

Submission to the Inquiry into Local Decision Making by the Public Accounts Committee

Foreword

Australian Red Cross welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to the Public Accounts Committee, in response to the Inquiry into Local Decision Making in the Northern Territory.

It is a long-held position of Red Cross that reconciliation between First Nations people and other Australians is an ongoing and necessary effort in restoring the power, dignity, and wellbeing of First Nations People across Australia. Local Decision Making, and the transferring of sector authority and leadership to strong Aboriginal organisations, is consistent with Red Cross positions.

Aboriginal people within Red Cross have guided and developed our organisational expertise in working alongside Aboriginal communities, and our commitment to working with these communities, enables us to provide a humanitarian perspective on Local Decision Making as outlined in this submission.

Red Cross would like to thank the Northern Territory Government for the opportunity to make a submission into this inquiry. If you would like to discuss any of the points mentioned within this document, we would welcome the opportunity to discuss further.



Poppy Brown
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Introduction

Red Cross is part of the largest global humanitarian network, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, whose work is driven by our seven Fundamental Principles, and ways of working. In the Northern Territory, Red Cross has a commitment to 'walking alongside' Aboriginal people and their organisations, supporting the localisation of decision making and action.

Like many other non-Indigenous organisations, Australian Red Cross is both a partner and a learner in this space; taking conscious and active steps to adjust, improve and strengthen our practice to best support the Aboriginal communities with whom we work. In this process, we are indebted to Red Cross First Nations' staff, members, volunteers, clients, partners, Board Members, and our National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership Team.

We aspire to walk alongside First Nations peoples and to stand together with them in their calls for systemic change. We do not purport to speak for First Nations people, but to add our perspective as an Australian humanitarian organisation that exists to address the needs of the most vulnerable. The Uluru Statement guides us, and all Australians, on the path forward as determined by First Nations peoples themselves.

Australian Red Cross wholeheartedly supports the voices of First Nation peoples in being heard and respected as they determine their future, and supports the recognition and localisation of pre-existing and emerging decision making structures and action. Further, we recognise that the challenge is often in the authentic and effective community-driven implementation. Local Decision Making (LDM) is a legitimate and positive step forward, but must be governed in a collaborative way; listening to a wide range of people, their ideas and their aspirations. It requires dominant systems and institutions to adapt and change their way of doing business to follow the guidelines and protocols of different place-based decision-making bodies. A flexible, principles-based framework is necessary to ensure that each LDM agreement is implemented in a way that is relevant for the community, through and engaging in the diversity of pre-existing leadership structures within communities.

The timing is right for LDM; organisations and government are both committed to the empowerment of Aboriginal communities, organisations, and individuals, and so the potential is great for genuine community-led collaboration and consultation, which leads to positive and lasting change.

Learnings from an example of good LDM in practice

The Tiwi Islands Skin Group is an example of effective, functional LDM group in practice. Below is what Red Cross has learned from our work and presence in this community, and how operating within the local context and with pre-existing structures has a positive impact on the community, its organisations, and individuals.

- One community, several bodies.

Communities are formed by several bodies which have leadership, authority, and responsibilities across different facets of the local region. Whilst having no prescribed structure across different communities, each community relies on the knowledge, expertise and wisdom of different groups and individuals to conduct business in a way that is best for the community, through communication, consultation, and collaboration.

In the Tiwi Islands example, there are several different forums, depending on the matter, that government should be communicating with. For example, to discuss council business, talk to the Regional Council; land business, talk to the Land Council, and for social change issues or service development, the Skin Group is the correct forum. Tiwi Skin Group is the traditional way that Tiwi people have governed their lives prior to the introduction of western governance systems. Skin Group is unlike any other existing "for purpose" board in Tiwi Islands because its roots are firmly in Tiwi culture and functions with genuine representation across all family and skin groups on the Islands. The agenda is set by Tiwi people and the meeting is facilitated in language via loudspeaker wherever community members are congregating.

Engaging in these structures is essential to build a Local Decision-Making system that is representative, effective, and supported throughout communities. Therefore, it is the responsibility of those outside to engage with these structures, and not subvert, avoid, or attempt to manage them. This is a reality for working in different Aboriginal communities. Finding the 'right mob' is critical to the success of this project. Without this, a nominated Local Decision-Making body may not represent the community, in the truest sense of the word. The loudest voice is not always the most representative

voice, and the most representative voice must be identified and established if true change, and effective and sustainable decision making is to be had.

- Communities *and* services are empowered.

The goal of service delivery is to provide meaningful support to community which improves the quality of life for individuals and families. In order to establish beneficial and effective services, community members need to be active participants in both the development *and* delivery of services.

If effective consultation with community is conducted, the communities are empowered through receiving services, and the services are empowered through having the tools, knowledge, and support to deliver strong, effective services. The services essentially receive a 'social license' to set up within the community, and subsequently receive good advice on delivering and improving the practice. Communities are serviced with an approach and timing that best suits the individuals, and both the services and community can thrive.

Recommendation 1 - Local context is acknowledged, recognised, and respected before forming LDM agreements.

Community development is a process that takes time, and process is as important as outcome. This includes acknowledging local time frames, spending time to develop an understanding of the context and ensuring that permissions are sought from the right people. Doing this to develop a deep understanding of the community and talking to a range of community members on their area of authority not just those most easily accessible or vocal. An LDM agreement with the best-placed body, or bodies, is critical. There may not be one singular body which is representative of the community, and thus alternative approaches may need to be developed. Prioritising true representation of the community is essential to ensure the issues being addressed are important, as identified by the community, and solutions are community-designed.

- Communities have answers.

It is essential to acknowledge that First Nations people possess the knowledge, understanding and wisdom to make decisions for themselves, to identify their own struggles, and develop culturally appropriate solutions.

When external bodies make decisions *for* communities, the resulting solutions can lack effectiveness; issues may be addressed that are not important to community, or solutions may not be culturally or otherwise appropriate or sustainable. Initiatives come undone through lack of community participation, ineffective work processes that potentially cause more harm than good to the community's wellbeing.

In order to develop the right solutions, to the right problems, in the right way, the government and sector stakeholders need to spend time listening to communities; listening to learn and understand, not simply to respond. Fundamentally, the communities have answers; so, at a minimum, communities need to be involved in important discussions, in order to align with, and be owned by the community. If the answers come from outside the community, they belong outside the community. Alignment with community needs, values, systems, and practices should be the first step in establishing any form of initiative in communities.

Recommendation 2 - Lived experience is listened to and acted upon.

Communities need to drive the process. Listening requires sector stakeholders to put down their agenda and be open to the ideas and steps that emerge. Listening to lived experience means building on strengths, and communities can grow and thrive through impactful services that are built *with* the community. In this, however, there needs to be recognition of the impact of cultural load on participants enacting change, and the fatigue in cross cultural and cross system translation Indigenous people take on every day. Intergenerational trauma can be a barrier for many, and it needs to be recognised through this process.

- Words and actions need to align.

Relationships built on trust first and foremost require mutual understanding. One of the critical pieces of understanding is that Local Decision Making is happening within a different and complex cultural system and world view. If mutual understanding is lacking, the actions of one party may seem ingenuine, hidden, or completely counter to what may have been discussed in collaboration. Bureaucratic talk and language can create barriers to getting through to the core of an issue. Conversation needs to occur in a clear and plain manner, so clear solutions can follow. Protocols for LDM's and for visitors are helpful to set clear expectations of respectful behaviours.

Ensuring that actions align with words is not simply 'doing what you say you will do' but ensuring that the other party understands what you mean, so your actions are expected. The attitudes and beliefs shared in the theory of the work, not only needs to be visible in the practice and implementation of the work, but that these sentiments are understood from the community's perspective.

This requires effective cross-cultural communication, time and effort spent in developing trust within relationships, building strong communication avenues, and creating a safe space where thoughts and feelings can be expressed without condemnation or judgement. Government and sector stakeholders need to ensure their actions align with how their words are understood; that change in community moves beyond simply talking, and that communities understand exactly what is intended prior to undergoing work. If we continue saying the right things, but not holding ourselves accountable to taking each step through the right process we impede the opportunity for community change.

Recommendation 3 - Time is taken to develop *mutual* trust and respect.

Relationships are and will be fundamental to the success of this project. Not simply the relationship between government and sector stakeholders and communities, but the relationships that exist within communities as well. Networks and leadership exist within communities, that when recognised, utilised properly, and strengthened, will have significant impact on the connectivity and growth of the community. Use approaches that are sensitive, flexible, and respectful, seek permission from appropriate LDMs and authorities, allow space for reflection, and ultimately foster opportunities for collective action. Change can only happen together.

Conclusion

Local Decision Making, at its core, needs to begin with a working 'with, not for' approach. Red Cross would like to emphasise the need for LDM to be an initiative that works *with, not for* communities. This means ensuring a range of principles are emphasised and embedded throughout the process.

Red Cross are learners and partners in this process. The work cannot happen without the buy in from communities. And buy-in can only be obtained by working within the existing structures, listening to local knowledge and wisdom, and acting upon genuine, community-identified needs.