

What follows is the transcript of an interview conducted on Tuesday 12th August 2008 with a long-term trainer and consultant working for an indigenous organisation in the Northern Territory. This worker has spent and continues to spend considerable time in a number of remote communities in the Northern Territory

The interview was conducted and transcribed by Cathy Picone, Joint National Coordinator, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (Australian Section) Inc.

Headings have been added to assist the reader.

Quarantining of Payments

[On the question of the quarantining of payments]: a lot of people are really, really unhappy. A lot of women are very happy. The net impact is increased food sales. People are buying smaller amounts of food more often. Considerable dissatisfaction comes from people who are managing their lives well, but some of the most vocal opponents of the quarantining are the people who were in the habit of using various means (including violence and the threat of violence) against women and various relatives, for instance, people who have addictions. Another impact is that cigarette sales are going down.

For example, in eastern Arnhem Land, people are keeping money on their cards. However in regional centres, some people sell their Woollies cards (their vouchers) to taxi drivers for cash and then use the cash to go and buy grog.

In broad-brush terms, there has been a positive response.

Generally, the women do a good job of managing and the men extort or run down the business.

The women can see the oppression of the men – there's a lot of standover stuff.

This is only half of the money – the other half people can spend how they want.

[A few months back], questionnaires were conducted [by Centrelink]. This has bearing on the question of what is informed consent. Centrelink split the money up – for example, some money was to go to school for kids' food, but the money goes to the school whether or not the kids turn up to school because the parents have authorised Centrelink to deduct money for food for kids at school. Now people are saying that when they had their interview originally, some of what they said was just aspirational. So the real issue is: what is informed consent?

There's an ambivalence because some people are finding income management beneficial. People who are addicts used to wait around the shop for their relatives to come shopping for food and when they were at the checkout, the addict would go up to them and pressure them to buy cigarettes for them.

With quarantining, they've flown around and done all this stuff. Now they're going to introduce a new system called a Basics Card to be used at selected outlets. This new system will go back to a PIN number rather than photo ID. That's largely to appease traders. Everyone remembers everyone else's PIN numbers – so it will remove some of the food security.

So it's happening TO people and there's been almost no consultation.

Up to now, restrictions (what you can't buy, for example tobacco) have been linked to the stock files in the register. With the new system, it's up to the register operator to say no you can't have smokes for instance. So it's a big cop-out. With the new system, you've got to keep your sales records for 7 years but the printing on the paper on which the register receipts is printed fades after 3 months.

By and large, people are happy with the presence of police officers. There used to be a reliance on elders to do the law and order and young addicts had a poor attitude to their elders because the elders were undermined by the wider society.

Police presence has also reduced the amount of harm perpetrated on women in some communities.

“Reforms” by the NT Government of the Governance Structures in Aboriginal Communities

Each Aboriginal community had a community council and Aboriginal people were elected to councils. NT Government has abolished that in favour of super-shires – now there's an area of 3-4 communities – of which they have a council and they don't even have to be Aboriginal people.

[Way back], Aboriginal people used to own and manage the land. This was a system of private enterprise. With the coming of the missionaries, this changed. The missionaries didn't ask about land ownership. The people who got the power were the people who sided with the missionaries. This led to many landowners being dispossessed. They introduced the Associations Act – while “democratic”, there was still no representation for the landowners. Different families got turns at exercising power. Now all that has been abandoned in favour of the shire areas.

You can't separate the Intervention from what's happening with the NT Government's reforms of the councils. To people for whom English is a fourth language, the difference between territory government and federal government doesn't matter. People see it as the same thing.

New Layers of Bureaucracy

There hasn't been a significant movement in health facilities. It's been a megafeast for white contractors. White people are driving around in Toyotas fixing fly-wire screens. People are living in shipping containers due to the big housing shortage. There's an enormous flurry of activity – all being done by contractors.

It's also brought another layer of bureaucracy: the Government Business Manager. These are people often with no community knowledge and no remote experience. They're administrators in the traditional sense, with ill-defined jobs. In general, they're good at controlling things - by choking things off. There hasn't been increased Aboriginal participation. In fact, it's the opposite. There's been a feeding frenzy of contractors, builders etc. The previous governance structure with Aboriginal people working now has another level of bureaucracy. Now it has several layers on top of it.

There are also Employment Brokers.

Urban Drift

Aboriginal communities are social realities, not economic ones. The white bureaucrats are talking about market gardens. The most important thing is that remote communities are social realities.

The net impact of this has been a significant movement of people to urban centres. There's a steady migration to towns. This is a really important point.

The dissatisfaction in the communities with various aspects of the Intervention has led to a significant drift to urban centres. The Larrakia Nation estimates that there are approximately 2,000 long-grasses in Darwin at the moment. [12/8/08]

All the houses and camps where people usually live are full up and the jails are full. A 3-bedroom house in Darwin rents for \$400 to \$600, so it's not possible to rent.

So one of the problems with all the intervention activity is the urban drift and a lot of people are ending up in jail.

Feeding Frenzy for the Aboriginal industry – Another Layer on the Blanket of White Oppression

What is needed is a cost effective analysis of keeping people in communities.

People are flying in and chartering aeroplanes, but everything is happening TO Aboriginal people

There aren't 700 jobs.

So we're just hassling people around. They're putting everyone into training courses, for example, an aged care training course. It's revolving door stuff.

At the moment, it's a feeding frenzy for the Aboriginal industry.

Charter aeroplanes, builders, small business consultants. Red Cross is doing school breakfasts and so parents are saying, "Well, why should I bother?" So it's breeding dependency. "If you're going to feed my kids, I don't have to bother." All this is happening TO Aboriginal people. They're not participants. Oppressed people are very good at figuring out how to survive [within white structures]; they've had to be. And presently with the Intervention, there's more weight on top of the blanket of white oppression.

Private enterprise is outcome-focused whereas the government is process-focused. As long as they tick all the boxes, that's sufficient. There's no one person that's accountable. The process is being driven by a political agenda.

Already the Federal Government is touting to reduce the cost effectiveness of communities. They're saying that it's not cost effective. But there needs to be a cost-benefit analysis of keeping people in the bush.

With an extra 2-3,000 people in Darwin, they're not going to be able to get a job, but they can keep half a job in Ramingining.

Alcohol and Drugs

Though there's less disposable income to spend on addictions, there's still a significant amount of marijuana and kava coming in. But there's still been an increase in food sales.

There's been a lot more effort to catch drug dealers on the road. That seems to be working. The drug dealers are white, Aboriginal, Chinese, Tongans and Fijians. The last two are responsible for most of the kava.

The more astute private shops (where a pack of cigarettes costs \$13 and a tin of powdered milk costs the same) so you check up powdered milk and give cigarettes. There's not the will to police that stuff.

“Overall, there's just been this enormous busyness”

Overall, there's just been this enormous busyness. It's a reflection of white culture: we don't like what's happening so we take control of it and shut it down.

It's all happening TO people. There's another level of oppression been added. If you want to empower people, you don't take control away from them. If you want Aboriginal

people to be strong, if you want resourceful community centres, you don't disempower them. It's like locking up your child in a cell in order to make them strong.

The Government Workers: there's a sprinkling of people with experience but most people are very badly equipped and are getting paid a lot of money.

Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse: how many people have been convicted? None that we know about.

Lack of Flexibility

And finally, during the Intervention, what has become apparent is a remarkable lack of flexibility, in fact a real inflexibility. Of course, anyone needs to start off with an idea but there's been a total lack of capacity to adapt to situations. It's almost impossible to get any feedback through. There's a total lack of responsiveness. The people on the ground are even embarrassed about this rigidity.

So in conclusion:

- In the end, the policing has had a direct impact in reducing violence against women.
- Food security is a positive outcome.
- Urban drift is going to create a huge problem.
- There's a lot of busyness happening.
- There's a control focus and not a development or participation focus.
- There's a commitment to due process and not to outcomes.
- There's another layer of bureaucracy.
- The agenda is control, not engagement.
- It would be good to explain the where to from here; to give hope.