

NT hubs are welcome, but what about all other settlements?

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The Northern Territory (NT) Government's new policy for remote Aboriginal communities is a progressive and positive step towards improved opportunity in these locations.

The NT's 'A Working Future' brings the territory into line with the Commonwealth Government's policy of concentrating investment into a small number of hub 'growth towns'. What is questionable, however, is the ability of the towns to adequately service other settlements, through a 'hub and spokes' model.

The proposed changes to the 'hubs' – the 20 priority towns – include secure leasehold and tax incentives for private sector investment, proper town planning and targeted infrastructure investment, and employment and economic development opportunities. The benchmark is the provision of the same facilities and services you would expect in any Australian town of a similar size, including schools, police stations, courts, health services, aged care and disability facilities, the Internet, good transport options and recreational facilities.

This policy initiative is being positioned as a concentrated effort to overcome disadvantage in these priority towns, in comparison to making unsustainable, scattergun investments into remote outstations or homelands.

What is absent in this policy is the 110 settlements that are neither hub towns nor outstations, including sizeable and long established settlements, the likes of Mutitjulu, Kintore, Ampilatwatja, Alpurrurulam, Finke, Willowra and Santa Teresa, all of which are also sites of the Northern Territory Emergency Response. If they too are to receive increased and concentrated investment in the long term in the next tranche of priority communities, how long can they expect to wait and what will be the unintended consequences of this policy lag? If distances mitigate against people commuting for services, then is the intent for people to relocate to the 'growth towns' or other towns across the NT, like Alice Springs and Tennant Creek?

There is no evidence to suggest that the relocation of people to larger towns results in improved employment and health outcomes for them. The barriers to recruitment of Aboriginal people are more related to human development than location.

There is a limited pool of funds and these are being earmarked for the 20 towns. Many of the 'smaller' settlements have populations of the order of 500 people, similar in size to many Victorian country towns. These small Indigenous settlements of the NT also need assistance to face a range of social and economic problems. World Vision is working in some of them, including Willowra and Epenarra, and we can attest to them receiving a palpable lack of funding over the past 12 months.

The 'growth towns' are to be complemented with a remote transport strategy, for people to travel to them. While this will possibly be an option for outstations in the locale of one of the towns, it is not feasible for many of the 110 settlements. The settlement of Docker River, for example, is more than 600 kilometres from Alice Springs, and more than 700 kilometres from the nearest proposed growth town of Hermannsburg. Yuendumu is the closest 'growth town' to Willowra, but it is still a two hour drive. In the Top End, roads can be cut for months during the wet season. Whatever the benefits that will accrue to the 20 towns, the flow-on to the smaller 110 settlements will be limited.

“It is in the national interest to maintain population and infrastructure in remote areas”

There are sound social and economic reasons for supporting small settlements, and these should be a factor in government consideration of the costs and benefits of remote service provision. It is in the national interest to maintain population and infrastructure in remote areas, and remote Indigenous life delivers numerous public benefits, such as environmental management of the vast Indigenous estate, and maintenance of language, culture and country, and the industries this serves, including tourism and art.

Either the Commonwealth and NT Government have longer term plans to support these smaller settlements, or they are going to let them quietly wither. The people living in them ought to know.

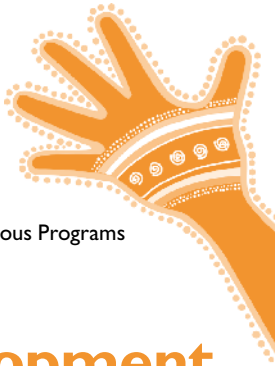
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Linking Hands

NEWSLETTER

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World Vision



Warlpiri Early Childhood care and development

For the period 2001-2005, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infant and child mortality rates in remote Australia combined were almost three times that of non-Indigenous infants and children. Unlike many Australian children, the children that are born into Aboriginal communities do not have the opportunities to be involved in early childhood programs that could assist in their development. Sometimes the programs are simply not available, or are culturally inappropriate. Through your support of Linking Hands, this is starting to change, one community at a time.



Early childhood programs are helping to strengthen the Warlpiri community.

The sandy deserts of Northern Australia are home for some 5,000-6,000 Warlpiri people, who talk about their land with pride and a deep sense of knowing. The Warlpiri are best known for their vibrant dances and their language – Warlpiri is one of over two hundred Aboriginal languages in Australia. Despite the constant struggle against chronic disease and social dislocation, the Warlpiri are working together with World Vision to help make their community stronger and more resilient. Early Childhood Development was identified as a key need for the Warlpiri Education and Training Trust in the Northern Territory.

Through your support, and in partnership with the Central Land Council and the Warlpiri Education and Training Trust, World Vision has established the Warlpiri Early Childhood Care and Development project. The project commenced 12 months ago. Aimed at children and mothers, the primary goal is to create an environment where children can be healthy, learn through play and be cared for in a safe

environment. By helping to strengthen the family unit, the community as a whole is also strengthened.

There are four communities involved in the project of the last 12 months. These include the Willowra, Yuendumu, Nyirripi and Lajamanu communities.

Locations for the early learning centres have been agreed on and equipment has been purchased in three of the four communities. The largest changes have been witnessed in the Willowra community, where fathers are starting to attend centres with the children, and three young women have signed up to work there. There are a core group of families that now regularly participate in the centres.

The early childhood workers at Yuendumu and Willowra are enrolling in a Certificate III in Children's Services, providing opportunities for their future career paths. World Vision continues to work with the community to help set up the project.

The project has only run one year. While there's still much to do, the early signs of success are there. Through your support, the opportunities for Aboriginal children, their families and communities will continue to be provided.

