Northern Territory Council of Social Service Inc.
'Growing the NT fairly'

NTCOSS Submission to the Northern Territory Government, Strong society, Confident Culture Strategy

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Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the Strong Society, Confident Culture Strategy and Social Participation Framework. NTCOSS has welcomed the Strategy and looks forward to continued involvement in any further development and implementation.

NTCOSS would like to emphasize the important role the Chief Minister must play in leading a whole of government and community approach to improving social outcomes for those who are most disadvantaged. The Chief Minister must sponsor strategies to break down policy silos and get government agencies working together to alleviate social exclusion for all.

The *draft strategy introduction "Why Does this Matter' uses the language 'disconnection of individuals or groups .and connected communities'.* In previous submissions, we have highlighted the idea of 'social exclusion' as a useful focus for highlighting and prioritising the areas of social policy that need development. We believe this terminology acknowledges more clearly the reasons and impacts of individuals and groups not being 'included'.

Why does this matter?

The "why does this matter" section of the document refers to our multicultural society in the NT. It neglects to identify how this multicultural society will be reflected at all levels of our society, through our political leaders and elected representatives.

The Value of Social Inclusion Impact Statements

NTCOSS is concerned at the potential for social justice considerations to become marginalised in the development of new policy. It is crucial that the principles of social inclusion be honoured in policy initiatives designed within the portfolios of economic development, telecommunications, and mineral exploration. The philosophy of social inclusion requires a whole-of-government and NGO approach to ensure that the idea is not simply consigned to the traditional silos of health, education and housing. To ensure that the notion of social inclusion is not submerged beneath the weight of other policy considerations, NTCOSS strongly recommends that the government adopt a system of Social Inclusion Impact Statements (SIIS) or Poverty Impact Statements.

'Poverty Impact Statements' are a key feature of the Irish Social Inclusion Strategy. They require government agencies and local authorities to assess policies and programs at the design, implementation and review stages. The process is designed to assess the likely impact that new policies and programs will have on poverty, and on inequalities which are likely to lead to poverty. The Department of Health and Human Services in Tasmania has identified the importance of Social Impact Statements in "providing the framework within which predications can be made regarding the potential positive and negative impacts of a proposal while it is at the planning stage" so that desired outcomes can be maximised and the costs or losses to communities minimised.

NTCOSS believes that it is crucial for the government to develop a strategy which will see the benefits from future economic development flow through to those who experience the greatest level of disadvantage. Waiting for a 'trickle-down effect' is not sufficient, and that the needs of those people who are socially excluded must be expressly built into the planning process. It would require the need to address place – based disadvantage and a commitment to work with the community to develop real strategies and opportunities for economic and social participation. There will also be a requirement to commit to promoting access, equity, participation and rights of all people to build social inclusion and positive social capital. The statement of intent and overall strategy would be more meaningful and useful if it recognised the concentrated, complex and entrenched disadvantage experienced by a number of locations in the NT (according to the Dropping off the Edge 2015, just four Statistical Local Areas in the NT account for 47% of the most disadvantaged rank positions) and the necessity for local solutions that are 'targeted, tailored and agile.[1]

There seems to be a theme of placing emphasis on individual responsibility in building connected communities and there are some interesting references to not being 'passive recipients' etc. As argued above, it is the services that promote access etc. that build social inclusion and cohesive communities. It is not the responsibility of individuals alone and indeed, individuals alone cannot tackle entrenched disadvantage. There needs to be long term commitment across the government, community and business sectors to resolve the complex issues of place-based disadvantage.

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[1] Dropping off the Edge 2015, identifies areas of disadvantage in every state and territory of Australia and uncovers the web of factors that must be solved for these communities, and our nation, to thrive. http://www.dote.org.au

How do we achieve a Strong Society and Confident Culture?

In this section reference is made to partnerships and Co-design (page 9). The aim to strengthen partnerships between government departments and agencies is welcomed. However no reference is being made to the role of peak bodies representing the social and community services sector in the NT. Peak bodies, while at times an uneasy voice for governments and their departments, play a significant role in aiming to develop a strong and representative voice for the sector they represent. This voice encapsulates various aspects, all contributing to policy development and implementation, which is vital for a strong and well functioning society. The figure on page 7 needs to reflect the partnership, collaboration, consultation and advocacy aspects in the how section. It could read "policy development and Implementation via partnerships, consultation, collaboration and advocacy" instead. The figure as it is does not depict a partnership approach but rather provides the impression of a silo system. As an overarching strategy, we understand it is not always possible to include every sector or issue. However we wish to highlight some gaps in the current strategy:

Community

As mentioned above the language needs to reflect the aim of this framework and hence the wording on page 11 could be modified to capture this more appropriately e.g. page 11 …"the NTG is committed to providing a strong leadership"- it could be identified more clearly what is meant by the wording "strong leadership" or alternatively replace it with *"inclusive"*.

Again reference could be made to peak bodies on this page.

Diversity

Indigenous leadership programs are being referred to on page 12, such as Lookrukin and Kigaruk, which is a positive initiative to build capacity for Aboriginal public servants. This initiative appears to be successful in providing a program for an increasing number of participants. However it is unclear whether these programs are only accessible for public servants or whether avenues could be opened up to employees in the NGO sector and be provided in central Australia.

Children and Families

We note that the key strategies do not include any strategies which focus on early intervention or prevention. It makes good economic sense to ensure that families are supported so that their children do not end up in the child protection system. It needs to be mentioned that the link between the high number of child neglect and poverty can not be overlooked. It makes good economic sense to provide services to young people who are at risk of entering the juvenile justice system or becoming homeless – as these support services usually cost far less than the alternative of detention. It makes good economic sense to ensure that individuals with mental health issues or disabilities and their families are supported with quality day programs and supported accommodation options as family breakdown or poor health outcomes will cost our community more in increased hospital stays or inability to maintain employment. The strengthening of already existing place based services in the NT, which have proven to be effective, is seen as a vital component to achieve environments which support families and children.

Furthermore, these approaches need to be inclusive of any national strategies which provide an overarching framework. Approaches should have a strong focus on early intervention and prevention (as well as measures to better support children in care). The delivery of preventative and supportive child and family service delivery, particularly in remote communities, has been very limited, fractured, and without any community involvement in the design and delivery of services provided. The result is that many children and families do not have access to appropriate services. NTCOSS stresses that the lack of resourcing should not be a reason for leaving or placing children in harmful situations. Ultimately, all players have responsibility for the current 'systems neglect' and 'societal abuse' of children. The 'systems neglect' needs to stop and this can only be done if all stakeholders work in partnership, and are adequately resourced and informed. This includes a well resourced 'out of home care' system inclusive of a kinship system that provides continuity of relationships and high quality care.

The section on children and families appears to be focussing on Child protection and out of home care system. Yet, our community is made up of children and families and this section needs to provide strategies of universal service delivery, which in turn will strengthen the capacity of families to cope well. A well established and resourced continuum of service delivery is vital for all families and children in the NT. International research supports a system, that provides services for all families, rather than just a welfare oriented, targeted program of provision which particularly services the disadvantaged. Universal service delivery promotes social inclusion and ameliorates social and economic inequality.

The existence of child friendly spaces, is equally important for children and families to feel and be part of a safe community. This would need to include places which children and

families can access for recreational activities and play, such as play grounds with safe play equipment. Child specific playgrounds are important for early childhood development as well as provide a social meeting space. Especially Town camp residents and remote communities, who have limited access to transport, would greatly benefit from a shared child friendly environment. Furthermore, child friendly spaces includes the provision of safe walking and cycling paths, which would enable children and young people to be mobile safely on their own. An investment in this area would greatly contribute to Territory children growing up in a happy, healthy and safe environment.

The section furthermore refers to the amendment of the Care and Protection of Children Act. It is envisaged that the principles of partnership, consultation and collaboration with the child and family sector will be respected and included when this process is undertaken. If child protection is everyone's responsibility key stakeholders need to be taken along on the journey of legislative changes in this area.

The Northern Territory is one of the few jurisdictions which, does not as yet have an Aboriginal community controlled child and family services system. This is surprising considering the high number of Aboriginal children, young people and families involved with the Child Protection and youth justice system. The learnings from other jurisdictions are, that there are long term benefits for the children, young people, families and ultimately the community if an Aboriginal Community controlled Child and family services system exists.

As well as recognising the links to the NT Domestic and Family Violence Strategy, the links to other strategies such as mental health and youth justice should also be included. Reference and acknowledgement also needs to be made to the third action plan of the National Framework for Protecting Australia's children when addressing Child Protection issues.

Finally it appears that the strategy is focussed on out of home care and overhauling the foster care system in the NT, rather than increasing support for families. It is argued that the state (NTG) has a role to support families and it is grossly unjust to expect families to compensate for their disadvantage.

Housing

As the NT has the highest rate of homelessness in Australia, the strategy should implicitly name homelessness as a key priority area and the strategies required.

Economic Security

Cost of living in the NT has a significant impact on those who are most disadvantaged. We suggest including an additional strategy such as 'Review concession schemes on a regular basis to determine if the concessions are meeting the aims for which they were established and establish a consistent approach across all concessions in terms of reviews and indexation methods.' Any such review would identify also whether all those who are eligible are accessing concessions.

NTCOSS has referred to the cost of living for Territorians in the Cost of Living Reports and identified its impact and pressure on vulnerable and disadvantaged Territorians in relation to housing, transport and food costs.

Specifically the report on Food costs identified how challenging it is for residents in remote areas on low incomes to live a healthy and secure life. The report stated:

"households who depend on remote stores for their shopping are spending more than one third of their income on food and are paying nearly 50% more on food than households who shop at Darwin supermarkets. In addition, prices in remote stores have risen at a greater rate (53%) than process in district centre stores (44%) since 2000." [2]

One of the subsequent recommendations was to commence a process for the development of a forum for addressing food pricing in the NT, to establish engagement between community, industry, research bodies and government to address price disparities between major supermarkets and remote corner stores. NTCOSS would support this process should it be considered.

The key strategies outlined in this section appear to be neglecting remote areas and how cost of living, distance related costs (e.g. fumigation) and lack of permanent employment can be addressed to achieve economic security and reduce the detrimental impact on the health ,mental health and wellbeing of people living in remote areas.

This section refers to the investment in a number of areas such as schools, medical facilities, sporting venues, recreation precincts. NTCOSS would like to highlight the importance of considering gender equity when investing in sporting facilities, activities and venues across the NT. The areas of cultural activities, art, and craft are equally important and need ongoing investment.

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[2]Northern Territory Council of Social Service (NTCOSS) Cost of Living Report: Tracking changes in the cost of living, particularly for vulnerable and disadvantaged Northern Territorians: The Cost of Food in the Territory, Issue No 6November 2014

The key strategies in this section refer to an "open for business" culture and appears to be mainly referring to our Asian neighbours. It is unclear how this will be implemented in terms of job generation especially in remote areas. Work opportunities need to provide community value and long term work opportunities rather then casualization of work, as appears to be happening. Short term and casual job creation does not provide economic security especially in remote areas. The framework neglects to address this in more detail.

Investment in training and education organisations is commendable especially when strengthening the Aboriginal training organisations in the NT. Training and education packages need to be inclusive of literacy and numeracy content in order to develop skills in meaningful employment.

Finally NTCOSS would like to see reference made that any investment in areas of economic development needs to have healthy outcomes for Territorians in the long-run. This should also include a commitment to ensuring environmental values are fully protected and investments are progressed with a culture of care.

Education

Education plays a significant role in children and families being able to move out of poverty. As identified in other papers there is a strong link between poor school attendance and factors leading to disadvantage such as homelessness, sub standard housing, poor nutrition, alcohol and child protection matters. NTCOSS believes that the framework needs to consider these other factors when looking at access to quality education and training.

NTCOSS would like to highlight some gaps, which are not clearly referred to in the education section:

- The need for greater investment in the identification and assessments and support systems for children with special needs throughout early childhood and secondary school years e.g hearing loss, Autism, FASD.
- The provision of remote pre-school programs (at recommended level), after school recreation programs, and permanent local school staff and principals.
- The lack of secondary education options in remote areas is not meeting the NTGs aim to provide access to education and raises concerns about equity and human rights.
- The provision of ESL for young people and adults of CALD background and remote communities needs to be considered.
- The framework refers to improving attendance but it needs to be mentioned that attendance itself is not a measure of successful educational outcomes

Health

A critical and recurring issue in the delivery of health care services is the aspect of cultural safety. Therefore the inclusion of cultural safety in the draft paper is recommended especially in light of the high number of Aboriginal patients utilising health services. The paper neglects to identify how outcomes will be evaluated and assessed e.g. effectiveness of the engagement of patients in the health care system in the NT.

The Northern Territory experiences significant harm from alcohol, tobacco and other drug use for individuals, families and the broader community. Treatment and interventions for alcohol and drug issues cannot be divorced from the structural and social determinants of health. It is recognised that unemployment, taxation, urban development, education and other government policies all impact on the social and physical environment which have direct relationship with the uptake of drugs.

Risk factors for alcohol and drug use as follows:

- Individual: social skills, difficulty with emotional self-regulation, mental health;
- Family: parental family management techniques, quality of relationships, conflict management techniques;
- Peer: rejection from pro-social peers, association with anti-social peers;
- Local environment: community disadvantage; and
- Macro-environmental factors: socio-economic status and inequality.

The harms of tobacco are well documented and there have been successful public health interventions to reduce tobacco use. Smoking prevalence in the NT population has remained consistently higher than in the Australian population as a whole. An age adjusted comparison of smoking prevalence identifies the proportion of NT Aboriginal (50.3%) and non-Aboriginal (23.6%) adults who smokes remain well above the proportion of Australian adults who smoke (18.2%)[3]. Since the early 1980s, there has been a general decline in smoking prevalence in Australia. In the NT, there has been a general fall in smoking prevalence in the non-Aboriginal population, particularly among females. Among NT Aboriginal males, there is little evidence for a decline in smoking prevalence with prevalence remaining above 60% (NT Health Department, 2015) [4].

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[3] Australian Bureau of Statistics (2003). Drug Induced Deaths, Australia, 1991-¬‐ 2001.
http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/3321.0.55.001

[4] Northern Territory Department of Health (2015). Alcohol and other drugs strategic plan 2015-2018 (DRAFT). Northern Territory Government.

Much has been researched and written about the harms and costs of alcohol use. Alcohol use has been found to have devastating effects on health, welfare and wellbeing of Territorians in rural, remote and urban communities for a long time. The South Australian Centre for Economic Studies & Menzies School of Health Research (2009) showed that the cost per person of alcohol-related harm in the Territory was more than four times the national level. The total social costs of alcohol consumption in the NT in 2004-05 were estimated at $641.8 million. In Australia chronic disease and injury related to alcohol is the cause of death for about 5, 500 people each year (2009) [5].

The evidence shows that alcohol issues are experienced by a range of Territorians and demonstrates that excessive alcohol consumption is significantly related to an assortment of harms such as domestic violence, sexual assault, driving whilst under the influence, foetal alcohol syndrome, family breakdowns, anti social behaviour and a range of property crimes. These harms are noticeable for individuals, families, the community and society as a whole.

Steps required to address alcohol and other drug use should be underpinned by Key findings from the 2013 National Drug Strategy Household Survey (NDSHS) identified that the number of people participating in illicit drug use in Australia has remained relatively stable over the past decade at around 1 in 7. In 2013 about 8 million people (42%), aged 14 and over, in Australia indicated they had ever illicitly used drugs, including misuse of pharmaceuticals[6].

Harm Minimisation. This approach encompasses within three pillars; demand reduction, harm reduction and supply reduction. Demand reduction approaches seek to prevent the uptake and/or delay the onset of the use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs; reduce the misuse of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs in the community; and support people to recover from dependence and reintegrate with the community. Harm reduction seeks to reduce the adverse health, social and economic consequences of the use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. The aim of supply reduction is to prevent, stop, disrupt or otherwise reduce the supply of illegal drugs; and to control, manage and/or regulate the availability of legal drugs.

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[5] South Australian Centre for Economic Studies & Menzies School of Health Research (2009). Harms from and costs of alcohol consumption in the Northern Territory: final report. South Australian Centre for Economic Studies, Adelaide.

[6] Australian Government, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, (2014). National Drugs Strategy Household Surveys (NDSHS) http://www.aihw.gov.au/alcohol-¬ ‐ and-¬ ‐ other-¬ ‐ drugs/ndshs/

Strategies include:

- A coordinated whole of government approach to alcohol, other drugs, mental health and other health issues.
- Investment in housing, employment and education.
- Evidence informed public policy.
- A strong emphasis on the provision and development of prevention programs that enhance resilience and community capacity rather than waiting for the problematic and more costly social outcomes such as drug use.
- Improved links between research and practice, particularly in prevention and early intervention programmes.
- Development of cross sector collaboration with the acknowledgment of it being a long-term approach and therefore best being bipartisan.

It is noted that the Plan does not make mention of gambling. It may be useful to develop a Public Health view to gambling issues in the Northern Territory. The existence of gambling and its related problems arise from a complex interaction between the:

- Games people play such as diversity, type and speed of play; degree of skill vs. chance; cost and accessibility.
- Individuals - factors within the person that increase or decrease individual desire to gamble.
- Socio-political, environmental or systemic factors - factors and parties within our society and economic system that encourage and discourage responsible gambling.

The negative impact and social and health harm of problem gambling is a concerning social and health problem across Australia. The implementation and delivery of a coordinated evidence-based approach works to address consequences of problem gambling for families, individuals and communities.

A framework for problem gambling could focus on:

- Intervention, counselling and support services to enhance problem gambling support and treatment services that are effective, accessible and culturally appropriate
- Responsible gambling environments to minimise the likelihood of recreational gamblers developing problem gambling behaviours;
- Public awareness, education and training – to promote a greater understanding of the nature of the gambling product, the potential for harm and the availability of help and support; and
- Research and data collection to inform the implementation and further development of the framework and its' strategies.

Community Safety

This section of the framework appears to mainly focus on government emergency departments, victims of crime and youth justice. Community safety can be seen as broader. The infrastructure concerning the walking and cycling tracks for example, as mentioned in the section under children and families. The provision of lights is a key aspect for community safety especially for women in public spaces, on walking and cycling tracks and town camps.

Reference is made to reform targeted justice legislation and justice administration procedures, but it is unclear how these targeted areas were identified and who will participate in the process.

The section furthermore refers to the development and implementation of the Youth Justice strategy. The principles that have been adopted by the Youth Justice framework are recognized however there are additional principles seen as critical. These include the importance of restorative justice principles, processes and practice. A therapeutic approach that responds to the needs of vulnerable children, particularly those in the state care system who come into contact with the justice system is important. A recognition and understanding of the particular needs of Aboriginal children and young people who are overrepresented in the youth justice system, a fact that is linked to extreme disadvantage experienced in the critical areas of health, education, employment and housing. Finally, the strategy does not include any commitment to early intervention and prevention, rather it focuses on rehabilitation and safeguards and support for victims and witnesses. NTCOSS recommends including plans for early intervention and prevention initiatives and welcomes the focus on remote community based initiatives.

Lifestyle

As mentioned previously any investment in the lifestyle choices should consider gender equity across the NT.

Finally, it is recommended that craft activities are consistently included in the key strategies rather then just arts and cultural activities.

References

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Dropping off the Edge 2015, identifies areas of disadvantage in every state and territory of Australia and uncovers the web of factors that must be solved for these communities, and our nation, to thrive viewed 2/10/2015 http://www.dote.org.au

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