The Future of Homelands/Outstations

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INTRODUCTION

In October 2009 the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia (ASSA) and the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) convened a workshop at the Australian National University in Canberra on Homelands/Outstations. Invited to the workshop were homeland/outstation residents, their resource agencies, peak Aboriginal organisations, social and physical scientists, educationalists, medical practitioners and bureaucrats. This report seeks to record the broad commentary from the workshop, over which there was consensus demonstrated in the unanimous endorsement of the Communiqué (attached Appendix 1).

The aim of the workshop was to give voice to homeland/outstation residents in relation to their growing concerns about being excluded from policy development about their futures.

Two significant policy developments occurred in 2008 and 2009 which instigated the need for such a workshop. The first was release of Northern Territory Government’s Working Future policy framework, which outlined, amongst other things, its first-ever homeland/outstation policy. The second was the overarching Council of Australian Governments’ (COAG) National Indigenous Reform Agreement (Closing the Gap) (NIRA). The NIRA was established to frame the task of ‘closing the gap’ in Indigenous disadvantage, especially the gap in life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

At the national level for 2005-2007, life expectancy at birth for Indigenous males is estimated to be 67.2 years, 11.5 years less than life expectancy at birth for non-Indigenous males (78.7 years). Life expectancy at birth for Indigenous females is estimated to be 72.9 years, 9.7 years less than life expectancy at birth for non-Indigenous females (82.6 years). Indigenous life expectancy at birth differs across the states and territories and the lowest for both males and females is found in the Northern Territory, estimated to be 61.5 years for males and 69.2 years for females.

Prior to, and throughout his term as Prime Minister to date, Kevin Rudd has consistently stressed his government’s commitment to evidence-based policy development. This commitment along with governments’ willingness to commit extraordinary funding targeted at Indigenous disadvantage held out great optimism for Indigenous Australians living in homelands/outstations.
During the past 30 years, a growing body of research has indicated that life at homelands/outstations might be better—in health outcomes, livelihood options, social cohesion, and housing conditions—than at larger townships, despite government neglect and under-funding. This research suggests that ‘closing the gap’ might be more likely at homelands/outstations than elsewhere.

THE DIVERSITY OF SMALL INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

The homeland/outstation movement is a recent Aboriginal post-colonial initiative beginning in the early 1970s. There are over 1000 small Indigenous communities located across Australia primarily in the Northern Territory, South Australia, Western Australia, and Queensland. The majority of these are located on Aboriginal-owned lands but many are located on excisions within pastoral leases or in national parks.

There is enormous diversity in homelands/outstations that statistical averages can mask. Most are populated by small family groups, but some number more than a hundred people. Some are occupied year-round, others seasonally or rarely; in almost all there is considerable population movement between homelands/outstations and larger centres. Some have robust local economies built on arts production, employment as land and sea managers (rangers), and wildlife harvesting; others are highly dependent on welfare income.

The key commonality is that their residents have made a determined choice to actively engage with their land. This choice might be based on a desire to protect sacred sites, to retain connections to ancestral lands and ancestors, to live off the land, or to escape social problems that might be prevalent in larger townships.

Despite the lack of adequate needs-based government support throughout the past 40 years for homelands/outstations they have continued to grow in number across remote Australia.

GOVERNANCE – HOMELAND/OUTSTATION RESOURCE AGENCIES

Good governance has been an essential ingredient in the success of many homelands/outstations and in regional economic development. Many homeland/outstation resource agencies are long standing, and grew alongside the homeland/outstation movement. Their primary aim is to support people living on country through the provision of services. Many now play a fundamental role as quasi government/development agencies/representative bodies and are essential intermediaries between homeland/outstation residents and the outside world. Two examples of resource agencies which exhibit good governance are Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation (BAC) and Laynhapuy Homelands Association (Laynha) – both represented at the workshop.

BAC, based in Maningrida in the Northern Territory, was established in 1974 to support people moving back to their clan estates from the government settlement of Maningrida. Initially, it operated as a resource agency and Aboriginal arts centre before developing into a major Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) organisation in the late 1980s and then into a regional development agency, establishing its first Maningrida-based business in the mid 1990s. In addition to supporting homelands/outstations, BAC operates 20 businesses and employs 500 people through CDEP. BAC’s turn-over exceeds $33 million per year.6

Laynha, based in Yirrkala in the Northern Territory, grew out of the Dhanbul Association. It was established in the early 1970s by Yolngu people to assist those leaving the mission and returning to country. It serves as a resource agency for 26 homelands, with an estimated population of 1,000 to 1,200 people across a region of 10,500 square kilometres. Grant funding supports Laynha’s core service delivery functions of housing (building and maintenance), infrastructure maintenance, enterprise development, training and

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health services, as well as the CDEP and Yirralka Ranger programs. Additional income is derived from civil works contracts such as road grading, with a small proportion of royalty equivalents from the bauxite mine (Rio Tinto) in Nhulunbuy.

The reform of CDEP, along with the potential loss of block funding that comes to resource agencies for managing CDEP—which is used for operational costs—threatens the future of both homelands/outstations and their resource agencies.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM

CDEP was introduced on a pilot basis in remote areas in 1977. It began as an innovative program that converted the notional equivalents of unemployment benefit entitlements of Aboriginal people in remote areas into grants to Aboriginal organisations from the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs. These grants were then used by Aboriginal organisations to employ potential unemployment benefit recipients in part-time work. It was developed as an alternative to welfare and ensured that participants were employed in community development projects. It is, along with resource agencies, the most significant public sector support mechanism available to homeland/outstation residents.

Currently CDEP reform is underway across Australia. It is having far-reaching consequences for both homelands/outstations and the larger Aboriginal townships. Underpinning CDEP reform is the notion, contrary to the evidence-based research, that there are greater opportunities available in the larger Aboriginal townships. This aligns with the neoliberal paradigm—which appears to be influencing policy—to eliminate non-state spaces and meet the labour and resource needs of mature capitalism. Moving homelands/outstation residents from areas where they are difficult to govern into the larger townships where they can be watched and reported on assists the state meet its labour and resource needs. This mirrors the investment principles expressed in the NIRA that, if implemented, will entrench further neglect of homelands/outstations, or force ‘voluntary’ mobility. NIRA articulates goals to incorporate those in remote locations into mainstream education and training and the market economy; and to promote personal responsibility and ‘engagement and behaviours consistent with positive social norms.’ The aim is to encourage residents of homelands/outstations to migrate up the settlement hierarchy, where to-be-delivered education and job opportunities exist for an imagined gaps-free future.

Most CDEP participants are being ‘transitioned’ from CDEP jobs—where they are paid wages and have the ability to work additional hours on community-managed projects and get paid ‘top-up’—to unemployment benefits or ‘sit down money’. This means that ‘sit down money’ is appearing in communities where it has never existed before. When a person is ‘transitioned’, or signs-up to, the new CDEP, paid by Centrelink, they are no longer required to fill out timesheets or be supervised, and Centrelink and Job Services Australia (JSA) pay them regardless. In communities this has created two classes of people. The first are those on old CDEP, involved in community-based development projects supervised by their CDEP organisation (usually a homeland/outstation resource agency), and are required to fill out time-sheets and not paid if no work is undertaken. The second are those on new CDEP who get paid by Centrelink whether they work or not—‘passive welfare’.

Under old CDEP, participants were signed-up and managed solely by their own community-managed CDEP organisation to undertake work. With this came certain community-managed services such as training, liaison with banks and state agencies, or income management to assist with the payment of school fees, rent, funerals and the like.
Under new CDEP, participants are required to be signed-up by three organisations; their CDEP organisation, Centrelink and JSA or its representative. This means triplicate paperwork and the requirement that participants attend monthly appointments with Centrelink or JSA, often some distance away from their home communities in regions with no or minimal transport networks. Those on new CDEP also have half of their income ‘quarantined’ as part of the Northern Territory Emergency Response introduced in 2007. The requirement to attend monthly meetings in towns along with the ability to access the new CDEP payment via ATM cards rather than through CDEP organisations in home communities has greatly increased the movement of people off their land. With this, some communities are reporting increases in drug and alcohol abuse, and the increased use of these substances as currency. CDEP reform, in marginalising long-established community-run income management schemes, has allowed for the emergence of loan sharks who, in some places, are leading money at interest rates as high as 30 per cent and driving people further into debt. There is no evidence that CDEP reform is bringing any benefits to homelands/outstations, but rather it is removing the incentive to work, undermining years of community-based development and employment projects and increasing the abuse of drugs and alcohol. All of this is working to widen rather than close gaps in Indigenous disadvantage.

PRIVATE INVESTMENT

Private investment, underpinned with community-based governance organisations, is beginning to play a greater role in the development of homelands/outstations. Aboriginal communities across central Australia for example, are using their own discretionary resources, such as payments arising from the use of Aboriginal land, for homeland/outstation infrastructure, development and service delivery.

The traditional landowners of Uluru Kata Tjuta National Park recently contributed approximately $620,000 to various projects on homelands/outstations, including an upgrade of the power supply at Ukaka and various road grading, fencing and water supply rectifications at Umbeara. In 2007-08, the Granite Mines Affected Area Committee spent over $170,000 on homelands/outstations within the Lajamanu region, for water supply and road grading projects. It has also invested substantial resources into Wulaign Resource Centre over the years. Additionally, much of the income derived from the Northern Territory railway development has been spent on basic infrastructure across the homelands/outstations in the Central Land Council region.

The large contribution made by traditional landowners to homeland/outstation infrastructure is driven by a lack of support by governments over the years, and because they remain critical to Aboriginal well-being.

CULTURAL AND NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

Over the past three decades over 20 per cent of the Australian land mass has been returned to Indigenous Australians as a result of successful land rights and native title claims and land acquisition programs. Many of the most intact and nationally important wetlands, riparian zones, forests, and rivers and waterways are located on these Indigenous lands.

Over the past two decades many Indigenous organisations in remote Australia, through CDEP employment, have been active in mitigating many of the adverse effects of biodiversity change and ecosystem degradation through the development of highly successful Caring for Country programs. Many areas on the Indigenous estate are threatened by invasive species (feral animals and exotic weeds). Invasive species,
along with wildfires, have the capacity to degrade entire ecosystems and impact on climate change. This is especially so in areas where Indigenous Australians have been removed from their lands or are unable to effectively manage them due to a lack of resources.

The economic costs of adverse patterns of environmental change, such as the loss of biodiversity and ecosystem degradation, are potentially enormous. It is estimated that the agricultural cost of weeds to Australia is in the vicinity of $4 billion in lost production per annum. The cost to nature conservation and landscape amenity is thought to be of similar magnitude. There is the potential of substantial costs to the tourism and agricultural industries through decreased production, biodiversity loss and degraded landscapes and waterways. Avoidance of environmental degradation is much less expensive than environmental repair, something that is very clear from scientific research and recent experience in the Murray-Darling Basin in south-east Australia.

The Australian Government’s Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs) and Working on Country (WoC) programs, which built on already established Indigenous Caring for Country programs, provide some resources to Indigenous Australians living in remote areas to manage these lands in the national interest. Indigenous Caring for Country programs are a clear example of development that, when properly remunerated and supported, can support Indigenous livelihoods and people living in homelands/outstations through small-scale, community-managed projects.

HEALTH AND WELLBEING

One of the principal indicators in the NIRA against which progress is to be measured in Closing the Gap in Indigenous disadvantage is the gap in life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

Over the last two decades homeland/outstation residents have participated in various health research projects. These have resulted in a growing body of evidence pointing to superior health outcomes for adults residing on homelands/outstations compared to those living in large Aboriginal townships. Reasons for these improved health outcomes may be attributed to various factors, including: a more favourable social environment, better family support and increased physical activity, a healthier diet, and lower rates of substance abuse.

If these health benefits of living on homelands/outstations are to be optimised, effective, local-level health services are required. This means targeted investment in comprehensive primary health care for homeland/outstation residents. The health benefits of Aboriginal people living in homelands/outstations could be augmented with innovative approaches to health service delivery, at a reasonable cost, given the need and potential benefit. There are examples of health services which have developed a tailored approach to service delivery, to support people to live on their homelands/outstations, for example Urapuntja Health Service at Utopia in central Australia. Funding for such arrangements is feasible, considering the COAG health investment of $1.57 billion.

One of the greatest obstacles to the delivery of a comprehensive primary health care system to people on country in homelands/outstations is the political will to support decentralisation, along with resistance from providers to support such a move. Currently, neither government policies on remote areas generally, nor Aboriginal health services specifically, are conducive to such innovative approaches. The uncertainty surrounding ongoing Commonwealth government support for remote communities has stalled State and Territory governments from providing the investment required to sustain these communities. In this way, despite the health risks, the drift from smaller communities becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.
A study recently released in November 2009 by the Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance Northern Territory (AMSANT), *Health and Homelands: Good Value for Money?*, authored by workshop participant Gavin Mooney, called for an immediate moratorium of funding cuts to homelands/outstations. The research found robust evidence on the positive benefits of homeland/outstation life on Aboriginal health. But moves by the Commonwealth and Northern Territory governments to shift money from homelands/outstations to central townships threaten to throw such health gains away. AMSANT found that both the Northern Territory and Commonwealth appear to be ignoring the positive evidence from homelands/outstations.14

**EDUCATION**

There is little longitudinal research to guide the development of evidence-based policy for homeland/outstation education. The data that do exist in State and Territory systems is extremely patchy, often not disaggregated from ‘hub-school’ data, and fails to account for disparities in the levels of funding and service provision to homeland/outstation schools.

Homeland/outstation residents report three main reasons why education outcomes in their communities have been relatively poor: inadequate funding; the education is not relevant to the lived reality of homeland/outstation communities; and low teacher retention rates.

Despite this, individual homeland/outstation communities continue to develop innovative mechanisms for learning on country. While this takes a variety of forms across remote Australia they share the common theme of community-controlled education. In some homelands/outstations residents have turned to independent schools to deliver community controlled education to their young people with reports of an increase in funding of over 320 times when this route is chosen.15 In others, homeland/outstation communities have focused on library knowledge centres/media centres or land and sea management programs as vehicles for providing education. In some places these centres have seen substantial engagement from young people.

**HOUSING AND INFRASTRUCTURE**

Historically, the Commonwealth has taken primary responsibility for homeland/outstation infrastructure and support. However, in 2007 the Commonwealth Government began to withdraw, handing-back responsibility for homelands/outstations to the Northern Territory Government under a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for Indigenous Housing, Accommodation and Related Services.16 The MOU maintains the moratorium that had existed under previous Commonwealth funding for housing on homelands/outstations. The MOU states that: ‘No Australian Government funding will be provided to construct housing on outstations/homelands’.17 There are no criteria of relative need or viability, just a blanket ban. This means that homelands/outstations are unable to build new houses to meet the needs of their growing populations. Under this policy, homelands/outstations will stagnate and cannot develop. Homelands/outstations that have historically played a significant role in reducing overcrowding, and in relieving the social tensions that are a feature of life in larger townships, are now themselves becoming overcrowded. This is adding to increased maintenance costs and social tensions which have rarely been a feature of homeland/outstation life in the past.

The freeze on investment in new housing at homelands/outstations and their growing populations along with the new government investment in housing in Aboriginal townships (‘hub-communities’, Territory Growth Towns) and CDEP reform will see a migration of people away from homelands/outstations to the townships. Government investment in townships at the expense of homelands/outstations ignores the body of evidence that points to better health outcomes, livelihood options, social cohesion and (until now) housing conditions found in homelands/outstations.
CONCLUSION

The Prime Minister’s rhetorical commitment to evidence-based policy development does not appear to extend to the most isolated and powerless section of Australian society—the residents of homelands/outstations. Indeed Government appears to be acting counter to available evidence—scant as it may be—and so both jeopardises opportunities to Close the Gap and increases the risk that gaps will actually increase. This is because the growing body of research that life at homelands/outstations is better, in health outcomes, livelihood options, social cohesion, and housing conditions, than at larger townships, is being ignored. The state’s march to move Aboriginal people up the settlement hierarchy to an imagined future of full participation in the mainstream market economy is very likely to lead to a widening rather than a closing of the gaps in Indigenous disadvantage.

NOTES

1. While the term outstation has widespread currency, many Indigenous groups prefer the term homeland. This is because of the view amongst many Aboriginal groups that they moved back to their lands, or as close as possible to places, where they hold primary spiritual responsibility. They have returned home. The term outstation can suggest a population or group physically and socially on the periphery.


APPENDIX 1: COMMUNIQUÉ TO THE PRIME MINISTER ON HOMELANDS/OUTSTATIONS

Over the last two days the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia (ASSA) and the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) have hosted a forum on homelands/outstations and similar small remote Aboriginal communities across Australia. This national forum brought together experts from peak Aboriginal organisations and homeland resource agencies, along with leading social scientists, education and medical researchers.

ASSA and CAEPR undertook this task in response to policy currently being implemented by government which:

- Is not informed by available evidence from research
- Is not based on the aspirations of residents of homelands/outstations
- Will not deliver substantive equality
- Has the potential to widen the gap in life expectancy
- Is not consistent with Australia’s international obligations.

The forum calls on you to:

- Recognise the cultural, environmental and strategic importance of nearly 1,000 homelands/outstations located on the Aboriginal estate including along the northern coastline
- Recognise the unique significance of homelands/outstations for Aboriginal livelihoods, health, education and well-being and in the provision of environmental services
- Recognise the importance of homelands/outstations for linguistic diversity and Indigenous Knowledge
- Call a moratorium on COAG and other government processes, like the reform of CDEP, that are undermining the positive contributions made by homelands/outstations to Closing the Gap
- Assess the compatibility of current policy on homelands/outstations with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples which your government endorsed earlier this year
- Refer the issue of homelands/outstations to a parliamentary inquiry such as the Senate Select Committee on Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities.