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Ignored: lessons learnt on the ground

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Philip Martin resigned from his role with Cape York Partnerships on Thursday

Many of the ideas in Canberra about Aboriginal welfare reform are incapable of standing up in remote communities. I know this because I was one of the people testing these ideas with Noel Pearson's Cape York Partnerships.

The research we undertook underpins the report From Hand Out to Hand Up, Pearson's blueprint for reform, which was handed to the federal Indigenous Affairs Minister, Mal Brough, in June.

From November last year I spent six months testing Pearson's ideas in Aurukun, 840 kilometres north-west of Cairns. It is a small town with a population of 1200, six clans and as many languages. There are pastel houses on stilts surrounded by 1.8-metre cyclone fences, calypso music blaring at all hours and groups sitting under trees in their dirt yards around fires.

There are low levels of literacy, hopeless school attendance, atrocious health, high unemployment, violence, grog and ganga.

My job, with a female colleague, was to work full-time with people in Aurukun to engage them on welfare reform: to sow Pearson's insight that through passive welfare - known as sit-down money - the community is producing essentially passive people.

By building trust over time, my colleague and I were to gently shepherd Aurukun's people towards articulating the welfare reform principles as though they were their own. This would involve asking people living with 20 family members in one broken-down house about the provision of housing, asking people who had never had a real job about what sort of training services might help, asking parents with illiterate 12-year-old children about schooling - while reminding them of the role sit-down money played in producing such mealy outcomes.

Similar research was undertaken in the towns of Coen, Mossman Gorge and Hopevale. The plan was to eventually build this feedback into policy before sending it to Brough. We were told this process would take at least a year and more likely two. But this real research conducted with real people is barely cited in the From Hand Out to Hand Up report.

The responses I encountered to many welfare reform proposals in Aurukun were mixed and confused at best and openly hostile at worst. There was strong talk that

domestic violence would increase if mothers alone had their family tax benefits cut for their children's non-attendance at school.

There was concern that cutting work-for-the-dole programs without investing in new enterprise would result in increased levels of self-harm, as some of the most dysfunctional people might injure themselves to get on pensions.

Less than five months into the pilot program, a document called Making an Impact was created and submitted to Brough.

On March 20 the project manager of the pilot wrote an email to us explaining: "The package was developed at Brough's invitation to deliver substantial and immediate on-the-ground change from July 1, 2007 ... The timing of the proposal takes advantage of the minister's desire for change and the likely timing of the next federal election.

"The fact that the Australian Government is prepared to consider funding an aggressive platform of reforms prior to the submission of the preliminary report, let alone the final report, is something in which you should all be intensely proud."

This was three months before the Every Child is Sacred report was released by the Northern Territory Government - the supposed impetus for the "emergency" action in the Northern Territory.

The Federal Government cherry-picked some of the harshest measures suggested in the Making an Impact and From Hand Out to Hand Up reports. The work was not complete and, certainly in Aurukun, was not a response to overarching community calls to implement welfare reform.

This could be the case in Mossman Gorge, one of the other communities studied, which is five minutes from the centre of Mossman township, a beautiful tourist destination.

Mossman Gorge has access to resources and infrastructure beyond the wildest dreams of a truly remote community such as Aurukun. Of the four Cape York communities where the ideas were tested, Aurukun is the only one with significant similarities to those identified as in need of protection in the Northern Territory.

The "state of emergency" rhetoric and blitzkrieg-like planning of interventions appears likely to miss key lessons learnt in many years of sustained community engagement.

What started as a pilot project last November with purported ambitions of fine tuning reform over the next one to two years has led instead to an opportunistic collaboration with the Coalition, and the transference of untested and uncertain policy ideas onto the peoples in Northern Territory, and soon, elsewhere.