

**Submission to the Coronial inquiry into the deaths of Kunmanara  
Brumby and Kunmanara Coulthard of Muṯitjulu Community**

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Note: The views expressed in this paper do not necessarily represent the views of  
individual *Working Together* Project partners.

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<sup>1</sup> The *Working Together* Project is a whole-of-government whole-of-community development project aiming to secure a better future for the people at Muṯitjulu.

Before he started sniffing, Kumanara Coulthard said to his father  
*“if you don’t stop drinking grog,  
we [my brothers and I] are going to start sniffing petrol”*.<sup>i</sup>

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## 1. Overview

While the issues discussed in this paper are sensitive, they are made with the greatest respect to the Anangu people of Mutitjulu. The analysis and recommendations in this paper have been informed by my work of over nine months in Mutitjulu. Parts of the paper may be viewed as controversial or even ‘ideological’ by some stakeholders. But I see them as logical. And as one of my community development peers told me, “ideas and logic are scary things to people who want to maintain the status quo.”<sup>ii</sup> The crisis of suffering in remote Aboriginal communities like Mutitjulu means policy revision has to go back to the bedrock questions. The time is over for tinkering around the edges. As a prominent anthropologist has said, “everything has to be on the table”<sup>iii</sup>.

Petrol sniffing is endemic and socially ingrained in Mutitjulu, as it is more broadly in the Ngaanyatjara Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (NPY) Lands. Petrol sniffing is causing devastating harm to the people of Mutitjulu including death, serious disability, mental trauma and depression, cultural disintegration, social dysfunction, violence, crime, and general grief and misery. I hope this paper will contribute to policy and program changes that are urgently needed to address the human rights abuses and suffering associated with petrol sniffing and other forms of addiction in Mutitjulu.

Petrol sniffing is just one manifestation of an addiction ‘epidemic’ in Mutitjulu.<sup>2</sup> Excessive daily use of alcohol and marijuana are also serious problems. Indeed, in aggregate these are causing more harm than petrol - the majority of adult men and many women in Mutitjulu are using marijuana or alcohol on a daily basis and this is producing serious human harm and social dysfunction. In this paper I will often refer to ‘addiction’ rather than just petrol. This is because grog, marijuana and petrol, are actually part of the same dysfunctional culture of addiction.

The Mutitjulu *Working Together* Project is approaching the dysfunction in Mutitjulu using best-practice development principles for dealing with ‘difficult development partnerships’. The Project is taking a long-term approach and has begun to build the foundations for sustainable development based on robust analysis of the problems and their causes. The complexity and interdependence of dysfunction in Mutitjulu means there are no quick fixes. Some small, incremental progress has been made, including in the area of addiction. But the Project will need to be sustained over the long-term if the changes are to become embedded.

Other interventions and systemic policy reforms will be needed if the egregious effects of petrol sniffing are to be eliminated in Mutitjulu. These include:

- supply reduction strategies including a comprehensive extension of the Australian Government’s OPAL fuel replacement scheme;
- well-planned reform of government policies and programs that are contributing to dysfunction and fuelling addiction, including passive welfare and the use of royalties earned from Aboriginal land and businesses;
- the establishment of a permanent police post in the community to build law and order - a necessary condition for sustainable development;

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<sup>2</sup> My reference to an ‘epidemic’ is made from a sociological rather than clinical or medical perspective. See Chapter 3.2 for further detail.

- implementation of the NT Government’s Volatile Substance Abuse Legislative Framework and a range of adequately funded evidence based interventions at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels;
- systemic reform of broader programs and projects in Aboriginal communities - including well planned design of programs and projects before their implementation; genuine and on-going program and project evaluation; and more flexible and longer-term funding arrangements.

## 2. The extent of the problem in Muṯitjulu

Petrol sniffing and other forms of addiction are not a new in Muṯitjulu. Reports over a number of decades have observed that “alcohol abuse, gambling and petrol sniffing are common ... and threatening the very existence of Anangu”<sup>iv</sup>. But the intensity and damage of petrol sniffing in Muṯitjulu is increasing with more users sniffing for longer periods of time, along with a transition from short term occasional sniffing to longer term chronic sniffing. This is consistent with sniffing more broadly in the NPY lands of the Northern Territory, Western Australia and South Australia. While numbers fluctuate, there are around 40 sniffers in Muṯitjulu - 10 per cent of the population.

The Australian Government funded Central Australian Youth Link Up Service (CALYUS), which works to address petrol sniffing, estimates that there are up to 600 people sniffing petrol in the NPY lands. On the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands alone, covering around 120,000 square kilometres in South Australia, over 200 people are sniffing petrol - eight per cent of the population.<sup>v</sup> This number has doubled in the last two years. Given its strong cultural connections to the South Australian Pitjantjatjara lands, Muṯitjulu has followed this growth pattern.

The human costs of petrol sniffing in Muṯitjulu have been very high. As one Old Lady said, “marijuana and petrol are devastating our people, but all we have done is talked in vain for ages”.<sup>vi</sup> Apart from the two youth whose death is the subject of this Coronal Inquiry, an estimated 20 sniffers in Muṯitjulu have acquired brain injury as a result of sniffing. Almost three-quarters of disabilities on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara lands are due to sniffing.<sup>vii</sup> Brain injured sniffers in wheel chairs are a common sight in Muṯitjulu. Many people continue to sniff despite their disabilities.

Sniffers who are intoxicated by petrol can be aggressive, unpredictable and violent. On 22 March 2005, I was chased by a petrol sniffer wielding an iron bar after I had attempted to convince her to tip out the petrol she was sniffing. Most people in the community are, understandably, afraid to confront the sniffers.

### Box 1: Anangu voices about petrol sniffing

- All our children are dying, ... , you don’t know our sadness.
- Listen to us, ... , help us protect our kids, not just kill them.
- You all have a responsibility to help us fix this problem.
- I sleep next to a petrol sniffer, ... , I’m their family.
- My son sniffs petrol but I don’t know what to do.
- The petrol doesn’t belong to us. Its not part of our law.
- Parents are on the grog so kids think “no-one cares about me ... I’ll sniff petrol”
- We are tired and worn out from grieving.
- My son said to his father, “if you don’t stop drinking grog, I will start sniffing petrol”.
- I don’t know what’s causing the petrol sniffing.

Indicative of the de-humanising and antisocial effects of sniffing, many older members of the Mutitjulu Community have been driven out of their homes and are sleeping in the sand dunes for their safety.

Petrol sniffing in Mutitjulu poses a serious public health threat through its association with violence and STDs. While reducing sexual inhibition, chronic sniffing also causes male sexual dysfunction. This mix is a dangerous precursor for sexually related violence. In 2004, a number of incidents in Uluru Kata Tjuta National Park, in which Mutitjulu is located, were reported by tourists who felt threatened or unsafe from inappropriate behaviour of a sexual nature by Aboriginal youth. Police advise that many unreported incidents are also occurring - particularly among Anangu themselves. Sniffers often exchange sex for sniffable petrol. People in the community have referred to young female sniffers in Mutitjulu being “used as mattresses” in the houses that have been overtaken by sniffers.

Aggression associated with petrol sniffing and cannabis use has facilitated a spree of property damage in Mutitjulu. In the last six months of 2004 the health clinic, childcare centre and adult education centre were all broken into and trashed. The school, MCI chambers and community store were also broken into and damaged on numerous occasions. The direct costs of this vandalism exceeded \$120,000.<sup>viii</sup> Mutitjulu youth have set numerous fires alight in the Park - eighteen fires were deliberately lit in 2004 causing considerable damage to the Park’s ecosystem and degrading its World Heritage and tourism values. In January 2005, two deliberately lit fires burnt dangerously close to residential areas and Ayers Rock Resort. These fires cost the Australian Government’s Department of Environment and Heritage \$35,000 in staff overtime and helicopter hire.<sup>ix</sup> Youth lit fires near Park staff’s houses while they were attempting to contain these deliberately lit fires. The Park Manager reported that the fire-lighters had been “clearly drug affected”. He also reported that the wellbeing of staff and visitors could not be guaranteed due to the “violent and unpredictable” nature of Mutitjulu.<sup>x</sup> The violence and dysfunction is significantly affecting the morale of Park staff and their ability to work with Anangu according to the principle of ‘joint management’. At meetings I have had with Park staff, a number of Rangers have been moved to tears.

The addiction epidemic in Mutitjulu is contributing to the abuse and neglect of children. Teachers at the school have advised me that the children who do attend school arrive “starving, filthy and chronically ill”.<sup>xi</sup> Parents preoccupied with sniffing petrol or drinking neglect their children who are often left with grandparents or sometimes to fend for themselves. This is obviously a risk factor for children to experience harm. The sight of pregnant women sniffing petrol or drinking in Mutitjulu is not unusual and is tolerated by people within the community. This results in impaired development for the unborn child, which results in developmental delays and poor health later in life. Pregnant women can be seen publicly sniffing petrol while sitting next to family members. Young mothers pushing prams have also been seen sniffing petrol.

### 3. Primary causes of petrol sniffing in Mutitjulu

It is important to acknowledge that petrol sniffing is a manifestation of a much more serious and deeply complex range of problems connected to addiction and dysfunction in Mutitjulu. A number of primary causes can be attributed to this dysfunction. A range of secondary or facilitating factors can also be identified. Given the complexity and interdependence of the problems, a linear summation of these is difficult and risks the exclusion or de-emphasising of some important factors and their interdependence with each other. After talking for some time to the mother of one of the young men who died sniffing petrol, I asked her what she felt was causing the problem. She replied, “I don’t know”.<sup>xii</sup> Notwithstanding the complexity and the limitations of listing the causes in a linear manner, I have listed below what I believe to be the primary causes of dysfunction. Chapter Four lists secondary causes. Apart from my on-going consultations, I shared the analysis in this report directly with Mutitjulu Community Incorporated (MCI) members at a meeting on 31 May 2005. MCI agreed with my analysis and some members made suggestions about additional causes of petrol sniffing which I have added to this report.

#### 3.1 Social and economic disadvantage

The conventional analysis of substance abuse in Indigenous communities is that it is a symptom of trauma, trans-generational grief, racism, dispossession, unemployment, poverty and so on. All of these are undeniably existent and enduring phenomena in Mutitjulu. Social and economic disadvantage is certainly part of the complex mix of factors that are encouraging addiction and dysfunction. Factors such as racism, dispossession and trauma are explanations for the precarious situation of Aboriginal people. The forced removal of children during the Stolen Generations era, for example, has had a significant and proven influence on parenting skills and culture. MCI members have emphasised that social and economic disadvantage is a significant factor which promotes self-destructive behaviour among their youth. One MCI member, for example said “young people need more choices”.<sup>xiii</sup> Another man said “young people sniff petrol because they are bored ... they have nothing to do”.<sup>xiv</sup>

#### **Box 2: Occupied Territory Syndrome**

*Occupied Territory Syndrome*, a phenomena suffered by societies enduring on-going occupation of their land, provides insights to the problems in Aboriginal Australia.

Societies suffering from *Occupied Territory Syndrome* exhibit a range of social behaviours that manifest their people’s frustration with their lack of sovereignty and control over their lives. The behaviour of youth in Palestine can be regarded as an example. The Palestinian youth express their feelings of anger and powerlessness through violence, particularly against the occupying forces. Where occupation extends across generations, the symptoms evolve into a societal sense of hopelessness. Violence against the State turns inwards and transpires into violence against the self and others.

Substance abuse (including petrol sniffing), family violence, suicide, vandalism, child-abuse and neglect, and malicious damage of infrastructure are behaviours consistent with *Occupied Territory Syndrome*.

Promoting community ownership and control helps to address *Occupied Territory Syndrome* and foster a more peaceful and safe environment. International experience has shown that helping communities to develop and share an honest history of their colonisation helps to validate people and let them know they can change if they want.

But social and economic disadvantage do not explain the rapid and almost total social breakdown that has been occurring over the last thirty years in Mutitjulu and indeed in many other Aboriginal communities. The causes of dysfunction in Mutitjulu are much more complicated than this conventional analysis - particularly when the problem is considered at the societal level. Indeed, some symptoms of the dysfunction can become conflated as causal factors. The poor state of housing, for example, is cited by some external stakeholders and documented in literature as a causal factor of substance abuse. While overcrowded and sub-standard housing<sup>3</sup> are no doubt a susceptibility factor of substance abuse, the poor condition of housing in Mutitjulu is also a product of the addiction-related dysfunction. Community leaders allow petrol sniffers, drunk individuals and psychotic cannabis users to cause significant damage to housing and other community infrastructure. Anangu have identified this relationship themselves. As the chair of MCI said, “the healthy lifestyle of the past has been replaced”. A senior Anangu woman said, “My house is a mess ... but not because there is not enough money ... I moved out and my son and the other petrol sniffers trashed it”.<sup>xv</sup> Despite Mutitjulu’s critical housing shortage, two residences are presently boarded-up because of damage caused by petrol sniffers which has made them unfit for human habitation.

### **3.2 Addiction has become an ‘epidemic’ and transgenerational**

The legacy of injustice, indifference and insensitivity is a necessary but not a sufficient prerequisite for the present disaster in Mutitjulu. The social acceptability of participation in alcohol, drug and petrol abuse - through both consumption and supply - indicates that a decisive factor about addiction in Mutitjulu has become the existence of an ‘epidemic’ itself.<sup>4</sup> This is consistent with evidence from the Central Deserts region more broadly, where 80 per cent of sniffers come from families characterised by “social and cultural breakdown associated with alcohol misuse”.<sup>xvi</sup>

So notwithstanding the people of Mutitjulu’s very real social and economic disadvantage, it is reasonable to conclude that addiction has thus become an epidemic and hence a condition in its own right - not just a symptom of disadvantage. Evidence that it has reached epidemic proportions includes:

- direct involvement in criminal activity associated with substance abuse, including unlawful grog running and marijuana;
- senior members of the community attending meetings while intoxicated and overriding planned agendas for their own gain or that of their immediate kin;
- the sniffing of petrol in public places by youth who remain unchallenged by other community members;
- regular and visible gambling by children who are less than school age;
- community Elders moving outside of their homes to sleep in the sand dunes after permitting their children who sniff petrol to take-over and trash their houses; and
- the social exclusion of community members who do not participate in the epidemic of substance abuse.

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<sup>3</sup> Between 10 and 20 people can be living in each house and three-quarters of them require essential structural repairs. Three quarters have no stove and one-quarter have no functional laundry.

<sup>4</sup> The Oxford Dictionary defines an ‘epidemic’ as a disease, literally or figuratively, that is prevalent among a community. My use of the term ‘addiction epidemic’ refers to where the issue of addiction extends beyond the linear summation of each individual’s addiction to become a societal problem.



When addiction becomes socially entrenched, opposing or avoiding substance abuse becomes anti-social because, as Cape York Aboriginal Leader Noel Pearson has argued, a new culture emerges where “to drink is to be Aboriginal”.<sup>xvii</sup> As one senior man in Mutitjulu said, “family pressure to drink is big”.<sup>xviii</sup>

The addiction epidemic in Mutitjulu has also become trans-generational. This is reinforcing its auto-catalytic nature. Children are learning about addiction from their parents. As one old lady said “Parents are on the grog ... kids, ... they sniff petrol”.<sup>xix</sup> As discussed in Chapter Two, children are also inheriting addiction at birth - young pregnant women regularly use petrol, alcohol and marijuana.

Kunmanara Coulthard’s petrol sniffing was a direct example of the trans-generational nature of the addiction in Mutitjulu. According to Kunmanara Coulthard’s mother, before he started sniffing petrol, Kunmanara Coulthard challenged his father, “if you don’t stop drinking grog we [my brothers and I] are going to start sniffing petrol”<sup>xx</sup>.

Acknowledging that substance abuse and addiction have reached epidemic and transgenerational proportions is essential for developing and implementing successful policy interventions. Focusing on one particular strategy, such as demand-side interventions, is less effective when addiction is socially acceptable and community members are participating in, or unwilling or afraid to challenge the abuse. In these circumstances, strategic and comprehensive approaches that address both demand and supply-side issues, harm management and social controls are necessary. Needless to say, the effectiveness of the principle of ‘self determination’ in the solution to addiction is weakened considerably.

The local response in Mutitjulu to the addiction epidemic reflects this. At best, it has been ad hoc and inconsistent. Illegal grog, marijuana and petrol running is tolerated by many community and MCI members. Many MCI resolutions concerning substance abuse have been made, and then abandoned or disregarded. In 1999, for example, MCI passed a resolution that all individuals convicted of marijuana dealing should be evicted from the community. Despite numerous convictions, no community member has been evicted. Community members who have drug or alcohol convictions against them, remain in the community. And often they are in influential positions.

**Box 3: Key factors facilitating auto-catalytic addiction epidemics**

- availability of addictive substances;
- spare time;
- money;
- the example of others in the immediate environment;
- permissive social standards and ideology.

### **3.3 Passively-derived income is financing the addiction epidemic**

Seventy per cent of adults in Mutitjulu receive welfare payments.<sup>xxi</sup> Lack of employment opportunities is not the major cause of welfare dependency in Mutitjulu where the National Park and Resort create a substantive labour market, including a number of jobs that are culturally appropriate for Anangu. Most working-age residents choose to rely on Centrelink payments as their primary source of income and participate in the market economy on an ad hoc basis to ‘top up’ their welfare payments. Around two-thirds of residents’ income is passively derived.<sup>xxii</sup> As one man said, “I work to earn a bit of extra pocket money”.<sup>xxiii</sup>

The passive welfare economy has distorted the cultural values of responsibility and reciprocity that were an important part of the traditional economy. Passive welfare resources are the principal financing mechanism for the addiction epidemic. Passive welfare dependence and substance abuse are feeding off each another and undermining other efforts towards social recovery. As Noel Pearson has stated, “a major contributor to the weekly drug habits of young Australians is Centrelink. This may be an outrageous thing to say, but it is the truth. If we want to ameliorate the tragic situation ... in remote indigenous communities, then we have to end unconditional welfare payments.”<sup>xxiv</sup>

This argument is not new or unique to Noel Pearson. Over two decades ago, the Aboriginal owned and controlled Tangentyere Council petitioned the Australian government to change the welfare system to overcome the alcoholism that flows from subsidised drinking and increasing dependency of many Aboriginal people on welfare payments.<sup>xxv</sup> At the same time, Charles Perkins said unless “we become active producers, instead of passive users, ... Aborigines will continue to be gripped by a counter-productive ‘hand-out mentality’ and destined to be a race of economic cripples and perpetual dependants”.<sup>xxvi</sup>

The apparent and logical link between passive welfare and Aboriginal community dysfunction has also withstood academic critique. For example, the Australian National University’s Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR), has stated that “Pearson is undoubtedly correct in implicating welfare payments in the deepening social crisis that confronts the Aboriginal people of Cape York and many other regions”.<sup>xxvii</sup> Anthropological analysis has also identified that money is strongly connected to the “distinctive contemporary Aboriginal values and practices that lie at the heart of Pearson’s argument.”<sup>xxviii</sup>

The argument that passive welfare fuels addiction-related dysfunction is not ‘ideological’. Indeed, respected individuals from both ends of the political spectrum have acknowledged it. Professor Marcia Langton, for example, has stated that she agrees with Noel Pearson “in substance and in emphasis” while also noting that dysfunction is not caused by welfare alone.<sup>xxix</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, Professor Helen Hughes from the Centre for Independent Studies has argued that “welfare dependence” results in “domestic and other forms of violence and alcoholism”.<sup>xxx</sup>

The argument is therefore not ‘ideological’, but ‘logical’. And it is one which has been identified by the people of Mutitjulu themselves. When I first arrived in Mutitjulu, one Old Man told me “Anangu need to stop relying on sit-down money, the young fellas need to work rather than humbugging the old people for money to buy grog or marijuana”.<sup>xxxi</sup> Most people in the community agree that the welfare economy has compounded social and economic dysfunction. Some Anangu have said, “sit-down money is killing our young people.”<sup>xxxii</sup> These community perceptions are also supported by academic analysis that has concluded that money acquired without mutual responsibility in Mutitjulu is having a “negative impact on family life, social relationships, and Anangu interaction with local agencies”.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Of course, it is important to note that it is not the welfare money itself, but it’s distribution and irrational use that is causing the problem.

The financing of the addiction epidemic extends from the provision of welfare payments to payment of royalties and other trust monies derived from Aboriginal land and businesses. In Mutitjulu, the majority of these resources, which can be significant, are directed to individual family heads. They are also overwhelmingly

untaxed and undeclared to Centrelink. This discourages their distribution via community channels that have PBI tax-free status. In an environment of addiction and dysfunction, distribution via community development channels would ensure more rational use of the funds – those not involved in the addiction epidemic would be more able to influence their use.

In an attempt to avoid contributing directly to the addiction epidemic, the gate monies have for some time been distributed as goods and services via a purchase order system. But evidence has shown that voucher systems are ineffective at addressing addiction and can also create a form of dependency that is ‘itself implicated in the alcohol problem’.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Individuals factor the conditionality associated with purchase orders or vouchers into their spending and resource allocation decisions and utilise other sources of income to finance grog, marijuana and petrol procurement. The royalty and trust monies are thus indirectly facilitating the addiction epidemic - via income substitution.

Like all Australians, the Aboriginal people of Uluru are entitled to enjoy economic returns from their assets. By raising of the issue of royalties and gate monies I am not questioning the cultural qualifications and expertise of traditional owners. Neither am I questioning Mutitjulu resident’s entitlement to participate in the economy or their right to earn a return from their assets.<sup>5</sup> Rather I am identifying the need for informed use of the royalties and gate monies and greater equity in their distribution. In addiction epidemic environments, informed choices about the allocation of money are less likely to be made. The fact that twenty years after the hand back of Uluru, many children in Mutitjulu are malnourished and chronically ill suggests that the majority of the rent and gate monies have not been well spent. The World Heritage Car Dump<sup>6</sup>, which is located within Uluru Kata Tjuta National Park, and the degree of alcohol, marijuana and petrol consumption in Mutitjulu tells a similar story.

Recognising the need for better outcomes from traditional owner’s income, the CLC has taken some initial steps to mitigate the problem. The volume of gate monies flowing directly to individuals has been capped and future increases in these monies will be directed to development projects in communities surrounding Uluru. The CLC has also imposed conditionality on the funds that are directed to MCI - these must now be spent on community development. Nevertheless, the majority of the rent and gate money earnings still go directly to individuals - usually male family heads, many of whom are part of the addiction epidemic.

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<sup>5</sup> Indeed, I am arguing the opposite. Aboriginal people should be able to benefit from their resources. But at the moment a significant proportion of the people of Mutitjulu’s resources are being wasted or are financing serious harm.

<sup>6</sup> Around 1,000 discarded motor vehicles lie in a dump close to Mutitjulu and inside the World Heritage protected National Park.

## 4. Factors facilitating the addiction epidemic in Mutitjulu

### 4.1 Sniffable petrol is readily available

Evidence has proven that the availability of sniffable petrol directly affects the level and nature of petrol sniffing.<sup>xxxv</sup> Mutitjulu is less than 30km away from an unlimited supply of sniffable petrol at the petrol station in Yulara. The land at Yulara is excised from the surrounding Aboriginal land-trusts, so the traditional owners and other Aboriginal people have limited influence over it. Their inability to restrict the supply of sniffable petrol at Yulara thus directly influences the availability of sniffable petrol in Mutitjulu. When I consulted MCI members about the content of this submission, they said “don’t forget to tell the coroner that we can’t stop the petrol coming in from Yulara, ..., we’ve got no control over that”.<sup>xxxvi</sup> They also emphasised that unless OPAL Unleaded is rolled out comprehensively, sniffable petrol will remain available - “if they put the OPAL petrol in at Yulara, the sniffers will keep moving down the highway to get petrol and bring it back, ... , OPAL needs to be everywhere”.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

The effects of readily available sniffable petrol in Mutitjulu have been exacerbated by the introduction of non-sniffable fuel in nearby communities. Restrictions to the access of petrol through substitution with un-sniffable fuels have been an integral success factor of anti-petrol sniffing campaigns. But evidence has proven that unless efforts are made on a regional basis to limit the availability of petrol, those who want to sniff petrol will continue to obtain it.<sup>xxxviii</sup> This is particularly so given the mobility of young Aboriginal people and the willingness of some people to profit from the supply of petrol to sniff. After Amata (across the South Australian boarder from Mutitjulu) received the subsidy and began selling OPAL un-sniffable fuel, its sniffers moved to Mutitjulu.

### 4.2 Lawlessness

Lawlessness is seriously encumbering the community’s capacity to address addiction and dysfunction. As already discussed in Chapter Two, grog and drug running, assault, sexual violence and child-abuse are widespread and tolerated in Mutitjulu. Children as young as four years old have been diagnosed with sexually transmitted diseases. Many people are traumatised by these human rights abuses and are afraid to confront the perpetrators. Recently an Old Lady came out of the sand dunes wielding a huge digging stick and visibly upset. I asked her why she was carrying the stick. She said “to protect myself, I am sick of the petrol sniffers threatening me”.<sup>xxxix</sup>

Because the Police have no permanent base in Mutitjulu, they cannot respond effectively to incidents of lawlessness, gather intelligence, and build relationships of trust with the community that are essential for their work - particularly relating to illegal alcohol, drug and petrol smuggling and supply.<sup>7</sup> As one Old Lady said, “gunja and petrol are killing people and something has to be done, ... , the community needs stronger policing to address addiction and protect our children.”<sup>xl</sup> Another woman said,

“the Police have to protect Anangu from violence and keep us safe. Grasses are coming into Mutitjulu like the Emu Poison grass. This new poison is killing Anangu instead of Emus. Old people are afraid for their safety. They might be attacked. It is important to work with the police”.<sup>xli</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> This is despite tremendous good will, dedication and effort from the current police officers who are based at Yulara and allocated to Mutitjulu.

### 4.3 Weak capacity and governance

Sound governance is universally recognised as essential for successful community development. Only where governance structures are strong and effective can good policy decisions be made and implemented in a sustainable manner. The World Bank's ground-breaking report, *Assessing Aid*, demonstrated this.<sup>xlii</sup>

To date, governance in Muṭitjulu has been very weak. In discussions with the Project Manager, MCI members have repeatedly emphasised their difficulties in making decisions with limited access to information and understanding of Western governance principles. MCI's Chairman said "everything has been upside down and we didn't know ... now we need to turn it back the right way".<sup>xliii</sup> A consultant's report identified: "inadequate and dysfunctional" management structures, reporting procedures and communication; and "ill-defined and misunderstood" lines of responsibility.<sup>xliv</sup> Weak governance has been exacerbated by a degree of administrative complexity in Muṭitjulu that surpasses the norm for Aboriginal communities.

Motivation for good governance has also been lacking. This has further hindered informed decision-making and policy and program development. When the *Working Together* Project commenced, MCI often failed to reach a quorum. And when it did meet, MCI members often discussed the allocation of Toyotas or trust fund monies rather than important issues concerning youth development and diversion. Prior to the *Working Together* Project, MCI had allowed the Childcare Centre to remain non-functional for around one year. The Sport and Recreation Officer position, which plays a vital youth diversion role, was also vacant for almost a year.<sup>8</sup>

The existing governance structures in Muṭitjulu also have limited cultural legitimacy. Muṭitjulu Council and community members have a limited sense of ownership of their community's governance. Reviving traditional governance structures and reforming the existing Western governance structures so that they encompass traditional Anangu law would help to enhance the community's sense of ownership and control and provide an incentive for improved capacity.

### 4.4 Self determination and 'passing the buck'?

Under the auspices of 'self determination', Aboriginal communities are expected to deal with a complex range of issues including: street lighting, community sanitation, housing policies, primary health care programs, employment programs, juvenile diversion, night patrol programs, etc. And, of course, petrol sniffing programs.

Disempowered communities suffering from addiction epidemics and social dysfunction cannot effectively instigate and control responses to complex issues such as petrol sniffing. Muṭitjulu has significantly less institutional resources and capacity to control petrol sniffing than mainstream communities. MCI has, to date, not even been able to satisfy funding agency requirements to develop a housing policy. Despite the availability of recurrent government funding, Muṭitjulu has also been unable to sustain a regular Night Patrol. In 2004, a new night patrol vehicle lasted for less than one month before being wrecked.

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<sup>8</sup> With the active encouragement of MCI's CEO and the *Working Together* Project manager, MCI is now taking more interest in exercising its rights and responsibilities - see Chapter Five.

Particularly given that many of Mutitjulu's leaders have their own personal addiction problems, it is inappropriate that they be called upon to develop and implement programs to address the dysfunction. As one Mutitjulu community member said about the failure of the night patrol:

"No one has the strength to do it. The council meets and is strong on talk ... there are too many other distractions ... there was an excellent Aboriginal Community Police officer who did great work for a couple of years, then one day he just took off his uniform and joined the drinkers. He's now in jail."<sup>xlv</sup>

It can be argued that 'self determination' has been used as an excuse by governments not to intervene when perhaps they should. For example, many parents' devastating relationship with alcohol and marijuana in their own lives - and in that of their parents - has severely damaged their capacity to care for their children. While some of the children in Mutitjulu enjoy loving and protective care, many do not. What 'self determination' is being enjoyed by the children who arrive at school "starving, filthy and chronically ill"? And what 'self determination' do the unborn children of young expectant mothers sniffing petrol have? As one experienced anthropologist and commentator has said,

"those of us who encounter such situations know that, while severe cases of neglect do result in official intervention, there often seems to be an unwritten rule that more neglect is tolerated for some Australian children than others, notably Aboriginal children in more isolated communities"<sup>xlvi</sup>.

People in Mutitjulu are also seriously traumatised by the on-going dysfunction in their lives. This seriously limits their capacity for 'self determination'. Yvonne,<sup>9</sup> a community Elder in Mutitjulu, provides an example. She is part of a minority of adults in her generation who do not drink or smoke marijuana. She is a victim of chronic domestic violence, her son is a petrol sniffer with serious mental problems that have escalated into violence of a sexual nature. Yvonne sleeps outside because her house has been taken over by petrol sniffers. Although highly educated in her own culture, Yvonne is illiterate in English and under tremendous emotional pressure. She lives with on-going trauma and is unable to assist her son effectively let alone find and implement solutions to the broader addiction epidemic in her community. Yvonne's story is not unusual in Mutitjulu or the NPY Lands more broadly. Indicative of the level of trauma suffered by the people in Mutitjulu, when the Health Clinic was trashed in 2004, its floor was covered in anti-depression medication.

A prominent Aboriginal health specialist has made the argument that mainstream communities with higher standards of living and more available services and resources would not be expected to solve their own substance abuse problems:

"There seems to be a widespread view within government... that this is a problem which the community should solve, this is their responsibility. This is a community with less resources and ability to control a tough problem than any mainstream community... that's not a demand that's put on any other community in the country. No-one, no politician and no bureaucracy expects ... the people of Cabramatta ... to solve the heroin problem and it's up to them to do it. No one makes that demand of them and they don't make that demand of them because it's a stupid thing to do, it's clearly not possible."<sup>xlvii</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Name changed to protect privacy.

The wider Australian community has a responsibility to assist in addressing petrol sniffing, which has no precedent in traditional Anangu culture. And Aboriginal people have been forthright in rejecting the notion that the solution to petrol sniffing lies with them alone. The father of a young Anangu man from South Australia who died from sniffing argued:

“The petrol doesn’t belong to us. Its not part of Anangu law. The problem comes from the outside, its like the Maralinga bomb tests, the solution should come from the outside too.”<sup>xlviii</sup>

To develop and run programs, different communities need different levels of intervention along a spectrum of their capacity and motivation. Many communities and Elders feel that they must solve the problems themselves, as part of retaining traditional structures within communities. Communities where local capacity and motivation have been strong have had success. While governments need to be mindful of this so that solutions are collaborative rather than imposed, they have an obligation to intervene more strongly when necessary. The Aboriginal people of Mutitjulu are Australian citizens who have the same rights to live in a peaceful society and enjoy a healthy upbringing and education etc as mainstream Australians.

#### **4.5 Historically ad hoc and reactive policy and program environment**

Petrol sniffing’s periodic appearance on Australia’s policy agenda, and the ways in which it has been construed as a policy issue, have mitigated against the development of sustained, evidence-based policies and programs. Despite numerous attempts to formulate responses over the past few decades, there have been minimal policies at any level of government, and a limited body of accumulated knowledge has been developed about the nature of petrol sniffing or the efficacy of approaches in addressing it. Most government interventions have relied on short-term project funding, the continuance of which has had little relationship with program effectiveness.<sup>xlix</sup>

The sporadic attention paid to petrol sniffing appears not to have been a product of systematic analysis or sustained public lobbying. It has owed a lot to media outbursts which have implicitly - and sometimes explicitly - portrayed sniffing as more than an issue of self-harm.<sup>10</sup> Sniffing appears to have been used by the media as evidence of broader social disintegration in Aboriginal communities, interestingly in a way that heroin use in mainstream Australia has not.

Pressure generated by sporadic media outbursts has created a bias towards quick, short-term action. Politicians, often genuinely moved by the accounts, but also sensing the political dangers of being seen as unresponsive, have exerted pressure on government departments to take action.<sup>1</sup> The onus has fallen on health agencies because addiction has been seen as a public health issue. But the resources available to analyse and address petrol sniffing have been limited. And when pressured to take action, agencies have generally been reluctant to divert resources from other programs that have been regarded as generating higher returns on expenditure. In the face of a petrol sniffing crisis, authorities have usually reacted with a gesture, such as funding an NGO to conduct a one-off project, while continuing to focus on other on-going issues. There have rarely been dedicated sections, divisions, or networks of individuals with on-going interests in keeping petrol sniffing high on priority agendas.

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<sup>10</sup> Although recent coronial inquests have drawn attention to the issue in a way that has the potential to generate some pressure for change.

According to some health experts, lack of sustained institutional interest in petrol sniffing has resulted in “a dearth of high quality research”<sup>li</sup> and as a result, policy has been made “on the run”<sup>lii</sup>. It would, of course, be unfair to apply this judgement to all situations and policy responses. The NT government’s forthcoming VSA legislation and accompanying measures, for example, appear to be more strategic. There are also a number of dedicated, experienced and highly educated officials and non-government people working on these issues. It is also important to acknowledge some NGO’s with limited funds have achieved successes through practical and creative approaches - for example, CAYLUS and the Mt Theo outstation.<sup>liii</sup>

#### **4.6 Culture of permissive drug and alcohol use among non-Indigenous stakeholders**

In Mutitjulu, and indeed across remote Aboriginal Australia, there is an acute shortage of quality personnel. It would be fair to say that this has led to a permissive approach to the issue of unlawful drug and alcohol use among employees of many organisations that are running programs in Aboriginal communities, including those that are designed to divert young people from addiction. Program interventions have been significantly weakened by these permissive attitudes which send confusing messages.

Anangu people in Mutitjulu acknowledge that many non-Anangu people working for organisations that are supposed to be supporting the community’s development are supplying them with alcohol or other drugs, or encouraging them to use addictive substances at social events. Some non-Indigenous people working in Mutitjulu have told me “Anangu need to be taught how to drink”<sup>liv</sup>.

The employment of people who promote the use of drugs or alcohol in Mutitjulu which is suffering from an addiction epidemic and has made a democratic decision to declare itself “dry” cannot be condoned or tolerated. As Noel Pearson has said:

“it goes without saying that, if we are serious about attacking these problems, it is unthinkable to have anything to do with white people who use illicit drugs or tolerate such behaviour in their families or associate with such people. Such people must be removed from our organisations and our communities must make it clear that white people involved with drugs will have to remove themselves from our land, otherwise we will have to assist them with that.”<sup>lv</sup>

#### **4.7 Mainstream ignorance and detachment**

Mainstream Australians are largely ignorant and detached from the tremendous suffering and on-going trauma occurring in Aboriginal communities. In the major coastal population centres - where less than two per cent of the population is Aboriginal - this ignorance and detachment has been easy to maintain. Aboriginal suffering is off the political radar screen in contrast to, say, the East Timor and Asian tsunami crises that enjoyed daily headline news status and hence urgent and generous responses. Because people’s eyes are closed to the suffering occurring in remote Aboriginal Australia, there is no sense of urgency and little political impetus to address them. Perhaps this explains why they have been allowed to fester and grow for so long. In the 2005-06 Budget, the Australian Government announced that it would provide over \$1.2 billion in assistance to farmers for the current drought.<sup>lvi</sup> This contrasted to a commitment of only \$10 million over five years to subsidise OPAL un-sniffable petrol.



## **5. The Muṭitjulu *Working Together* Project is addressing dysfunction**

The Muṭitjulu *Working Together* Project is unique in Central Australia. It is addressing Aboriginal community dysfunction - including that related to addiction and petrol sniffing - in a whole-of-government whole-of-community manner and under the application of international best-practice principles. The Australian and Northern Territory Governments are working together with Muṭitjulu Community Incorporated, the Central Land Council, and the private and non-government sectors to overcome the community's serious dysfunction. The project is approaching the complex and interdependent issues in Muṭitjulu in a holistic and collaborative manner and according to principles that have proven to work in 'difficult development partnerships'.<sup>11</sup>

The 'difficult development partnership' model is based on international experience in dealing with fragile states such as the Solomon Islands or Zimbabwe which demonstrate similar social, economic and political conditions to remote Indigenous Australia. Despite long term aid from donor states, poverty, weak governance and dependency have remained significant limitations to growth in these countries.

The *Working Together* Project's principal foci have been law and order, governance, addressing addiction and investment in youth. These foci were derived using 'difficult development partnership' methodology and were informed by grass-roots community consultation, dialogue with government and non-government stakeholders, and the relevant literature. They are almost identical to the priorities identified by the Australian government for safer Aboriginal communities - namely 'family violence, substance abuse and governance'.

In addition to programming analysis and design, the *Working Together* Project is directly building the capacity of MCI, which receives on-going support from the Project Manager. He attends MCI meetings regularly and assists MCI to make more informed choices, including through the use of cross-cultural capacity building tools.

A program of governance capacity building has commenced. MCI's CEO is implementing an active-learning process aimed at improving governance frameworks and accountability and also narrowing the cross-cultural divide. This capacity building is making incremental progress by developing ideas from within the community to reduce complexity and improve structural accountability. MCI and other community members are participating in the design of graphical 'visual explanations' of governance and management concepts. The finished tool kit will become a permanent asset and will be updated to reflect any corporate relationship changes resulting from the training, reforms and the *Working Together* Project.

MCI now regularly reaches a quorums - compared to about one-third of the time prior to the project's commencement. MCI is becoming more accountable and transparent. And it is making more responsible decisions. A recent example relating to addiction was MCI's decision on 22 March 2005 to issue trespass notices to six petrol sniffers from outside the community who were causing considerable infrastructural and social harm. In May 2005, when some of these sniffers returned to Muṭitjulu, MCI's Chair authorised their arrest and eviction.

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<sup>11</sup> See [Appendix A](#) for a list of these principles.

Increased decisiveness and responsibility is slowly spreading and the community is beginning to make other small, but incremental steps to address dysfunction. The police recently achieved a significant drug bust after community members provided intelligence about family members dealing drugs. Some senior women have expressed a desire to speak to the Police about on-going child abuse.

Reflecting the *Working Together* Project's identification of the need for law and order as the first building block for sustainable community development, additional policing resources have been secured. These have included culturally appropriate resources - through an Aboriginal Community Police Officer. And they are having a positive impact. While to date, the improvements have been limited to increased staffing and effort from the nearby Yulara police station, the construction of a permanent police post within the community will further improve law and order. Reflecting the strong national interests associated with a safe and harmonious community at Mutitjulu, the Australian government has agreed to fund the capital costs for the Police Post (around \$2 million) and the NT government will meet the recurrent costs.

**Box 4: The complex and interdependent nature of community development**

It is often tempting to look at the problems facing Aboriginal communities on an issue by issue basis. While focusing on one issue at a time can appear to offer clearer solutions, there are no panaceas to the dysfunction facing remote Aboriginal Australia. The problems are extremely complex and interdependent.

A letter to the editor of the *Alice News* on 29 April, for example, asserted that governments were focusing too heavily on law and order at the expense of education. While education is an essential part of successful community development, it is not the only ingredient. The solution is more complex. Autonomous investment in education will certainly not solve the complex and interdependent problems of dysfunction in Aboriginal communities. Investments in law and order, good governance, health, housing and other social capital are all important and indeed, interdependent. Law and order, in particular, is a crucial foundation for community development. Unless people feel safe, they cannot exercise their rights and responsibilities. In remote Aboriginal communities weak law and order is a serious barrier to community development and violence against people and community infrastructure is having huge costs.

Communities' broader social environments are as much, or even more, a determinant of educational outcomes than direct investment in schooling. Children need to be safe from violence and drug and alcohol abuse if they are to benefit from education. They need a healthy and drug-free gestation in their mother's womb. They need a good diet and healthy living conditions after birth. Without these, they suffer the immediate disadvantage of retarded learning potential through malnutrition, disease, and foetal alcohol and drug syndromes. They also need positive parental role-models, not the example of addiction epidemics which send powerful messages to children that educational achievement is less important than drug and alcohol abuse. At the same time, evidence highlights that the education level of mothers is a key factor in ensuring maternal and infant health - here lie the complexities.

The violence and dysfunction associated with addiction epidemics needs to be addressed if children are to flourish and avoid anti-social behaviour and substance abuse. Policing investments are crucial to improving law and order and addressing dysfunction. This has been clearly demonstrated in the international context and a similar process is needed in remote Aboriginal Australia.

Reopening the Childcare Centre has provided a place of refuge for women and children and is also ensuring an early childhood intervention approach to education by exposing children to a learning environment. It has also had very positive flow-on effects more broadly in the community. Two young women have been working at the Childcare Centre and are hoping to commence a certificate program in childcare. Nine young mothers have been working at the community store knowing that their children will be cared for and safe. Some of these women have begun working at the tourist facilities at the National Park.

Apart from its application of international best practice principles, the *Working Together* Project's success to date has also been based on the provision of adequate financial and physical resources; the engagement of appropriate human resources; effective and cooperative planning; good ongoing consultation; and a commitment by all of the Project's partners to work together.

### **5.1 Key Challenges for the Working Together project**

While there have been some real and visible improvements in the community as a result of the *Working Together* Project, long-term commitment will be required to consolidate and cement progress. The project's initial term expires in early 2006. Partners have informally acknowledged that the Project will need to continue for some time. But there is a risk that as more results are delivered, Project partners may withdraw funding to allocate to other areas of need. To produce change that is truly sustainable, the Project will also need to continue for at least a generation. The Project also needs to be evaluated according to best-practice community development principles. This will highlight its successes and weaknesses. And more importantly, it will provide an opportunity to distil the key lessons learned and the potential for their replication in other settings.

While some project partners have differing agendas, and although funding for key projects (eg the police post) can be difficult to achieve, the cooperation between parties involved in the *Working Together* project has been unprecedented and is achieving tangible results. Ongoing work will be required to ensure that all parties work effectively together and that this cooperation is deepened. As the Australian Government's new Indigenous Affairs arrangements are cemented and its relationship with the NT Government deepens, the potential for this will improve.

Many people involved in the *Working Together* project have an interest in key social issues facing the Northern Territory and believe that an attempt should be made to address the key institutional policy issues of welfare reform and access to alcohol. These issues are contentious, political and sometimes driven by ideology rather than logic. But given their systemic influence, if they are not addressed it will be very difficult for the Project to produce lasting change.

## **6. Measures to compliment the *Working Together* Project**

### **6.1 Comprehensive regional supply of OPAL Unleaded**

The supply of BP's new OPAL Unleaded fuel under the Comgas scheme provides a valuable opportunity to dramatically reduce petrol sniffing. As noted in Chapter Four, supply reduction strategies are a key component of comprehensive and evidenced based approaches to reducing petrol sniffing. The Comgas scheme has been effective in reducing petrol sniffing, particularly when part of a broader strategy. It's introduction in Areyonga, for example, resulted in an immediate reduction in the number of sniffers - from 15 to two. The scheme's major weakness has been its ad hoc geographic distribution. While some communities have had access to OPAL, others have not and sniffable fuel has remained available.

Young Aboriginal people are mobile and have ample time to travel and find alternative sources of sniffable petrol. Petrol is also very portable and dealers manage to evade police with great success and 'promote' new recruits. Mutitjulu has no petrol station but 750ml bottles of petrol are available for between \$50 and \$70. And many sniffers have moved to Mutitjulu from communities where OPAL is being used and sniffable petrol is not readily available.

Although the Australian Government has announced an expansion of the scheme, OPAL will not be universally supplied across the region. Universal supply would virtually eliminate sniffable petrol and dramatically reduce the incidence of sniffing. The NT Department of Health and Community Services and the Local Government Association of the Northern Territory (LGANT), amongst many others, strongly support the regional rollout of OPAL.

Universal roll out of OPAL in the Central Deserts region would prevent significant human and social harm while also saving governments significant health care costs associated with caring for brain injured sniffers. The average health costs of maintaining an ex-sniffer with brain injury in the Northern Territory are over \$200,000 per annum<sup>lvii</sup> and there are over 600 sniffers in the NPY region. The health costs of not rolling out the fuel universally could thus be substantial - indeed, much more than the cost of the subsidy.<sup>12</sup>

The Australian government provides over \$3 billion in fuel rebates to other stakeholders. Under the energy grants scheme, for example, farmers enjoy off-road diesel fuel subsidies of over \$700 million per annum and the mining industry over \$1 billion.<sup>lviii</sup> It would be reasonable to say that none of their children are at risk of dying if they do not receive these subsidies - unlike young people of Mutitjulu and the NPY Lands.

### **6.2 Reform of government policies that foster addiction**

The historical burden of policy in creating much of the misery suffered by people in Aboriginal communities like Mutitjulu cannot be underestimated. According to leading Indigenous affairs commentator, Peter Sutton, "the contrast between progressivist public rhetoric ... and the raw evidence of a disastrous failure in major aspects of Australian Aboriginal affairs policy since the 1970s is frightening"<sup>lix</sup>. Unlike history, policy can be changed. But if policy revision is to respond effectively to the crisis, everything has to be on the table.

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<sup>12</sup> Based on current fuel sales volumes, CAYLUS has estimated the subsidy cost of rolling out OPAL Unleaded universally in the Central Deserts Region (including Alice Springs) at around \$8 million pa.

The addiction epidemic in Mutitjulu and other Aboriginal communities cannot be resolved without confronting the issue of unconditional welfare payments to able-bodied people. There is a strong need to move from discourse to action. Notwithstanding the significant human and civil rights issues attached to welfare reform, the addiction epidemics in remote Aboriginal Australia fuelled by passively derived income are causing very serious human rights abuses. This social disaster dictates the need to take action - “we can’t just all agree that passive welfare is a problem, we have to do something about it”.<sup>lx</sup> Many Aboriginal people agree that “if we are to survive, ... , we have to get rid of the passive welfare mentality that has taken over our people”.<sup>lxi</sup> A senior woman in Mutitjulu emphasised at a community meeting the need to analyse, discuss and address these issues. She said: “as humans we are conscious beings, ... , we are not like the birds that fly and sing among the trees, ... , we have a responsibility to use our consciousness to think about the problems we are facing, ..., to talk about them, ..., and then to address them”.<sup>lxii</sup>

A number of perverse incentive structures created by government policies and programs encourage economic passivity and dependency, detract from informed decision-making and capacity building, and contribute to the addiction epidemic in Mutitjulu. Reforming incentive structures - by replacing perverse incentives with positive ones - allows people and societies to adapt on their own terms. Evidence has proven that locally owned and driven community development processes are more likely to be successful than externally imposed solutions. Incentive structure reforms can thus be a powerful means of encouraging sustainable change.

While governments need to make these reforms a priority, it is also important to highlight the significant structural adjustment costs for people in Mutitjulu associated with reform. Mutitjulu has a very fragile social fabric and a living history of conflict, dispossession and acculturation.<sup>13</sup> Perverse incentive structures that are encouraging economic passivity, dependency and addiction therefore need to be addressed with appropriate consultation, compassion, and timing. Given that governments designed, implemented and legitimised the past thirty years of policies, it would be morally hazardous to do otherwise.

### **6.3 Construction of a Police Post in Mutitjulu**

Reflecting its strong commitment to the Mutitjulu *Working Together* project, in March 2005 the Australian government offered to fund the construction of a Police Post in Mutitjulu - close to \$2 million dollars – on the basis that the NT government meet the recurrent costs. The NT government has agreed to the proposal and a Police Post with accommodation for two ACPOs will be built in Mutitjulu soon.

Consultations conducted as a part of the *Working Together* Project indicated that community residents, particularly women and elderly people, saw stronger and more active policing - including through the construction of a permanent police post - as critical to overcoming the violence and dysfunction. As one old lady said at a community meeting, “I asked the Police to arrest my one of sons because he was beating his wife to death, ... , we have to work together with the Police for the safety of our families”.<sup>lxiii</sup> Other stakeholders, including community workers, tourism operators, government officers and the Police, share this view which is also consistent with best-practice principles of international development. To be successful, the long-term and incremental process of change required in ‘difficult development

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<sup>13</sup> In the 1930s and 1940s Anangu were still fighting for their sovereignty. Mt Connor and Curtin Springs stations were established in the 1940s. The first vehicle track to Uluru was only built in 1948.

partnerships' needs to be based on a foundation of law and order. The police post will make a valuable contribution to this.

While basic policing is a basic right for all people, including the Anangu people of Mutitjulu, there will need to be recognition of - and support to address - the change in community dynamics that will be created by more active policing in an environment where criminal behaviour has historically had limited consequences. There will need to be a plan supporting the community through this enormous culture change.

#### **6.4 Implementation of the NT government's new Volatile Substance Abuse legislation**

The forthcoming Volatile Substance Abuse (VSA) Prevention Act has the potential to make a significant contribution to addressing petrol sniffing - as part of a broader package of responses.

The Act will:

- Give police and authorised people the powers to search and seize volatile substances;
- Help to keep petrol sniffers safe by giving police or other authorised people the power to remove petrol and take sniffers to a safe place;
- Assist with the longer-term issue of treatment by giving Magistrates the power to issue treatment orders to chronic sniffers;
- Allow communities to control the sale, supply and use of petrol by developing community management plans; and
- Strengthen provisions as they relate to illegal supply.<sup>14</sup>

The legislation is accompanied by an increase in resources and services to address petrol sniffing. The NT government has committed to develop a volatile substance abuse service system - so that when a person is referred for treatment there will be capacity through enhanced and new services. Treatment and rehabilitation options will include clinical support, VSA services in Alice Springs, the enhancement of existing out-stations and one new out-station in Central Australia. Service capacity will also be enhanced through Sobering up Shelter and Withdrawal services training and changes to police and Department of Justice data systems. Consistent with the legislation's attempt to improve access to assessment, case management and coordination, youth case workers and planners will work with the Courts.

The NT government has committed \$10 million over the next five years for the new and enhanced services. But this level of resources will be inadequate for the VSA Prevention Act's effective implementation. According to the NPY Women's Council, the capacity for the care and rehabilitation of petrol sniffers is currently very limited and governments will have to face this issue, including the question of capital costs".<sup>lxiv</sup> The number of disabled sniffers in the NT is likely to rise to around 120 in the next few years. And the average health costs of adequately maintaining an ex-sniffer with ABI are estimated to be \$200,000 per annum and as high as \$750,000 for more serious cases. So in the near term, the health costs of caring for disabled sniffers in the NT alone could be over \$20 million per annum. Given the current levels of official expenditure, it is reasonable to assume that many sniffers are not receiving the level of care they require and that this will continue.

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<sup>14</sup> Location of a Police Post within the community will further assist the Police's ability to utilise measures contained in the NT Government's new VSA legislation.

## **7. Broader Indigenous program and project recommendations**

### **7.1 Robust up-front analysis of programs and projects**

A significant problem with many policy and program interventions that have been implemented in Aboriginal Australia has been their lack of robust up-front analysis. As one experienced person working in Central Australia has said: “money has been thrown around like chook food”.<sup>lxv</sup> In contrast to the Australian experience, international development agencies invest significant resources in ensuring that their interventions are well targeted.<sup>15</sup>

The people of Mutitjulu are themselves aware of the need for more analytical and targeted approaches to the problems they are facing. One man has linked the need for this analysis to getting the gun scope right when hunting kangaroo. If one does not take the time to put the scope on the gun, and make sure that it is aligned properly, the bullets are unlikely to hit their target. While the *Working Together* Project is helping to ensure that the scope is right in Mutitjulu, governments need to be more systematic in their approach to analysis - at all levels from national policies and programs down to grass-roots projects. (Note: while an evaluation strategy is currently being developed by members of the *Working Together* Project, a formal evaluation strategy was not incorporated into its initial design. )

### **7.2 Genuine on-going policy and program evaluation**

Linked to better analysis is the need to evaluate policy and program interventions systematically. At present, the majority of government programs that are designed to address dysfunction in Aboriginal communities such as Mutitjulu are contracted out to private or Aboriginal associations and corporations. In Mutitjulu, for example, health services, juvenile diversion programs, employment services, Centrelink, education and training, etc are all contracted out by governments. While the government funding providers usually demand acquittals for the grant monies provided, they do not systematically evaluate the projects or programs delivered by the contracted service providers.

Reflecting accountability to clients and tax payers and the importance of continuous business improvement, the international development community invests a considerable amount of resources in evaluation. AusAID, for example, evaluates the majority of its projects during the design stage, mid-term and on their completion. Systematic evaluation keeps individual projects on track and provides valuable lessons learned for future projects and programs.

Genuine and systematic evaluation should be given much greater priority by the Australian and Northern Territory Governments in their project funding for remote Aboriginal communities such as Mutitjulu.

### **7.3 More flexible and long-term funding arrangements**

As discussed in Chapter Four, a significant flaw in government programs and policies to date has been their reactive and ad hoc nature. The transgenerational nature of the problems in Mutitjulu and other Aboriginal communities means that the solutions need to be coordinated, long-term and on-going. Best practice principles for dealing with ‘difficult development partnerships’ emphasise the need for long-term approaches and the coordination and harmonisation of projects and their funding.

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<sup>15</sup> International best practice has proven the importance of robust up-front analysis for successful community development projects and programs.

There is a need for program agencies to move away from year-to-year funding and to break down the funding silos that limit communities' flexibility to respond to the complex and dynamic challenges they face. To run its on-going programs, MCI receives funding from at least 14 different funding organisations and receives ad hoc grants from numerous other organisations for individual projects.

As the author of a recent book about petrol sniffing has said, “programs need to be synergistic and work together”.<sup>lxvi</sup> While the Mutitjulu *Working Together* Project is attempting to do this, and indeed are having some success at the grass-roots level, the issue also needs to be addressed at the Territory and National levels.

The international development community has developed various mechanisms to overcome the challenges associated with pooling funding at the international level. It is increasingly engaged in Sector Wide Approaches (SWAs) where international donors pool their available resources and provide these in one funding bucket to their development partners. Of course, these SWAs maintain policy and programming conditionality, and monitoring and evaluation requirements to ensure that resources are targeted and spent effectively.

## **8. The demographic express train – a strong National and Territory interest argument to address the problem**

The demographics of the Northern Territory mean that addressing dysfunction in Aboriginal communities is increasingly becoming a ‘Territory interest’ imperative. Aboriginal people already account for around one-third of the Northern Territory’s population. The Aboriginal population is growing fast, compared to the non-Aboriginal population. Indicative of this growth is the Aboriginal proportion of Northern Territory Primary School enrolments which is approaching 50 per cent - at a time when Aboriginal attendance rates, particularly in remote communities, are low. Some Northern Territory government officials are already talking about a time in the near future when the NT education system will need to be turned up-side-down – ie, into an Indigenous system with special programs for non-Indigenous children.

This demographic trend has been described by one senior official as a ‘demographic express train’.<sup>lxvii</sup> If the addiction epidemic in Aboriginal communities is not addressed, it is likely that Central Australia will become “a giant care warehouse for disabled, brain-damaged sniffers, chronically ill drinkers and those with cannabis-induced psychosis”.<sup>lxviii</sup>

Given that the problem of petrol sniffing extends to South Australia, Western Australia and Queensland, this demographic express train will also become a National Interest issue. Petrol sniffing thus needs urgent and energetic action by governments.



## List of terms and acronyms

ACPO	Aboriginal Community Police Officer
ANU	Australian National University
Anangu	Term used Pitjantjatjara speakers for “Aboriginal”
AusAID	Australia’s International Aid Agency
CAEPR	Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research
CAYLUS	Central Australian Youth Link Up Service
CLC	Central Land Council
CLP	Country Liberal Party
Kunmanara	Term used by Pitjantjatjara speakers for the name of a deceased person
MCI	Mutitjulu Community Incorporated
NGO	Non-government organisation
NPY	Ngaanyatjara Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara
NT	Northern Territory
OPAL	Unsniffable fuel produced by BP Petrol
STD	Sexually Transmitted Disease
SWAps	Sector Wide Approaches
VSA	Volatile Substance Abuse

## **Principles for overcoming ‘difficult development partnerships’**

Principles essential for successful community development in ‘difficult partnership’ environments include:

- *Robust up-front analysis* ensures that investments are focused correctly. Given the long-term time frames of community development, getting the ‘aim’ right is crucial to hitting the target.
- *Ensuring local ownership* of the development process and mobilising existing capacities and assets. Real community development only takes place when community members are committed to investing themselves and their resources. The community has to be built from the ‘inside out’ rather than the ‘outside in’.
- Maximising the use of *local knowledge and technology* – “the wisdom of the community exceeds the knowledge of the experts”.
- *Maintaining law and order* – a critical foundation for all other investments and to protect human rights while the development process is in train.
- *Improving governance* – crucial because it underpins other community development investments. Without good governance and policy frameworks, sectoral investments (in health or education for example) have no guarantee of success or sustainability.
- Accepting that the *process of change is trans-generational* – communities and their capacity are built over the long-term.
- Adopting *realistic objectives* and *accepting higher levels of risk*. Particularly when starting from a low base, it is important to set realistic objectives that can be reached by incremental progress. Measuring the direction of change is better than measuring absolutes.
- Creative use of *incentives* – understanding the existing incentive structures (positive and perverse) that operate in a community helps to ensure successful development interventions. Introducing new incentives that encourage positive change is important.
- *Stakeholder coordination* – working together ensures that stakeholder interventions compliment rather than negate each other. Harmonisation and reduced complexity frees community and other stakeholders to focus on what is really important.
- Incorporating *gender*. The consideration and inclusion of women has consistently proven to be a critical success factor in community development.

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- <sup>iv</sup> Anangu Walytjapiti Tjuta: Regional Planning for the Impiyara Region, Lester and Schrader, March 1993.
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- <sup>vi</sup> Ms Happy Reid, community meeting on 15 December 2004.
- <sup>vii</sup> Survey of the prevalence of petrol-sniffing on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands, October 2004.
- <sup>viii</sup> Advice from MCI CEO.
- <sup>ix</sup> Advice from Parks Australia North, March 2005.
- <sup>x</sup> Advice from Parks Australia North, March 2005.
- <sup>xi</sup> Conversation with Principal and teacher on 30 May 2005.
- <sup>xii</sup> Project manager's discussion with Kunmanara Coulthard's mother on 17 May 2005.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Mario Guiseppe, MCI discussions about this coronial inquiry on 31 May 2005.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Richard Khan, Night Patrol worker, MCI discussions about this coronial inquiry on 31 May 2005.
- <sup>xv</sup> Senior Anangu woman, Working Together meeting on 19 October 2004.
- <sup>xvi</sup> NPY Women's Council Report on Petrol Sniffing in the NPY Lands, October 2004.
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- <sup>xviii</sup> Hezeikel, Community meeting on 15 December 2004.
- <sup>xix</sup> Project manager's discussion with community elder in late 2004.
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