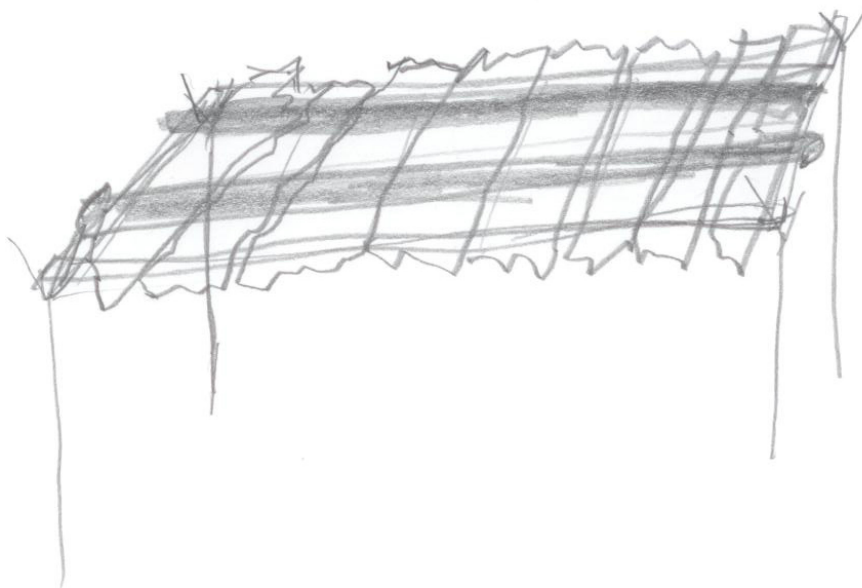# More Than a Roof Overhead

Consultations for Better Housing Outcomes

Sub-Project 1 of the ARC Linkage Project More Than a Roof Overhead

Michael Christie and Matthew Campbell

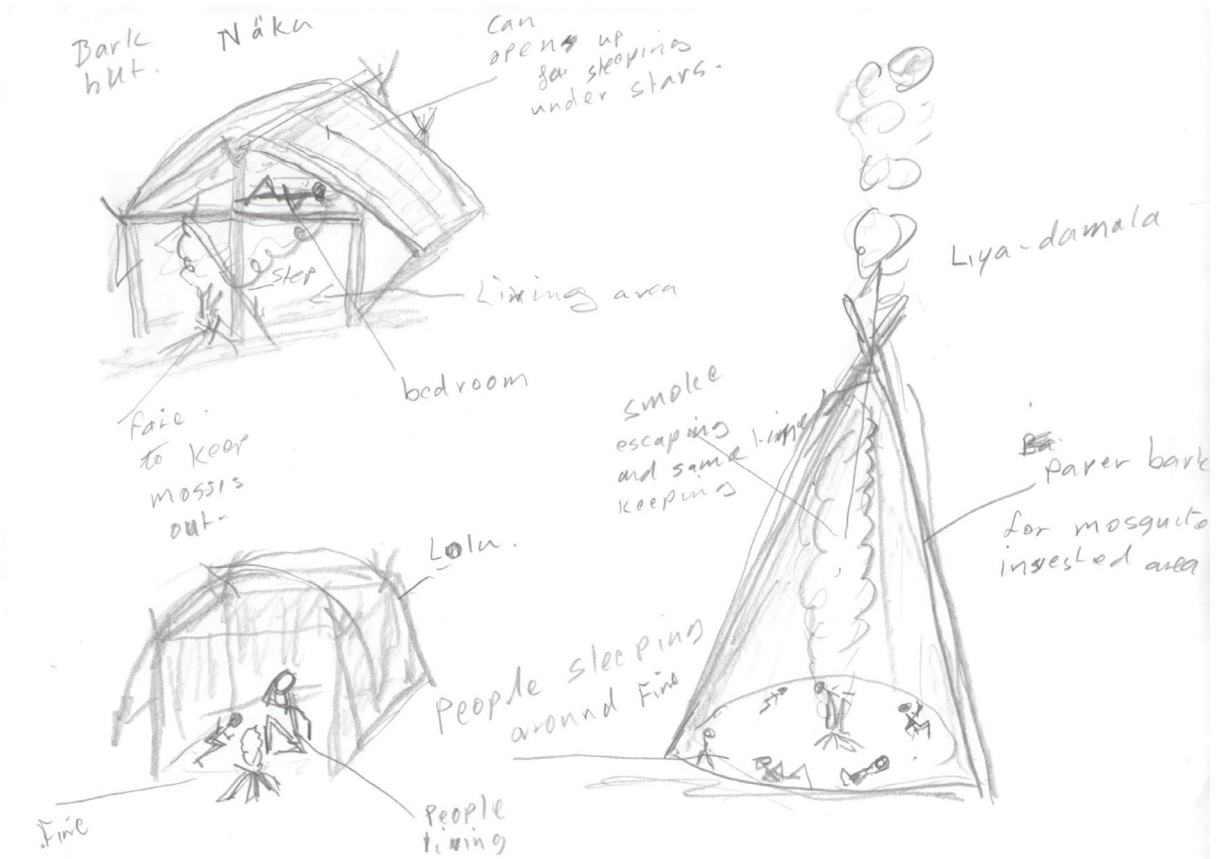**The Northern Institute, Charles Darwin University – March 2013**

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rapan

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Contents

Bark hut.

Nāku

Can open up for sleeping under stars.

Living area

step

bedroom

fire. to keep mossis out.

Lolu.

Fire

People living

Liya-damala

smoke escaping and same keeping

paver bark

for mosquito infested area

People sleeping around fire

Drawings from the Stage 1 consultation, Darwin

Main Messages

- In Aboriginal communities good housing and good deployment of housing are seen as crucial determinants of health, wellbeing, and local governance. Much community distress is attributed to poor housing and bad allocations.

- Cultural authorities in remote communities and town camps play a role in decision making about housing. Their role should be recognised and integrated into Housing Reference Group (HRG) processes.

- The current policy of 'advice only' creates many problems, both at the community level and between the Department of Housing[1] (DH) and HRG members. Careful on-the-ground negotiations and decision making within HRGs would very seldom end in disagreement.

- From the community perspective, decisions about housing are not separate from decisions about health, education, employment, community development or economic development. The work of HRGs should be integrated into wider work of collaboration between senior community members and all levels of government through something like Community Reference Groups (CRGs). In each community a different and negotiated configuration of clan elders, senior community members and traditional owners would make up the CRG.

- Miscommunication and lack of communication around new works, allocations and repairs, and lack of timely responses results in much distress and acrimony. The establishment of more immediate and effective communication processes, for example a 1800 number would improve the engagement of community members and the effectiveness of HRGs

- Most of these recommendations require a whole-of-government approach to match the whole-of-community approach advocated by DH and community participants in this research.

- Senior community members who work with governments on decision making around housing and other issues should be remunerated.

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1   The Department of Housing was known as the Department of Local Government, Housing and Regional Services until August 2012. Commonly referred to as Territory Housing it incorporates Remote Housing NT which is the main subject of this research. We will use the term DH throughout this report

Executive summary

More Than a Roof Overhead (MTRO) is a project funded by the Australian Research Council, aimed at 'meeting the need for a sustainable housing system in remote Indigenous communities'. There are five sub-projects, addressing issues of consultation, education and training, procurement, alternative technologies, life-cycle costings and appraisals, and policy approaches. CDU's part, sub-project 1, *'Consultation for Better Housing Outcomes'* is the subject of this report. Our aim was to understand the practices and perspectives of both government and Aboriginal community members around consultation process.

There were two stages in the research. In Stage 1, a group of eight Yolŋu elders from remote communities in east Arnhemland came together to discuss and provide their perspectives on housing in their community, its history and current state, their vision for the future and consultation processes, particularly those of the Housing Reference Groups.

In Stage 2, staff at all levels of DH, and Aboriginal community members from Top End and desert communities, mostly HRG members, were interviewed using loosely structured questions around consultation processes. This summary integrates the findings of Stages 1 and 2.

Whole-of-Government, Whole-of-Community

Whole-of-government approaches to working in remote Aboriginal communities have generally proved to be more successful than governments and agencies operating independently. Similarly, communities have been healthier and happier where 'whole-of-community' approaches have been viable. By 'whole-of-community' we mean collective problem solving and planning under the authority of community elders working together.

The research has found on both sides of the divide between government and communities, a vision for a much more integrated approach to decision making. This would involve a drive for better coordination between government departments and recognition and support of the ways in which, at the community level, good governance sees housing, health, community and economic development, education, community harmony and environmental care as inseparable issues.

To make this integration between whole-of-government and whole-of-community work would require a return to something similar to the old community councils, where an identified group would work on an integrated assessment of government business. Such an approach will enable decisions around health delivery, education, employment, community development etc. to be made with reference to each other. We recommend that a regular time be set aside for government-community meetings in all relevant communities where all government related community business can be negotiated in a range of contexts – sometimes meetings with particular elected community representatives, sometimes whole community level meetings, sometimes groups of affected people. We recognise that such an approach would require

coordination between governments to enable the formation of a single community reference group to support government- community engagement.

Successful negotiations between 'whole-of-government' and 'whole-of-communities' occur as much because of good communication practices *within* government and *within* communities as between them. Whole-of-government groups should work together, possibly in collaboration with local Government Engagement Coordinators[2] (GECs), to negotiate collaborative agreement making practices addressing a variety of agendas at the local level. The often hidden work of elders maintaining community harmony would be better supported by government if local community decision making authority were integrated into a single group. The relationship between these representative group meetings and whole-of-community meetings would be difficult to dictate. Both are important. This is an area where more policy consultation and trials need to take place and different solutions tailored for different communities.

The Community's Role in Making Decisions about Housing.

The move to the new NT remote housing system occurred at the same time as other significant changes in the way Aboriginal affairs were managed in the NT and these changes were generally seen by HRG and community members as all part of the one government initiative, and a deliberate move by government away from collaboration and involvement of Aboriginal people in decision making.

There was a general recognition on the part of both government and community, of the 'disempowerment' of community authorities in recent years and community members believe that the HRGs are not giving them the voice they were promised, or solving the problems they experience. HRG members were very clear that they and other community members had insights into the local community histories and politics that were crucial to good governance, and good housing outcomes, which were often not recognised or ignored by DH.

Often they felt that agreements that had been made in good faith at the HRG level were being overturned by particular people in the offices in Alice Springs and Darwin. This sometimes led to HRG members getting the blame within the community for unwelcome decisions made by DH and saw the good will generated at the community level being compromised by decisions made higher up.

Therefore agreement over housing allocation and maintenance should be finalised through careful negotiations on the ground, not in a regional office. The strong distinction currently made between advising and deciding should be replaced by a commitment to negotiation and decision making on the ground wherever possible. The advising versus deciding dichotomy is essentially an unnecessary one that produces ill feeling between HRG and community members, and between communities and government. There is a long tradition of successful agreement making in Aboriginal communities where both government and local agendas have been dealt with carefully by key representatives in good

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2   Government Engagement Coordinators were previously called Government Business Managers in the NT. They are employed by the federal government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA)

faith. Those processes should be reinvigorated. Only under rare circumstances would executive decisions need to be made by government.

This approach should replace the current system of advice sent to head office for final decision. All levels of Australian governments are making clear statements about the need and desire to engage effectively, and HRGs are a perfect opportunity. Community members' desire for community harmony should be identified and supported as an underlying principle for decision making. Governments would commit to the idea that collaborative decision making contributes to healthy communities and good governance.

Flexible, Timely, Local Both-Ways Success Factors

Talking to DH staff and community members from both the Top End and Central Australia, we found a very large range of styles and practices of HRG implementation. Community members and senior DH staff all commended the community-level workers (Community Housing Officers and Housing Support Officers) for the hard and often thankless work they do bringing HRG meetings together and dealing with the everyday ongoing work of providing housing in remote communities. This work inevitably involves considerable good will, flexibility and discretion, in which on ground workers negotiate their own approaches to problem solving. At the same time, HRG members often work behind the scenes to ensure that key community people are informed and have input into decision making – or into advising DH. The flexibility which accounts for so much good faith and success within the community, and within DH, is often invisible from above.

At the same time, practices and decisions made outside the HRGs (i.e. within the communities, and within DH) are often invisible or mysteriously delayed or ignored. We recommend a number of possible solutions to improve the consultation processes. These include a 1800 number whereby community members could contact DH with questions to do with Repairs and Maintenance (R&M), allocations, HRG meetings etc., and get a personal response (phone call, visit) within a guaranteed period. This may be the most cost effective way of enhancing the good will that does exist between DH and some of the more disaffected communities. It is this commitment to good local governance which ensures long term benefits. It could include employment arrangements whereby DH and HRG members spend more time together outside meetings building relationships and ensuring community members have opportunities to understand and contribute to housing policy. This would enable the growth and support of the quite different and distinctive flexible meeting and negotiation practices which have developed in different places.

Recognition Of Authority

It was widely acknowledged that the people who serve on HRGs are giving up their time and contributing the ongoing work of making a difference in their community. Community members and many DH staff members pointed out that the authority of the elders was crucial to HRG success, and elders need to be paid as a form of recognition and respect for their authority. Developing appropriate remuneration strategies at the local level is critical.

At the same time, some community members think of the HRGs as being of little benefit and believe that if we can't find workable ways of involving elders in housing decisions, then social problems multiply. Successful community-government interactions require that senior managers in both government and communities are properly involved in complex decision making and properly remunerated for their work. Stage 1 of this research recommended 'a space in the community where they can meet together whenever they want to and talk about community issues – not just housing'. Such a space would also function as an appropriate site to receive government and other visitors. Payments to senior community members involved in decision-making and negotiations around housing and other community needs would affirm their role in working with government and community members to maintain good local governance. They are paid for their knowledge, authority and expertise. This approach would in the long term improve the quality and accountability of agreed local ways forward, and be very cost effective in terms of maintaining community health and harmony. It would also help guarantee the critical involvement of key community figures in decision making collaborations between communities and government.of maintaining community health and harmony. It would also help guarantee the critical involvement of key community figures in decision making collaborations between communities and government.

Full report

Introduction

> 'Housing is fundamental to achieving improvements in Indigenous health, education and employment and makes a major contribution towards Closing the Gap in Indigenous disadvantage. Under the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing … (the) Northern Territory (government) has been allocated $1.7 billion over 10 years to 2018, (to) deliver more than 900 new houses and rebuild or refurbish around 2900 existing houses by the end of 2013'.
>
> *The Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs website.*[3]

Remote Housing NT is a division of the NT Department of Housing which was established to manage the delivery and improvement of Aboriginal public housing in the Northern Territory. It is system through which the NT and Federal governments are implementing their National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing (NPARIH). The introduction of Remote Housing NT saw all Aboriginal housing previously managed under Aboriginal Housing Associations converted into public housing. This entailed the government acquisition through compulsory leasing of Aboriginal land for public housing. Two construction company consortia known as Alliances were engaged to deliver the Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program (SIHIP), an element of the Remote Housing NT system in which houses will be built, rebuilt or refurbished. Housing Reference Groups (HRGs) were set up in 73 communities, a number of Town Camps and other 'living areas' 'to work with government and ensure local communities have input to decisions about housing in their community'.[4]

More Than a Roof Overhead: is a project established by RMIT and funded by the Australian Research Council, aimed at 'meeting the need for a sustainable housing system in remote Indigenous communities'. There are five sub-projects, addressing: consultation; education and training; procurement; alternative technologies life-cycle costings and appraisals; and, policy approaches. Charles Darwin University's part, 'sub-project 1', is called 'Consultation for Better Housing Outcomes' and is the subject of this report.

Method

The project began at the School of Australian Indigenous Knowledge Systems at Charles Darwin University in Darwin, where John Greatorex and Michael Christie led a two day workshop through the Yolŋu Aboriginal Consultancy Initiative[5]. The Yolŋu researchers were from Milingimbi, Galiwin'ku, Gäwa and

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3   http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/our-responsibilities/indigenous-australians/programs-services/housing/remote-housing-in-the-northern-territory (accessed 22/2/2013)
4   http://www.housing.nt.gov.au/remotehousing/housing_reference_groups (accessed 22/2/2013)
5   See www.cdu.edu.au/yaci

Birritjimi, and were all senior bilingual bicultural authorities. Key issues and local perspectives relating to the research were discussed in Yolŋu languages:

- the history of housing in their remote Aboriginal communities
- the current state of housing in communities and homeland centres, and changes over the past years
- the vision for the future of housing in their communities and the 'systems approach' to Aboriginal housing, and
- views and recommendations for the community-based Housing Reference Group system

At the end of two days of discussion back and forth, drawing on whiteboards, breakout sessions and phone calls to elders back in Arnhemland, the main Yolŋu researchers made statements to video on what they thought were the key issues to be considered for this first stage of the research. The statements were transcribed and translated and the key consistent ideas were collated along with the notes taken from the workshop itself. The draft of the report was then added to after further discussion with the researchers, with some homeland community members, and after meetings with other researchers and stakeholders in Alice Springs and Darwin.

The results of stage 1 are found in section 3.1 below. We have selected quotations (translated from the original Yolŋu languages) which we see as representative of the overall discussion. A complete report from Stage 1 can be found at http://www.cdu.edu.au/centres/yaci/projects_housing.html

Stage 2 began with meetings with key people from the Department of Housing (in the positions they were in at the time of the research): Mychelle Curran (Deputy Chief Executive, Territory Housing Programs and Performance), Monica Baumgartner (Director, Remote Property and Tenancy and key project partner for SP1), Russel Wills (Manager, Tenancy), Len Griffiths (Deputy Director Remote Housing and Town Camps, Central Australian Regional Office) and Peter Holt (Manager Priority Projects). We agreed that Stage 2 should focus quite specifically on Housing Reference Groups, and should involve public servants working at all levels of DH as well as Aboriginal community and HRG members. We also talked informally to members of other NT government departments.

After looking at the Housing Reference Group Operational Guidelines, and through our discussions with people in management, we identified areas of interest or concern around the HRGs which could form a basis for our collaborative work. These were:

- the size and representativity of the HRGs
- selection processes
- (Annual) review processes
- the Terms of Reference (for each group)
- the clarity of various roles
- the governance arrangements

- payment and time commitment

- frequency of meetings

- the future of the HRGs (after the construction phase)

- relation to other bodies like the Local Implementation Plan (LIP) committees, the shire 'Local Boards' etc.

- communication and feedback structures and processes

We proposed to use cycles of semi-structured interviews and collaborative interpretation of findings to identify and implement most effective practice within and among what we identified as the three levels of governance for remote housing: management, regional/implementation, and community.

Matt Campbell and Michael Christie from CDU undertook extensive hour-long semi-structured interviews beginning with senior DH managers, and then following chains of recommendation, to people involved at all levels of the bureaucracy, including Housing Support officers and Community Housing Officers who are employed by DH and the Shires respectively. These people recommended Housing Reference Group members for us to interview, and this led to interviews with community elders and people living in social housing (including legacy, new, rebuilt and refurbished houses) on Aboriginal communities.

In the letters of introduction we said we would ask:

> What is your role, and how have you been associated with HRGs? Please give some examples.

> How do you see the effectiveness of HRGs? What do they do well? Please give some examples.

> What do you see as some of the key issues to be addressed if we are to improve the effectiveness of HRGs?

> Whom else should we talk to and how should we go about it?

> In the interviews we also showed people the list of areas of interest (above), and they often fastened upon one or two for special comment.

Preparing findings and recommendations was a difficult task and time-consuming task involving transcription and analysis of all interviews, with the transcriptions being summarised and returned to the interviewees with an invitation to endorse, correct, remove or add to any of the claims or summaries. While people were very generous with their time, and provided thoughtful and very useful responses to our questions, we received only limited feedback on the transcriptions and summaries we returned to the interviewees.

Over 100,000 words of transcription and translation were analysed with the help of qualitative data analysis software. The findings and recommendations listed below in section 3 came from long discussion around the general themes that emerged from the interviews with both the DH workers, and the HRG (and community) members. Given the huge range of backgrounds,

attitudes, perspectives and ideas, it was a challenge to present our findings and recommendations in a way that reflects the diversity coherently. Most of the interviewees were most concerned with the wider practices and processes of consultation rather than the nuts and bolts of day-to-day HRG work, and this is reflected in our findings. We have elected to use quotations to illustrate our interpretations, and have grouped our findings into themes. We also decided that it was not necessary or useful to differentiate between DH staff and community members, or between Aboriginal and nonAboriginal interviewees. In fact, by putting those categories to one side, we found that the general principles which emerged in our findings were suggested and supported from both sides of the divide between government and community.

Findings and Recommendations

Stage 1

The Yolŋu consultants see poor housing as the result of lack of consultation and engagement, and the cause of many of the problems Yolŋu are facing today. Even though they were all born during the mission days, they have a strong understanding of Yolŋu life before the mission, and its relevance to everyday life today. They told stories about the old systems of housing. The places where housing was erected, their designs and functions, the ways in which the spaces were used, the arrangements of buildings, the contrasts between public and private spaces, the authority of the elders, and the names that buildings and spaces were given, were all subject to *raypirri'*, (which could be translated 'congruence with the proper ancestral way of doing things') and should still be today. Sometimes *raypirri'* is translated as discipline, but it is a positive productive thing.

> …where we stayed, like in a house or a shelter, a shade of whatever, we would give it a name, putting names to those shelters. The names would be derived from our original estates. Our clan based estates where our original homelands would be.

Good housing design starts with the needs and work of the elders. We can say that good housing designs themselves reveal and enact *raypirri'*. They allow people to live in agreement.

> But how did the old people live? They were facing each other, so that the place of the elder who could tell everyone how to behave was there, s/he could see everything.

In the mission days, houses were often overcrowded, especially in the wet season, but the elders were still properly in charge, and everyone was working. This is still the case in homeland centres, where all the inhabitants have some legitimate connection to the land. Good housing policy must address homeland support. We can still keep the authority of elders strong if we negotiated good housing.

> in the mission days … when I was growing up, we had a lot of families living together. Some of the houses were really close to one another, sleeping together, and there was a lot of work done together. Unity, you see, was operating more, living in community harmony in those days.

Today people have a range of experience with housing, from run down unhealthy housing (often believed to be administered by unaccountable and unresponsive authorities) to flexible and responsive 'hybrid' housing on homeland centres.

> Where I am It's an old residential place for the miners, but housing at the moment is not in good condition, so roofing as rotted away, gone all rusty, every time it rains the veranda gets wet and it rusted and as well as having asbestos in every house.

> G's houses at G (Homeland Centre are finding) ways of allowing people to be in touch with each other, to have privacy, and to observe (avoidance) relationships … attention to where the breezes come from at different times of year, of dealing with insect pests, of rain and sun in different seasons.

Yolŋu feel safe in extended families and on land to which they have connections. They believe it is good when people have the opportunity to modify their houses to suit their own needs and changing family structures. Yolŋu have a keen sense of the environment, particularly the ways breezes work, as well as sun, shade and rain. Housing can take advantage of Yolŋu environmental knowledge.

> So way I see that homelands are the best places to go and start … where people especially families can live, be healthy, ever their minds at ease. Without any problems, the only problems would be … to go long distance back into the community where everything is set up what the government wants, like all health regions, shopping and things, … As long as the government keep their word about upgrading the roads, for that's what we heard …

The common experience today is large houses with many people living in them, none of whom has the full responsibility for everyone through kinship. With only one or two people from each household employed, there are difficulties storing food, keeping the place clean, sorting out who will pay for the power cards and the rent. Most Yolŋu believe that the provided houses are too big. The family units they are expected to accommodate are not appropriate in terms of governance and authority of the elders.

Yolŋu see a clear connection between poor housing and poor health. Everyone expects the situation to get worse with the new 'growth towns'. They are already worse with the new shires. The intervention undermined traditional authority.

> This Intervention is already a wrong way to go. Intervention prevents us from doing things in a disciplined Yolŋu way. … So this we have this thing called *raypirri'*, that word has meaning, doesn't it? It has meaning, it's full of words. *Raypirri'* is a powerful word.

Housing reference groups should work two ways – negotiating with Yolŋu on behalf of the housing body, and negotiating with the housing body on behalf of the Yolŋu. This can only work if engagement is taken seriously, and the traditional authority of the elders and the land owners and managers are properly respected. The first thing the elders need is a space in each community where they can meet together and talk about community issues – not just housing. The government refuses to recognize this need, and this undermines attempts to implement this *raypirri'* in housing decision making.

> Like the old people used to come together to the bark shelter, and sit down, and talk about each other. And later they will agree together. 'Hey, I'm going to do the right thing by everyone'.

> But these days we are finding a lot of difficulties, even for our elders, they are feeling they have no strength, they are powerless. Maybe we need to have an office for them, where they can come together…, where they can fulfill their community responsibilities, first and foremost for their clan their families and clan groups and communities. It's really important that this happens for our elders, because they are the ones who provide the foundation. We have to make that happen. If there is no backbone, we can't be strong. Those senior people, those older ones, they are our backbone. We need to support them and give them a place, space where they can exercise their responsibilities together.

Stage 2

Both government workers and community members acknowledge that DH could not do its job without HRGs. However there are different perceptions of the success of the HRGs, as both a vehicle for making decisions about housing, and as a space in which Aboriginal people and the government work together to improve life in communities.

> Well, in terms of taking action on anything, SIHIP, on allocating a house for example. We couldn't do it without them (the HRGs) or if we did, well we could do it without them but there would be such a backlash on everything. They guide us, they guide us through.

> I don't think we would have been able to roll out the last three years without engaging reference groups. I would see no way possible the SIHIP program would be able to roll out.

Whole-Of-Government, Whole-Of-Community

DH staff generally recognise that changes in government policy have rarely been understood on the ground, and community members often felt that government staff did not understand or care about the importance of traditional kinship and governance in keeping communities healthy and happy.

Within each community there currently exists a range of consultative groups (LIP committees, Community Advisory Boards, Local Reference Groups, Water Management Group, etc.) constituted by various government departments for a variety of ends. Often the same few senior community members serve on most committees. (Many of them were members of community councils or housing associations in days gone by).

> This is our big problem, every community has got a couple of really bright sparks that will go that extra bit for their community and they end up on three or four committees.

> At the moment, there's at least half of the people who are on the housing reference group are also on the other two groups which are basically representing one group of people. Like, the housing reference group does have some people on it that are not on the community advisory board or the local reference group but about half of them are on the community advisory board, local reference group and also on housing reference group.

People identified benefits of individuals sitting on multiple committees…

> …being aware of what else is going on in the community by being on the other committees would be helpful as well.

…as well as the strain having separate committees working on separate issues places upon the community elders who work hard to maintain community harmony.

> The fact that there are so many meetings demanding of the same people, sometimes it would be wise not to have the same people on all committees

Communities and community members often miss out on the 'big picture' when different committees work independently.

> And particularly if you have people only getting snippets from different groups that they sit on, how do we bring that big picture together for someone? Of what this whole bits and pieces mean, in a bigger context. Because to me it is quite obvious, that that's not necessarily happening well.

> But the more that this core group of people that I've been working with that attend most meetings, the more they get involved, the more understanding they are gaining of that bigger picture and … I think that there is room now for a lot more of that bigger picture story for people to be given.

Other government departments seek advice from HRGs if they can't find or form another committee when they visit remote communities…

> What would happen is that they'd say that we're having a Housing Reference Group at the learning centre, and then a Government agency would ring up, oh, they're having a Housing Reference Group today, and so they'll just invite themselves along and say that they're coming.

> Yeah, well that was one of the risks to some of these things, because you know, you have a good engagement model, and everybody wants to jump on board and tie up 24-7 of their time and around everything.

However DH staff were generally of the opinion that HRG affairs should be kept separate from other business and justified this view on the grounds that housing is so controversial that it shouldn't be confused with other issues…

> And it was a huge call too, to keep it separate, because housing has had a lot of stigma, so I mean if we're going to roll out the reform, it's very important not to complicate things

…or simply that this was what their original role was set out to be…

> I strongly believe the housing reference group should deal with housing, because that's what they've been asked to do.

Some DH staff made clear that housing is not separate from other community concerns, and see benefit in discussing housing matters in conjunction with all others….

> Are the issues, the health issues on the community, related to insufficient water or bathing areas? Is that a priority above a kitchen area to make

> sure there is good nutrition, or opposed to food storage, or opposed to what are the priorities in that community based on the community needs and issues? And the only people that can tell you that are the people on the community.

…and it was recognised by some DH staff that good decision making in Aboriginal communities involves accessing, understanding, involving and respecting integrated local governance and authority over all aspects of community life.

> Some of them … key people have that ongoing sort of role, and just about every sort of decision that has to be made will come to those people.

When elders or traditional owners or people with special interests are excluded from decision making, and the 'wrong' people are allocated housing, serious social problems can develop…

> And also if that person is related to that person, or family member, he or she got to have some respect to come into town, and talk to that person; who's the boss, who's the leader of this town camp. You can't just go in and just throw the swag and just lie [down] and just drink. Those people have got to have some respect.

> At KL, some people from G and L were given houses to live in, where my brothers lived for a long time, and now there's all fighting, ambulance and police every night, unhealthy, and my mob had to go back to B.

> I explained to them, if you see mob in your place, overcrowded, just tell them to leave because you have to look after your kids and look after the old people, don't know where they're from, they have to go back to their family member.

Sometimes HRG members work behind the scenes to make sure they are consulted and informed.

> Those two old ladies down at G- they are the ones who have to decide. We talk to them every time.

There is much support within the communities, and some within DH, for communities each to have one single group that engages with the government on a range of issues, (like the old local councils)

> I think people are getting a little bit sick and tired of the amount of meetings they're expected to attend for all sorts of governance, agency issues on communities. And there's a lot talk about trying to probably allocate a day a month if you like when most of those meetings might happen; so that if people came together they could, they could have a better use of resources.

… although there is some concern within DH that expanding the brief of the HRGs has the potential to compromise confidentiality…

> Should they be separate from the other group? I think their business should be separate, but should they be a separate group? I think that's their business.

> I guess there's lots of material that we cover throughout an HRG membership that could be classified as confidential, and sometimes that leaks out in to the community, and can cause tremendous upset.

…while some community members thought that the confidentiality of meetings causes problems.

> They should sit down here and have it [the HRG meeting] with everyone.
> So everyone could listen and understand what's going on

Recommendation 1:

Whole-of-government, whole-of-community decision making must become a priority. The decision making work of HRGs should be seen as one element of community based decision making in relation to the provision of government services, rather than as a stand-alone forum. Such a position recognises that good governance requires integrated decision making at the community level (as opposed to the level of the service - in this case housing). Such an approach will enable decisions around health delivery, education, employment, community development etc. to be made with reference to each other. We recommend that a regular time be set aside for government-community meetings in all relevant communities (for example once a month on a Friday) where all government related community business can be negotiated in a range of contexts – sometimes meetings with particular elected community representatives, sometimes whole community level meetings, sometimes groups of affected people.

> Successful negotiations between 'whole of government' and 'whole of communities' occur as much because of good communication practices within government and within communities as between them. Inter-agency arrangements like the 'Healthy Homes Working Group'[6] need to be revived and strengthened if integrated solutions are to be negotiated at community levels. Whole-of-government groups should work together to negotiate collaborative agreement making practices addressing a variety of agendas at the local level. The often hidden work of elders maintaining community harmony would be better supported by government if local community decision making authority were integrated into a single group. This local group would need to negotiate the role and processes for whole-of-community meetings as the needs arise. The relationship between representative group meetings (HRGs etc.) and whole-of-community meetings is difficult to dictate. Both are important. This is an area where more policy consultation and trials need to take place, and different solutions tailored for different communities.

The Community's Role In Making Decisions About Housing.

The move to the new NT remote housing system occurred at the same time as other significant changes in the way Aboriginal affairs were managed in the NT (i.e. 'super shires', the transfer of management of Aboriginal Housing from Aboriginal Housing Associations to DH, NTER) and these changes were generally seen by HRG and community members as all part of the one government initiative, and a deliberate move by government away from

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6   Working Groups were established to coordinate inter-governmental agency efforts to make progress toward achieving Closing the Gap building block targets. See http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/our-responsibilities/indigenous-australians/programs-services/closing-the-gap/closing-the-gap-targets-and-building-blocks

collaboration and involvement of Aboriginal people in decision making.

There was a general recognition on the part of both government and community that this has contributed to the 'disempowerment' of community authorities in recent years.

> It is a feeling of total disempowerment. Not only with local councils, which had all the power in terms of what happened in the community where people went to the councillor and addressed issues; well, they were removed. Then came along the Shires in terms of the Local Government reform, and took away and stripped the assets of these communities, in the community's eyes. And then come along the intervention and stripped them of any choice or power, again. So total disempowerment and total confusion of who does what now.

…and community members believe that the HRGs are not giving them the voice they were promised, or solving the problems they experience…

> So people are going, 'Well, … A didn't work, so what about B, C or D options?' And there were no other options, so what people are saying is "Why are you not listening to us. We ask you for this and you're not doing anything for us, you're not doing anything. But you're leaving us with no answers".

Within DH probably a majority of staff viewed the changes around housing (from community decision making to advice) as ultimately beneficial and desirable, citing housing allocation under Aboriginal housing associations as corrupt (the best and newest houses always going to the most powerful people)…

> …but eventually, hopefully, people understand that the old ways in which the majority missed out and few got almost everything, are over…

…and citing the unwillingness or inability of community members to allocate housing on the basis of need rather than rights, including seniority in the community…

> …because before, well, we all know the strongest got the new houses. In most cases, you know, it was not fair and transparent.

However we found that HRG members saw the special needs of some people as key concerns that they were dealing with…

> So we decide who goes in that house. People that are maybe on dialysis, or maybe that person has been living here for quite a long time, a resident of this camp. Or might be one of the family members that are maybe on (dialysis), so they can be looked after.

…and they were clear on the need to involve (in some places) traditional owners (or in other places) community elders in information sharing and decision making – even if behind the scenes.

> It's really important that this happens for our elders [their involvement in thinking about housing], because they are the ones who provide the foundation. We [HRG members] have to make that happen.

HRG members were very clear that they and other community members had insights into the local community histories and politics that are crucial to good

governance and good housing outcomes, and which were often not recognised or ignored by DH.

> And you've got to come with a good reputation (to be allocated a house) because we (community members) come from a background where we all know that. We will know of them, and we'll know what happens from other aspects that aren't even, that (Territory) Housing don't know.

> …and they should be listening to the people that are sitting, that have stayed in their Community for a long time.

People are concerned that their knowledge is not recognised and their concerns around community harmony are not heeded when making housing allocation decisions, and that many poor social outcomes have resulted…

> Yeah, we're [HRG members] just advising, you know, talking to them … this is not a good idea, or this person's not good or this family's not good. We tell them, we explain why it's not good because the thing will happen like at Y-, like at H-, all the same fighting, that's what are the families we didn't want moving in and then they went ahead and done it, let them in, and there's been fighting going on.

> (DH is) not acting properly. We got some of (people in our community who have been allocated houses): ' Oh, you can't kick me out, I'm your cousin brother, I'm your sister, why you rubbish me?' Then sit down and they start using dirty words. But me, whoever come to my place, I say the gate's open, or I'll call the police. But we need (T-) council to work as well strong, you know.

Often they felt that agreements that had been made in good faith at the HRG level were being overturned by particular people in the central offices in Alice Springs and Darwin…

> …they [DH on-ground workers] are doing their job, what we're telling them, but it's whoever they're telling in the (Department of) Housing are changing, and then when it goes up to Darwin it's different again..

> Yes. They listen, that person. They listen to us. But once they have that, they get a different thought when they go into their office.

…with HRG members getting the blame within the community for unwelcome decisions made by DH…

> Yeah, but it may look that way [that we are not responsible because we only provide advice] but the people who get the bad decision, they see us as the people that are contributing to that decision, and we're the face people, they see us every day

…and the good will generated at the community level being compromised by decisions made higher up.

> There is a genuine attempt by the Territory Housing people to listen, but it seems that further up the hierarchy of decision making that the housing reference group's input is being given very little credence, or being listened to very much.

This impacts on the ability of the HRG to be the partnership through which complex decisions are made, and ideas and information are exchanged 'both ways' and through which both ways accountability can be achieved.

And that's part of this whole HRG thing, it's about working in partnership. I think that we need to understand that from the Government's point of view, we're working in partnership with the community, and you need to understand that you've got some responsibilities to deliver in an appropriate way.

We are wondering what really, if they're coming in to our meeting, sometimes we think that they're only coming in to fool Aboriginal people. The Government are not listening to the community.

Recommendation 2:

Agreement over housing allocation and maintenance should be finalised through careful negotiations on the ground, not in regional offices. The strong distinction currently made between advising and deciding should be replaced by a commitment to negotiation and decision making on the ground wherever possible. The advising versus deciding dichotomy is essentially an unnecessary one that produces ill feeling between HRGs and community members, and between communities and government. There is a long tradition of successful agreement making in Aboriginal communities where both government and local agendas have been dealt with carefully by key representatives. Those processes should be reinvigorated. Only under rare circumstances would executive decisions need to be made by government.

All levels of Australian governments are making clear statement about the need and desire to engage effectively, and HRGs are a perfect opportunity. Community members' desire for community harmony should be identified and supported as an underlying principle for decision making. Governments would commit to the idea that collaborative decision making contributes to healthy communities and good governance. This approach should replace the current system of advice sent to head office for final decision.

Flexible, Timely Local Both-Ways Success Factors

Talking to DH staff and community members from both the Top End and Central Australia, we found a very large range of styles and practices of HRG implementation. Community members and senior DH staff all commended the community-level workers (Community Housing Officers and Housing Support Officers) for the hard and often thankless work they do bringing HRG meetings together and dealing with the everyday ongoing work of providing housing in remote communities.

What it is, is these people down here at this level, they're very busy doing what they're doing, in fact they're flat out.

This work depends upon hard work on both sides…

Because their job is fairly stressful, intensive, and I mean, they're on the road a fair bit

…but can lead to 'burnout'…

G- and I talk about their fatigue and the burnout

This work inevitably involves considerable good will, flexibility and discretion, in which on ground workers negotiate their own approaches to problem solving.

> No that's my phone; but see, I don't want to carry two phones and so many people have my personal phone number, tenants from various place; look you know, it's a mobile phone, you pull it out of your pocket. I don't care if it's a Saturday. Sometimes I'd rather, yeah okay, you know I'm not in the office now, what's going on, I'll be back to you. It's only a few minutes out of your life.

Examples of flexibility include the range of approaches we found for dealing with difficulties presented by organising meetings that met the requirements set out in the 'operational guidelines' including negotiation around achieving a quorum…

> …the Housing Reference Group couldn't get their act together to have a meeting to allocate those houses. So we had to cut half the membership out because we thought it was too many, and we moved people on that didn't want to attend Housing Reference Group meetings.

> There is quite a bit of work involved in, at times, we'll actively go around. I'll actively go around and round people up.

…meeting at least four times a year…

> If they've got a pressing matter they'll make a meeting with us, and when we say we want regular, we were supposed to be having them once a month, and then maybe an extra one chucked in if there were certain issues.

…with the required prior notice…

> And the protocol is, I'll ring and talk to P, "We're going to have a Reference Group meeting on this date, run this past the community, check what's happening, 'Is this a good date? Are we going to get people?' and they say, Yep'. And so we'll put up a poster saying there's going to be a Housing Reference Group meeting on this date, please talk to your local Housing Reference Group member if you have any issues you want to raise.

…having a reasonable balance of clan representation at particular meetings within the quorum.

> Okay, guys, ladies, who do you want from your camp? And they can decide amongst themselves. We've never had to come to a vote or anything like that and it seems to be a fairly self regulating process…

> …you've got to really work to ensure that you've got this balanced group [at the HRG meeting]…

> …We divide ourselves up into different areas. West, north, east and south. Those who live on the west side, speak for the west. And they will speak from the east, the south and the north. So that's the work we do, and then give it to them.

> I'm not on the … housing reference committee. I can see that the housing committee is made up of people from different clan groups. Different clan groups, we trust them to be a voice for the different clan groups, to represent what our thoughts are concerning arrangements for our housing.

In addition the on ground DH staff developed local approaches to deciding upon the chair for each meeting…

> We're actually doing similar to what we're doing with community advisory board and the local reference group; we're nominating someone to be the chairperson for the day of the members that are there, look around and say, okay, who will be the chairperson for the day and we've nominated. So it's virtually a rotational…

…the annual replacement of HRG members…

> ..but you might get people where we're just renewing everybody from last year where you would just recap and go okay, we're starting again but you've all been on this group; now we just go over what are the main points…

…and induction.

> It's [induction] usually done at the first [meeting], not always because we don't always have the time, but the membership's 12 months, and so when you get a renewal of membership, ideally that's when you do your …, education, induction, that sort of thing.

This flexible and sometimes ad hoc implementation of policy was a necessary and productive aspect of community-level work.

> Yeah, and I mean, you're out on a community, we stay out there for periods of time and you just, well if you've worked on community, you know what it's like. You're out there, you meet, you greet, you get a profile there, people know you and then people approach you whether you're in the shop, up the street, the Shire office; and to me, that is the correct way of going about it.

And DH staff's ability to undertake a flexible approach which enables successful community level negotiations depends very much on the work done 'building relationships'.

> Yeah, a good idea to have them [HRG meetings], but we should have more time to get together and talk with the residents and listen to their side of the story, what the problems are that are happening in those houses and the area, which way we can move forward, or we're going backward. But the thing is we want to listen to people that live here…

> We stood our ground. We'd been in that house for over 20 years and when they fixed it up, they told us we couldn't move back in. (They said it was) for someone else. But we stood our ground. We talked to them and they let us back in.   We stood our ground.

Most agreed that more time spent together by DH staff and HRG and community members outside meeting times would be beneficial.

> I think we need to be spending a lot more time with HRGs; maybe not in a formal context or a meeting, but just connecting with; because those individuals who make up an HRG membership can often be traditional owners or elders, or leaders in their community.

In some places HRG members have taken it upon themselves to develop strategies to address the problems within their communities which are not being addressed by the current system (e.g. lack of negotiation with Territory Alliance, lack of involvement of land owners, people who should be on HRG but can't

because of other commitments…)

> We know the people who live here. So I said, all right, let's do it [form a small sub HRG team to engage the Alliance], what do you think? So we volunteered, the three of us, to say 'Look, we think our liaison team here and everyone can talk through us and we can let everyone know … what do you think of that?'

Community members often find the building and R&M crews difficult to work with

> One day they came down … to say we're going to turn off (the power) for four or five hours, and everybody just blatantly refused and said no, don't come here and do it then, because we've got sick people living here and we've got kids, it was the holidays and the air conditioning, it was hot as all buggery, and people just refused and said no; and then they cut it back to one here and one there, whatever. They're flexible like that but in their first approach it's a bit abrupt, … they just think people don't have lives really, you know. It just seems a bit rude.

A few DH staff thought that problems of misunderstanding and mistrust would be solved with better induction of HRG members.

> I think the HRGs have got to know more what their role is, like we probably need to start doing some more inductions and training with them, and do a bit more mentoring to actually get them to function properly, for our benefit, their own benefit, the community's benefit.

However, across HRGs, members take the view that across the membership they have among them the combined skills to participate effectively and meaningfully in housing related discussions.

> …we've got a lot of people that can speak the language of most of the groups that are there, and what happens is that people with a better education are able to pull the paperwork and have a look at it and sort of interpret it, so that then everyone else can understand it and ask the questions, and then someone will tell the rest of the people about that, actually what you're talking about, so they can get an understanding of that.

Nevertheless some DH staff believe the HRG members do not understand their roles…

> My fear is presently that many of our HRG members may not fully understand their role.

> But I still am not convinced that people understand what they're there [as an HRG member] for.

…however many community members believe that they are not properly informed or consulted about policy, forthcoming meetings, or provided with feedback about decisions made in DH offices.

> We need you to be at a meeting this afternoon, it's very urgent and we're going to do this. That whole, it's sort of one sided, they get what they want but you don't get the other side coming back.

> No. I think, we don't actually go out in the community and tell them what a decision is.

Most importantly some DH staff insisted that until DH is responsive, including seeing repairs and maintenance requests being fulfilled promptly and visibly, relations between communities and DH will not improve.

> It is a difficult concept … 'This is not your house any more' and … you'll have to pay more rent; so it's really … getting staff to understand the obligations of Government … it's around responsive R&M, it's around having some credibility around allocation. So there's got to be a strong, robust mechanism … Feedback is a critical part of maintaining good relationships

> Like we were saying, that's what the meeting's for, let us know then what's going on and what are youse going to do about it, or how are youse going to go about it, you know. Just things being done, that's all, just let us know.

> Say I'm paying the rent and my son, we pay for things what we damage, we pay for it. See what's happened to the gate. My nephew's gate, there's no gate. I talked to the Housing, he needs the gate to get fixed. That gate's never been fixed, it's still there.

Recommendation 3:

DH should put in place structures and processes which facilitate flexible transparent 'both ways' negotiations and information flow upon which the success of HRGs and other consultation systems depend. These could include

> A 1800 number whereby community members could contact DH with questions to do with R&M, allocations, HRG meetings etc, and get a personal response (phone call, visit) within a guaranteed period. This may be the most cost effective way of enhancing the good will that does exist between DH and some of the more disaffected communities. It is this commitment to good local governance which ensures long term benefits.

> Employment arrangements whereby DH staff (at all levels) and HRG members spend more time together outside meetings and ensuring community members have opportunities to understand and contribute to housing policy. This would enable the growth and support of the quite different and distinctive flexible meeting and negotiation practices which have developed in different places.

Recognition Of Authority

It was widely acknowledged that the people who serve on HRGs are giving up their time and contributing to the ongoing work of making a difference in their community.

> …it nearly becomes a full time job for these people, just facilitating all of the Government demand on that community

Community members pointed out that the authority of the elders was crucial to HRG success, and elders need to be paid in recognition and respect of their authority…

> …because those individuals who make up an HRG membership can often be traditional owners or elders, or leaders in their community…

> They should [get paid] because they're talking for their clans.

…indeed, more than half the DH staff interviewed agreed that people should be paid for HRG work.

> It takes up people's time, something that I personally, it's my personal view that they should be paid.

> My personal view is that people should be remunerated, but it should be based on people's participation and involvement

> I think people should be remunerated, and I don't think the fact that they don't make decisions should be an issue.

> Usually the meetings are held in the daytime and there is no either sitting fees or any way to reimburse people who are employed full time, to reimburse the employer for the loss of their staff, or to reimburse the person who might lose pay if they do attend the meeting.

> And the way it's happening, without any reimbursement or way of enabling those people to be at meetings, we're not getting a good cross section of the community on committees.

Despite these strong arguments some DH staff thought that such payments may be an inducement for dishonesty….

> In my personal opinion, no, [HRG members should not be paid] because I think once you start to bring money into it, does that take away; I could be wrong, but does that take away a completely unbiased membership? Are people just saying, yes, I'll do it because they're going to get money to do it?

…or that people should contribute their time voluntarily out of a sense of duty to the community.

> You have a responsibility to put back into your community. So I would hope that people would put their hands up, and want to be involved, and when we set up an HRG that they'd come along and have a presence, and be actively involved.

At the same time, some community members think of the HRGs as being of little benefit…

> And you know, like, four years on, there's not really a great deal of people now that are even interested in any of this (HRG business). They just said that it's just, it's no good, it's not working and all the things that we were promised are crap.

…and believe that if workable ways of involving elders in housing decisions cannot be found, then social problems will multiply.

> We feel a bit powerless because like when we talk about the homes, we used to be able to put a trespass notice on somebody or whatever, and that person wasn't allowed to enter, not only they weren't allowed in the house but they weren't allowed in the Valley per se … That's when we were able to do that and that's how we kept the harmony pretty much under control.

Often the most suitable people to be making decisions for the community are already employed and their employers are reluctant to let them take time off for a HRG meeting.

> So the problem is, people are being expected to come and do it for the goodness of their heart and the problem there is, when people in full time employment, such as school teachers, school staff, the health workers, very rarely sit on this committee. They're not there on those committees. And they're the workers and the thinkers in the community.

A whole of government approach would ensure that these people are made available for meetings, and a remuneration system could compensate the employers of workers.

> That is, one thing that you have raised though, is a lot of people who are on Reference Group meetings tend to also be employed. Sometimes this creates difficulties with their employers…

Recommendation 4:

Identified community spaces, and remuneration to facilitate and recognise senior participants' knowledge, authority and participation. Successful community-government interactions require that senior managers in both government and communities are properly involved in complex decision making and properly remunerated for their work. Stage 1 of this research recommended 'a space in the community where they can meet together whenever they want to and talk about community issues – not just housing'. Such a space would also function as an appropriate site to receive government and other visitors. Payments to senior community members involved in decision-making and negotiations around housing and other community needs would affirm their role in working with government and community members to maintain good local governance.

> This approach would in the long term improve the quality and accountability of agreed local ways forward, and be very cost effective in terms of maintaining community health and harmony. It would also help guarantee the critical involvement of key community figures in decision making collaborations between communities and government.

Conclusion

"Under Labor, they were often forced off their country into larger communities and even towns, with disastrous results. We support their right to live where they choose, in decent housing … administered through local organisations or councils. … My dream is to see the day housing in these places are built, occupied, and maintained by their owners."

Hon Alison Anderson, The Australian, 3 Nov 2012

"The NT Government [is] to strengthen community governance by:

- Ensuring that local government is respectful of cultural authority and is connected with the people it governs;
- That services are being delivered to an acceptable standard; and
- Like other levels of government, it is accountable for its use of public money."

Adam Giles, "Driving Local Government Reform", 4th December 2012[7]

The MTRO research was conducted over three years, and involved government workers and Aboriginal community members from Central Australia and the Top End. We had expected that most of the discussions around HRGs would focus upon how they work, how they are formed and renewed, the guidelines for their operation, and their effectiveness. However we found most people to be concerned more about how the HRGs fit into the wider scheme of things, particularly the role of senior cultural authorities in promoting community health and harmony through housing, and their role in collaborative decision making with government.

The publication of this report coincides with the recent election of a new government in the Northern Territory. The policy direction of the new government indicates an emphasis on consultation, community level governance, and on Aboriginal control of housing in remote communities. This research has found that these moves are strongly supported by people within the public service, and Aboriginal communities in a wide spread of contexts.

We hope also to have demonstrated some key changes which would be very well received and cost effective. The implementation of such changes would be an important contribution to government working with cultural authorities to strengthen community governance and improve housing outcomes.

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7   http://newsroom.nt.gov.au/index.cfm?fuseaction=viewRelease&id=10149&d=5

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Contacts

Michael Christie michael.christie@cdu.edu.au

Matthew Campbell matthew.campbell@cdu.edu.au

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