



The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council

NATSICC welcomes the release of the Dropping off the edge report produced by Catholic Social Services. The report statistically ranks Australian communities on a state and territory basis in order of apparent disadvantage.

Average middle class Australians would be surprised to know learn that 3% of communities are living in distinct disadvantage when ranked on certain factors including incarceration, education, unemployment and more. These communities are in their neighbourhoods, local council areas and perhaps school zones.

Unfortunately, what will be of little surprise is the over representation of Aboriginal communities ranked highly in the report. South Australia's Anangu Pitjantjatjara community is the unfortunate loser in the rankings leading the way in unemployment, education, incarceration, young adult engagement in education or work and juvenile convictions. The result epitomises the situations that first Australian's endure on a day to day basis. Sadly, here are Aboriginal communities that mirror these findings all over Australia.

As Australians, there is a need to look past the paper that these statistics are written on and try to understand how these damning findings translate to everyday lives. Imagine trying to raise a family where there is little hope for jobs, culturally engaging education, or even having a complete family around the table at dinnertime due to incarceration levels.

NATSICC asks why, in this day and age and after millions upon millions of dollars spent is this still the case? The council believes that not utilising the principle of subsidiarity when dealing with Aboriginal communities harbours most of the blame. It is a cornerstone Catholic Social Justice Principle that calls for the lowest, closest and least centralized authority be empowered to make decisions and in this case, deliver projects.

Subsidiarity believes that as social beings, people form groups on local levels that act as mediating and representative bodies that can make informed decisions and, as an offshoot, create links within a community. Catholic Social Services have concluded that the formation of links within communities leads directly to decreasing disadvantage. The statistics show that people of high disadvantage that are living in areas that are higher on the socio economic scale show less symptoms described as indicators. The reasoning tends to be access to better facilities, stronger community links and organisations and an underlying sense of community as a results of better facilities.

Another facet of Subsidiarity is that it bases itself on the autonomy and dignity of the human being and looks to empower individuals to raise above their current situations and exceed their pre assumed capacity. Programs based in a centralised structure inherently lack the trust and knowledge of local people because they tend to work 'for' rather than 'with' local people.

As shown above, there is no more relevant environment to employ the principle of subsidiarity than in remote Aboriginal Communities. There is a latent local workforce ready to serve their people, and a knowledgebase of culture and the old ways that worked for thousands of years. Obviously local people and communities will need help – they cannot do it alone and this is where the principle of Reconciliation comes in. Black and white, young and old, new ways and old ways need to come

together and thrive on the strong sense of reciprocity that Aboriginal people have deeply entrenched within themselves and their culture. Something given should always be repaid in some way. In this case it will be trust, sharing of the rich gifts of culture and knowledge of the land and respect for infrastructure that was helped built (both physically and in planning) by Aboriginal people.

A funding system that works in concert with the application of Subsidiary Governance will also be required. The current funding system experiences duplication of services and employs a complex application and acquittal process which can lead to Aboriginal organisations missing out of funding due to English being a second language in many communities. Those that manage to receive funding can end up labelled with misappropriation of funds allegations because their expertise lays in being able to work with local people, not accounting. This is where Aboriginal people need help – make it clear how funds can be used and have a presence on the ground level that works with organisations to ensure that correct allocations are being made throughout the program delivery process. This will mean that adjustments and improvements can be made during the lifecycle of the project and not at the end when meaningful changes cannot be made.

The concept of a project lifecycle also needs to come under scrutiny. NATSICC feels the standard 3 year finding terms have, on the whole been ineffectual in eliminating long term disadvantage. In our experience, we place string emphasis on consultation and as a result this phase can take some time. If it takes a year to consult with the community, you then have two years to digest the findings and develop a strategy to deliver the project. Add to this the rigorous acquittal requirements – how much time do you have to actually deliver the project? Add to this the insecurity of 3 year terms for staff (which often cannot be funded under current arrangements), you can see why many projects fail.

NATSICC would like to see a funding arrangement that fosters the growth of organisations that are formed to address specific needs in specific communities. Consistent long term funding will result in small, grass root level organisations that are nimble enough to change to emerging community needs and that employ good people as well as rewarding those same people with stability and self esteem.

Again, NATSICC would like to extend our gratitude to Catholic Social Services and Jesuit Social Services for commissioning the report. The dropping off the edge report again highlights the disparity in Australia and is an excellent vehicle to drive further conversations on how to bridge this gap. The lack of reasoning behind the figures shows an unbiased method in assessing data and now puts the onus on us, as a rich, contemporary western society to fix what has gone on for too long.

The full report and interactive report are available at <http://www.dote.org.au/>

