indicator 13: Reduce the under-five mortality rate

- Indicator 14: Reduce the infant mortality rate

Australian Goal 5: Improve maternal health

Target 8: Reduce the maternal mortality ratio for Indigenous Women.

- Indicator 15: Reduce the maternal mortality ratio
- Indicator 16: Reduce the incidence of risk factors for poor perinatal and child health outcomes.

Australian Goal 6: Combat Chronic and Communicable diseases

Target 9: Have increased, by 2015, the life expectancy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to that of the rest of Australia

- Indicator 17: Cardiovascular disease (heart diseases, strokes)
- Indicator 18: Neoplasms (cancers)
- Indicator 19: Diseases of the respiratory system
- Indicator 20: Endocrine, nutritional and metabolic diseases, including diabetes
- Indicator 21: Disease of the digestive system
- Indicator 22: Prevalence of Suicide

Target 10: Have decreased by 2015 the rates of hospitalisation for communicable diseases

- Indicator 23: Prevalence of Hepatitis A and Hepatitis B
- Indicator 24: Prevalence of Meningococcal infection
- Indicator 25: Prevalence and death rates associated with tuberculosis

Australian Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability

Target 10: Integrate the principles of sustainable development into mining and land use agreements and reverse the loss of environmental and cultural resources

- Indicator 26: Mining agreements and land use agreements are formulated with free and prior informed consent of the Traditional Owners.
- Indicator 27: That Mining and land use agreements have clear and obvious benefits to communities, now and in the future.
- Indicator 28: That Land Rights are protected and not watered down.

Target 11: By 2015 to provide adequate and safe housing

- Indicator 29: Significant increase in the rate of home ownership to equal that of non – Indigenous Australians.
- Indicator 30: Provision of new housing to ensure a reduction in the rate of overcrowding to zero.

Target 12: By 2015 to create safe environments in which to live

- Indicator 31: A reduction in the incidence of violence: assaults and murder.
- Indicator 32: A reduction in the number of child abuse substantiations.

Australian Goal 8: Develop a National Partnership for Development

Target 13: Give Indigenous people the control over managing their own affairs

- Indicator 33: Re - establish an elected representative body.
- Indicator 34: Monitor the impact of Shared Responsibility Agreements
- Indicator 35: Truth in funding – provide adequate funding for proper implementation of programs.

Target 14: Ensure that the wrongs of the past are acknowledged

- Indicator 36: The Federal Government says Sorry to the Stolen Generation and pays reparations.
- Indicator 37: A Treaty is established and Indigenous Australians have the full right to their lands.
- Indicator 38: Reparations for Stolen Wages are made in full.

Implementing the MDGs in NSW

The MDGs are far reaching and cover all the areas that the Committee has under consideration. There are certain principles that will enhance the ability of the NSW Government to implement them:

1. Proper consultation with Indigenous peoples. This means proper consultation from the start, from the conceptual stage of any policy or program. Too often programs fail because the people for whom they are designed are not involved in all levels of the development and implementation. Appropriate consultation also involves communicating in ways that are relevant and appropriate and are implemented from where the people are.
2. Listening – harness the ideas and experiences of Indigenous peoples in NSW. Listen to what they need and their solutions to address the areas of need. Prioritise Indigenous knowledges over external consultants. Commit to supporting and training Indigenous people, to be able to deliver solutions, rather than bring in short term external consultants.
3. Proper funding and long term commitment – the issues that face Indigenous peoples have taken many years to accumulate. They will take many years to rectify. Programs must be given every opportunity to work by providing sufficient funding and realistic and long term time frames being allowed.
4. Appropriate methodologies – allowing communities and individuals to implement programs in culturally appropriate and effective ways. Recognizing that all ‘communities’ are different and encouraging innovative and community based delivery.
5. Working with all levels of Government – The COAG trials and the former Federal Government’s changes to Indigenous Affairs were ostensibly aimed at reducing the ‘silo mentality’ of Government departments. It is essential that the Federal, State and Local Governments all work together to achieve positive outcomes for Indigenous peoples. Cooperation needs to occur within departments. We know that department areas are closely linked. For example, by improving housing at Baryulgil, hospital admissions were reduced. Health, education and housing are intricately linked. We know for example that for every year that a girl stays in high school it adds four years to the life of her child. Education is key to reducing poverty and closing the gap.

The Northern Territory Intervention

NATSIEC and the NCCA have been following the NT intervention with concern since it was first announced. We have released a statement and have also formed a special Task Force to look into the Government's intervention and also to look into a new national Indigenous representative body who would replace the old ATSIC

Following is our initial position statement, which, despite the intervening months since the introduction of the intervention, is still relevant.

NATSIEC POSITION STATEMENT ON THE NORTHERN TERRITORY INTERVENTION

NATSIEC completely supports action to end child abuse, wherever it is found. We have long been calling on the Government to hear the pleas of Aboriginal people and to take action to assist them in addressing the woeful conditions that plague their communities; to address issues of lack of health care, lack of proper education, lack of adequate housing and the high rate of violence, abuse and alcohol related issues. While it is tragic that these Aboriginal voices have been ignored for so long and are now being characterized as being part of the failure, we see this change of heart from the Federal Government as an opportunity to make a real and dramatic improvement to the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

We do, however, vehemently reject any suggestion that to question and debate components of the Government's so called National Emergency package is akin to supporting child abuse and hindering the prevention of further harm to children. It is a central tenet of our democratic society that we can debate these issues, rather than uncritically accept such a dramatic policy intervention. We urge all involved parties to focus on the very real issues at hand and not get sidetracked by dwelling on political, or personal, point scoring. We need to work together to ensure that real change is, finally, achieved for our people.

NATSIEC also has grave concerns about the negative characterisation of Aboriginal people during this debate. We must make it clear that not all Aboriginal people are alcoholic child abusers and not all the abuse suffered by children is at the hands of Aboriginal people, non-Indigenous people have played their part in this current crisis; as has poverty and the continual failure by governments to support and properly funded, thoughtfully developed long term solutions. We do not deny that there are severe problems facing our communities, including abuse, violence and alcohol addiction. But we call on people to be respectful of the majority of sober, responsible Aboriginal people who have strived for many years to make changes, and who for the most part have not been supported in their efforts.

NATSIEC supports immediate intervention to ensure that communities are safe and free from violence and abuse. We do not support mandatory health checks for children. It is well documented that this can increase the trauma for victims. We have grave concerns that the plan, in its entirety, is not properly funded and that sufficient doctors and health professionals who are specifically trained in child abuse are not available. We are concerned that the focus is on the identification only of victims, with too little thought being placed on appropriate long term counselling and medical support as well as a lack of attention being given to charging and processing perpetrators through the justice system and, importantly, protecting communities during this process. We ask the Government to pause, in its eagerness to intervene, and listen to the experts in child abuse; and to take on board their well thought out recommendations to both prevent further abuse and to ensure those children who are already victims are cared for appropriately.

NATSIEC supports the ban on alcohol in these communities, but has concerns that not enough attention has been given to proper rehabilitation and counselling services to support individuals and the community. We are also concerned that there will not be adequate support services for victims of abuse and violence. We want to know what measures will be taken to ensure that the abuse problems aren't simply relocated to another place, or worse, that other substances will take the place of alcohol. We are also concerned that not enough attention is being paid to other aspects of alcohol abuse, in particular the violence against women. The fact that more Aboriginal women die from violence in the Northern Territory than any other cause of death is a statistic which should have inspired intervention long ago.

NATSIEC has concerns about the linking of the land permit system and the management of communities to the child abuse issue. We do not support the wholesale abolishment of the permit system and believe that it can be retained whilst allowing access for necessary people to deal with these issues. We are also concerned that Aboriginal people will lose hard fought for rights over their land and self-determination. We reject claims that self-determination is a failure of Aboriginal people, and point out that the key areas of health and education have been under resourced for many years. It is the lack of support to implement long term solutions that has contributed to the current situation.

NATSIEC also has concerns about the blanket approach to quarantining welfare payments. We believe that quarantining should only apply where it is proven that there is a failure of responsibility and children are at risk. Casting all Aboriginal people as irresponsible and unable to manage their income is erroneous. It will cause more problems than it will fix. Care must be taken to ensure these measures are targeted to those people who will benefit from them. We do not support a blanket approach which will affect all Aboriginal welfare recipients.

NATSIEC calls on all governments to fund long term solutions to the problems facing Indigenous communities. We agree that drastic action must be taken if we are to turn these issues around. Sending in the police and the army is only one possible solution, which needs to be done with extreme sensitivity. Other urgent areas for attention include:

- Committing \$400 million to health, as repeatedly requested by the AMA.
- Ensuring that every child has a fully funded and resourced place in school, with the same access to resources available to every other Australian child.
- Ensuring that there is adequate long term policing in place to ensure the safety of community members.
- The urgent building of housing to address the chronic shortage.
- The review of employment and economic development opportunities; and converting the many jobs currently being run through CDEP into real and properly funded jobs.
- Above all working with communities to address their issues. We have been down the paternalistic, protectionist path before. It didn't work then. It won't work now. Governments must work in partnership with Aboriginal people if we are to truly address these issues long term.

NATSIEC reminds the Government that through the Make *Indigenous* Poverty History campaign we have been calling on them to implement the Millennium Development Goals here in Australia. If the Government committed to these eight goals; and showed a similar commitment to all areas of disadvantage that Indigenous people experience, as they have to the issue of child abuse, we are confident that by 2015 we will have made Indigenous Poverty History.

Conclusion

NATSIEC commends the Committee for undertaking this important inquiry. In our opinion it is essential that NSW finds solutions that suit NSW communities. No doubt there are examples of programs that work elsewhere in Australia and we urge the Government to investigate where their success lies. However, it should never be presumed that what works in the Northern Territory will work in NSW. The most important factor in addressing the gap is that Indigenous peoples are instrumental in both identifying the areas of need and in devising solutions to address them.