

Australian governments have failed Indigenous peoples, says Oxfam

Report calls for reestablishment of a national elected representative body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples



*Oxfam report calls for drastic overhaul of all areas of Indigenous policy and interaction with government.
Photograph: Paul Miller/AAP*

Calla Wahlquist
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Successive Australian governments have failed to achieve meaningful change for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, according to a report by Oxfam that calls for a drastic overhaul of all areas of Indigenous policy and interaction with government.

The report, released on Wednesday, outlines 10 recommendations including changing the native title system to make it easier to both attain and leverage as an economic and cultural asset; reestablishing a national elected representative body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; changing the funding system to prioritise community-run Indigenous organisations; and implementing every relevant recommendation from every major report into Indigenous affairs in the past 30 years.

The last task alone would keep the federal government in policy reform for several years: the majority of recommendations made by significant Indigenous inquiries, from the 339 recommendations of the 1991 royal commission into Aboriginal deaths

in custody onwards, have never been implemented or have been implemented only in part.

The report comes a week after a UN investigator released a damning preliminary report saying repeated failure to enact UN recommendations on Indigenous issues would damage Australia's chances of securing a seat on the security council.

Writing in the foreword, former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social justice commissioner Prof Tom Calma said the government should implement the recommendations of the Oxfam report with "all possible urgency" to break the cycle of policy renewal and change that had rarely resulted in meaningful change on the ground.

"Over the years, the urgent need to respect the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples has been documented in far too many reports, reviews and inquiries – by royal commissions, parliamentary committees, government agencies, human rights and equal opportunity commissions, respected United Nations bodies, and indeed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples ourselves," Calma said.

"Yet these reports are consistently ignored by successive governments, while too many of my Indigenous brothers and sisters continue to experience the reality of these failures every day in our communities. Sadly, too many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples still live shorter, less healthy lives with lower socioeconomic outcomes than non-Indigenous people."

Australia is only on track to meet one of its seven closing the gap targets. Delivering his closing the gap speech in February, prime minister Malcolm Turnbull said "community driven" initiatives would be central to meeting those targets.

Opposition leader Bill Shorten offered his support for some of the changes proposed by Oxfam, saying Labor will "carefully study its findings and recommendations".

He criticised the Turnbull government's Indigenous affairs policy as being "defined by savage cuts to services, a loss of local control, a failure to listen to Indigenous voices, and policy-making which is paternalistic and overly bureaucratic".

Those approaches were criticised by Oxfam, but it also criticised the 2007 Northern Territory Intervention, which was re-badged and continued under Labor in 2011.

The report called for a shift in strategy from policies that are led by the bureaucracy and formed with very little Indigenous consultation, to policies led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and supported by a genuine process of consultation.

It particularly criticised the Abbott government's Indigenous Advancement Strategy, which it found disadvantaged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led organisations.

According to an analysis of the IAS by Sydney University associate law professor Lesley Russell, provided in the report: "There is every indication that the government

is increasingly looking to mainstream services and programs to meet Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' needs, especially in non-remote areas.”

Russell said that while 55% of the programs funded under the IAS were run by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, 81.4% of direct Indigenous expenditure went toward mainstream services.

Nolan Hunter, a Bardi man and chief executive of the Kimberley Land Council, said he supported calls for a reform to the native title system, which he said was designed to allow states and corporations the power to extinguish the already limited rights of traditional owners to access their land.

“The right to hunt, fish and perform ceremonies and cultural practices out on country is secured under federal law, it does not prevent the state government from coming in on top of that and changing tenure, changing access,” he said. “It’s a weak form of property right.”

Hunter said native title laws also disadvantaged people whose lands had been colonised earlier than the Kimberley, where white settlers did not arrive in earnest until the start of the 20th century.

Under the Native Title Act 1993, established following the Mabo high court decision in 1992, the law only recognises native title if the traditional owners have been able to prove a continuous cultural connection to the land.

“The irony of this is Australia finally recognises that Aboriginal people have been dispossessed of their land, and then they say that they are going to set up a law that says you have to prove that you were dispossessed,” Hunter said.

“For people that were in the line of first contact, that creates a bias against them because they don’t have the connection to that country necessarily because they were moved off it or forcibly taken away.”