



Joint Statement on Subsidiarity



'Mimis Dancing under the Southern Cross', Tom E. Lewis, Limited Edition Etching, 2016 used with permission of the artist.
 "These are spirit creatures, Mimis, dancing under the Milky Way around the Southern Cross.
 No matter who or where you are in this country, when we look up at the night sky, we see them all, dancing as one."

Joint Statement on Subsidiarity

“Self-determination, pride and self-respect are the banks of the river through which the waters of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life flows.” (NATSICC, 2016)

A statement by Aboriginal Carbon Fund, Caritas Australia, Centacare Wilcannia-Forbes, Djilpin Arts Aboriginal Corporation, Jesuit Social Services, Kinchela Boys Home Aboriginal Corporation, National Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council, Red Dust Healing, Redfern Jarjum College, Tjanpi Desert Weavers, Unity of First Peoples Australia, Western Desert Nganampa Walytja Palyantjaku Tjutaku Aboriginal Corporation

Recommendations

We call upon the Federal, State and Territory governments, and religious institutions, not-for-profit organisations and businesses which seek the wellbeing of First Australians to commit to the principle of subsidiarity, evidenced by:

- Ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including survivors of the Stolen Generations and their descendants, lead in developing and implementing policy that affects their lives by resourcing flexible and appropriate Indigenous decision making structures;
- Developing formal agreements with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples that describe how partnerships are to be achieved in decision making around programs, services and other support provided;
- Prioritising funding for Indigenous led and governed organisations, which are more able to respond effectively to their specific cultural context, over larger external providers. This involves recognising that more resources might be required, but that adequate resourcing will achieve more effective results;
- Ensuring cultural competency is valued as a skill as crucial to program success as any technical skill in program sectors such as health, education, employment etc;
- Where Indigenous led and governed organisations do not have the capacity to lead program design and implementation, ensure contracted or sub-contracted service providers are committed to the principle of subsidiarity, including enhancing their own cultural competency and working towards an eventual hand over of full control of programs at a time agreed upon by the relevant Indigenous organisation;
- Committing to transparency in reporting of progress against measures of subsidiarity, including the total amounts and percentages of funding allocated to Indigenous led and governed organisations within all relevant funding channels;
- Committing to implementing the recommendations in the Bringing them Home Report and the Aboriginal Deaths in Custody Report.

The call for subsidiarity

The principle of subsidiarity, and its potential in Indigenous Affairs, is neatly summarised by the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council (NATSICC) as follows: “Subsidiarity compels us to realise that the people closest to, and most affected by, the issues are the ones best placed to address them, with the help of the Government... From the experience of the Council, programs that genuinely embrace the principles of subsidiarity when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the most effective.”

In practice, subsidiarity ensures that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are actively involved in designing, implementing and evaluating policies and projects. It empowers individuals, families and whole communities, and is a necessary pre-condition to promoting the common good.

Crucially, subsidiarity does not absolve the higher powers of responsibility, particularly where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples do not yet have the resources to fully design and implement their own solutions. In such cases, a non-Indigenous organisation may be of assistance but must be committed to true partnership which embraces mutual learning – organisations needs to be equipped with the cultural competency necessary to be effective and committed to sharing the skills required to eventually hand over the decision making power when appropriate. Subsidiarity also does not absolve government of their responsibility to fund basic public goods such as education, healthcare infrastructure and security.

Our strong view is that a community development approach built upon the principle of subsidiarity should underpin the design, funding and implementation of programs for the benefit of Indigenous peoples and ensure Indigenous led and governed organisations are the preferred providers. Such an approach would respect the uniqueness of different Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experiences, valuing and privileging the variety of cultural and spiritual worldviews and support a decision making environment that enables every nation and community, including survivors of the Stolen Generations and their descendants, to negotiate the decisions that affect them.

The UN Declaration on The Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), to which Australia is a signatory, embodies the principle of subsidiarity. Article 23, in particular, affirms that “Indigenous peoples have the right to determine and develop priorities and strategies for exercising their right to development. In particular, indigenous peoples have the right to be actively involved in developing and determining health, housing and other economic and social programmes affecting them...”

Over the last fifty years there has been numerous Commissions, Inquiries and Reports relevant to Indigenous Affairs that have acknowledged the importance of this principle. Two significant examples are the Final Report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1991) and the Bringing Them Home Report (1997) which emphasise the importance of self-determination, a principle that relates closely to subsidiarity.

More recently, the Empowered Communities: Empowered Peoples Design Report (2015) identifies three key principles as crucial to achieving empowerment: mutual responsibility, self-determination and subsidiarity. This report makes many recommendations, of which there are two in particular which we believe deserve special attention:

- *“Our failure to achieve progress in Indigenous Affairs is ultimately due to, and reflective of, the widespread disempowerment of Indigenous people”; and*
- *“a new partnership must be formally agreed that transfers real responsibility to Indigenous people and puts them in the position of senior partner, in a way that has not occurred in the past”.*

The historic Redfern Statement (2016) also seeks a commitment from the Australian Government to much better engagement with First Australians. The many Indigenous leaders across Australia who made this statement say among other things that:

- *“For the last quarter century then, we’ve seen seminal reports (such as the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody) which have repeatedly emphasised that our people need to have a genuine say in our own lives and decisions that affect our peoples and communities. This, known as self-determination, is the key to closing the gap in outcomes for the First Peoples of these lands and waters”; and*
- *“All of these reports call for better resourcing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities”.*

These sentiments are echoed in numerous statements by non-Indigenous organisations. The Catholic Church’s emphasis on subsidiarity resonates through Saint John Paul II who suggests that “Indigenous peoples have the right to continue to live and develop as culturally distinct groups with primary responsibility for their own development and that they have a right to the things they need to achieve that development.”

ACFID, the peak body of international development agencies, developed a 2014 paper on key principles in effective Indigenous development practice which include Partnerships and productive relationships, Participation, Cultural competence, Flexibility and a Strength-based approach.

The catch-cry “nothing about us without us” echoes across the land.



