

Human Rights Council of Australia Inc

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CAR/HRCA PROJECT - ENGAGING THE NGO SECTOR IN RECONCILIATION

FINAL REPORT - JULY 1997

1) SUMMARY

This is the final report to the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation on the CAR/HRCA twelve month project to engage the NGO community in the reconciliation process.

As agreed this final report includes:

- achievements to date
- situation analysis
- recommendations for future actions by the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation

Achievements to Date

HRCA was awarded the tender for the project to engage Australian development, social service and human rights non-government agencies in the reconciliation process and to report by 30 June 1997 and that project is now completed. It is clear that work by these NGOs toward reconciliation, on the basis of acknowledgment of the past and commitment to social justice, will continue.

Over the course of the year many different NGOs have become actively engaged in the reconciliation process, while others have further developed and expanded their existing commitments. As envisaged in the HRCA strategy this engagement has taken different forms.

- **Save The Children** have committed resources to a feasibility study of running projects with Australian indigenous communities.
- **The Salvation Army** has highlighted the importance of reconciliation on the front page of its paper *The War Cry*.
- **Australian Baptist World Aid** has provided resources to support the advocacy work of indigenous organisations on Native Title and has produced materials for its members highlighting the relationship between co-existence on the land and reconciliation in relationships.

- **The Public Interest Law Clearing House** has highlighted the issue of the *Stolen Generations* in a special report encouraging lawyers to lend assistance to survivors of this practice in their pursuit of compensation.

The **NSW Association of Community Legal Centres**, **Mission Australia** and the **International Commission of Jurists** are just three of the organisations that have established internal reconciliation sub-committees to develop policies and action plans to work with indigenous organisations and individuals in the pursuit of social justice.

Over the past year NGOs have made significant contributions and commitments in relation to:

- advocacy to all levels of government on reconciliation and wider indigenous issues
- building awareness and support in their memberships and wider community
- program commitments to address indigenous disadvantage

After a year, and particularly after the May 1997 Reconciliation Convention which was attended by a number of important organisations from the sector, the momentum for NGO engagement has only increased.

In this regard it is particularly apposite to note that **World Vision Australia** (WVA) have undertaken to provide the resources to facilitate meetings which would hold NGOs accountable to their commitments, exchange and learn from each others' experiences and encourage greater involvement by the constituencies and by those NGOs who have not yet made commitments.

To this end WVA have called meetings in Sydney and Melbourne in July to bring together organisations from a range of sectors to look at the role they can play in building the *peoples movement* for reconciliation.

The **Association of Major Community Organisations** (AMCO), which brings together some of the largest community organisations in Australia, including Red Cross Australia, The Smith Family, Barnardo's, and the Salvation Army has asked for representatives of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation and the HRCA to address their next meeting on July 28th.

The **Australian Council for Overseas Aid** (ACFOA) and the **Australian Council for Social Service** (ACOSS), have as peak bodies, both developed and adopted policy positions on reconciliation and some of the specific recommendations of the Council's Social Justice Report. These positions provide a basis for further action by themselves and their member organisations as well as encouraging their member organisations to get committed.

The attached table (appendix 1) illustrates the commitments made and activities now underway in this sector.

Also attached (appendix 2) are copies of the HRCA leaflet, "*What NGOs can do for reconciliation*", which has proved to be a useful tool in engaging the sector in discussions and making it clear that there exists a range of practical and concrete commitments

organisations can make. Enclosed with this report are some examples of the public and policy positions developed over the past year.

2) SITUATION ANALYSIS

As the original HRCA strategy argued, Australian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are an important sector of Australian society, and therefore have an important contribution to make to the success of the reconciliation process.

These organisations both reflect, and lead community opinion. Many including World Vision, Community Aid Abroad, Save The Children and Mission Australia have a large membership/supporter base who place trust in these organisations to tackle poverty and disadvantage in Australia and overseas.

Their views are respected on a professional level by politicians, the media and the wider community. Their willingness to become actively engaged in the reconciliation process is encouraging and provides hope for the future.

A growing number of these NGOs are now centrally committed to working in practical ways to further the process and outcomes of reconciliation. More NGOs in the social service and overseas development sectors now view work towards reconciliation based on recognition of the rights of the first Australians, and working with indigenous organisations and individuals to realise these rights, as central to their work and mission.

The strategy put forward by HRCA suggested engaging organisations on behalf of CAR, on the basis of where they were and working cooperatively with them to explore the most effective commitments they could make to the reconciliation process and where necessary offering assistance in the form of advice, guidance and materials. It was always intended that HRCA would seek to act as a catalyst to this engagement.

Some organisations, such as **CAA**, were already committed but over the past year have taken on a stronger leadership role in encouraging others in their sector to be involved. Others such as **Save The Children** have overcome significant barriers and are now in the position of committing resources to community development projects in Australia for the first time.

It remains the case that there is a wide variation in the levels of engagement by NGOs. It is important, and challenging, to build the support for this engagement at a senior level, and in the membership constituencies, in order to gain real commitments to active support for reconciliation. As the project concludes some of the major organisations are only now making the first steps. CAR has an important role to play in continuing to offer them support.

A number of organisations have made a clear connection between reconciliation and other issues of importance to Australia and Australia's indigenous peoples including Native Title and the Stolen Generations Report. Some have become actively engaged in wider community coalitions actively campaigning on these issues. To some extent it has been the media and public interest over these issues that has been important in establishing the climate for organisations to feel the need to become involved.

This link between Reconciliation and wider issues has always been explicit in CAR's work, as evidenced by its key issues for reconciliation, its social justice report and its commitment to building a *people's movement*. It should be noted that the recommendations of the social justice report helped to make the concept of reconciliation specific and practical for many organisations that had difficulty in conceptualising reconciliation.

As the HRCA strategy suggested, the direct involvement of CAR has been vital to the success of the project - in terms of support and direction from the Secretariat and in the willingness of CAR members to address meetings of different organisations in the sector.

CAR has been singularly successful in overcoming the reservations of organisations to become actively involved in what many had previously seen as indigenous issues and persuading organisations that reconciliation is a key issue for all Australians and that they have a role to play.

As the formal reconciliation process moves into its final three year phase the part to be played by this sector is very much within the hands of CAR. The commitment of the sector is now there but still needs to be nurtured, and guided.

3) RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE ACTION BY CAR

HRCA would like to emphasise that the conclusion of the project does not conclude the contribution that NGOs are committed to making to reconciliation. Significant groundwork has been laid and commitments made. HRCA believes the continuing involvement of CAR with this sector is important to maintaining the momentum and achievements of the past year and in providing guidance and leadership into the future.

HRCA therefore recommends that CAR

- officially welcome the offer by World Vision Australia to provide the resources to play a monitoring role and facilitate meetings which would hold NGOs accountable to their commitments, exchange and learn from each others' experiences and encourage greater involvement by the constituencies and by those NGOs who have not yet made commitments. **NB.** CAR member Marjorie Thorpe met with Lynn Arnold CEO of WVA in Melbourne on 24 July. It is suggested this be followed up in writing,
- offer to assist WVA in this work through nominating a liaison point in the Secretariat, Council members being willing to address meetings as appropriate and keeping WVA informed of new initiatives and directions in the reconciliation process. It is suggested a representative of WVA be invited to the CAR Secretariat at the earliest opportunity for a briefing.
- convene a meeting of those who have been involved in working with different sectors, including NGOs, youth, women, faith groups, ethnic communities and local government to discuss experiences and learn from the different strategies employed and suggest future directions for sectoral engagement in reconciliation as a contribution to CAR's

strategic discussions. It is suggested such meetings regularly after this, perhaps twice a year.

HRCA believes that the strategy pursued in this project of seeking organisational support at a high level through personal approaches may have a wider application in CAR's efforts to build wider support for Reconciliation in different sectors of Australian society in its final three years.

The approach has a number of advantages:

- it is relatively low cost - it is not dependent on the production and distribution of printed materials
- personal approaches reach the target audience in a way that paper cannot - decision makers in organisations are not easily reached through pre-printed material, or even letters, but are likely to agree to a request for a meeting. A relatively small number of decision makers can determine whether that wider audience in their organisation is reached.
- organisations can choose for themselves, in consultation with CAR, how best to contribute to, and become engaged in the reconciliation process.
- supporting organisations undertake to meet the costs of communicating the reconciliation message to their supporters and the wider community leaving CAR to use its scarce resources to meet other needs.

Attachments:

Table of NGO Commitments

What NGOs Can Do For Reconciliation

*WorldVisionAustralia: summary of reconciliation activities
copy of "welcome to the land article" from WV news*

Salvation Army: copies of "The War Cry" articles on reconciliation

ACSJC: "Justice Trends" front pages on Reconciliation

UNAA: Statement of Policy on Reconciliation

ACFOA/ACOSS/ACTU media statement on Native Title

ACFOA: policy on reconciliation and Native Title

Mission Australia: correspondence

NACLC:

Newsletter Report on Reconciliation Convention
