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Business `not the answer' for blacks

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The argument by Cape York leader Noel Pearson and others that Aborigines in remote communities can achieve economic self-sufficiency by becoming entrepreneurs and small businesspeople is dangerous and wrong, indigenous development worker Olga Havnen said yesterday.

"It's not the panacea and let's not pretend it is. I think it is dishonest and will prove to be another self-sabotaging, self-defeating initiative," said Ms Havnen, who is the indigenous programs manager for the Fred Hollows Foundation.

It was more important to focus on the crisis in education which perpetuates poverty and poor health, she said, shown by recent Northern Territory literacy tests which found only two year 3 Aboriginal students had adequate competency.

Such low literacy levels, and the fact that most small businesses fail within five years, showed that those pinning hopes on entrepreneurship as a solution were "going to be sadly disappointed".

"We need emergency remedial programs and we need them today. If you are going to overcome socio-economic disadvantage in Aboriginal communities, it has to be a multi-pronged approach. It has to come back to education."

Ms Havnen, an organiser of a two-day Sydney conference which begins today on philanthropy and corporate investment in indigenous communities, said a lack of political will, combined with poor resourcing, were the real causes of a failure to bring about real change.

It was a fallacy that indigenous affairs was "awash with money".

Nationally, the funding shortfall for housing was so great that it would take 20 more years to meet the needs of the current population.

Meanwhile, it was impossible to eradicate diseases such as scabies or trachoma while there was overcrowding. There are no secondary schools in any Aboriginal community in the Northern Territory, she said.

"What is happening in this country is genocide by neglect. It is not ignorance or lack of data. In the past 25 years, there have been 21 reports on Aboriginal health," she said.

"This is where I am hoping the corporate and philanthropic sector will take some leadership, because the Government won't."

Philanthropy was much bigger than people realised and many corporations and family trusts had committed themselves without any publicity to trying to make a

difference in indigenous affairs because they were dismayed over Aboriginal disadvantage, she said.

However, if organisations plunged in with a "one size fits all formula", without understanding cultural sensitivities, or the need to have a community member championing a project, their efforts could be "self-sabotaging".

Smart thinking was needed, such as that behind a Fred Hollows Foundation primary school nutrition program at Beswick in the Territory in conjunction with the Jawoyn Association and local Aboriginal women.

The attendance of only 50-60 children daily was this year lifted to 120 by providing breakfast and lunch at school, paid for largely with contributions made by families from their family support payments. A nutritionist works with the program.

Building "capacity" starts that small, Ms Havnen said. "It's not rocket science. It's not sexy stuff. But it works."