



**St Vincent de Paul Society**  
NATIONAL COUNCIL *good works*

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Submission to the Department of the Prime  
Minister and Cabinet

*Remote Employment and Participation*

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## Introduction

The St Vincent de Paul Society National Council welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Australian Government's *Discussion paper: Remote Employment and Participation*. We support the stated commitment to developing a new model for employment and participation in remote Australia that is community led and tailored to the needs and aspirations of local communities. Any future changes must also be based on building capacity and capability, rather than imposing paternalistic and punitive measures that merely deepen disadvantage and inequality.

This submission draws upon, and supports, the remote development and employment model proposed by the Aboriginal Peak Organisations of the Northern Territory (APONT).<sup>1</sup> In the discussion paper it is pleasing to see that elements of Option 1 have been drawn from the model proposed by APONT. We believe that any workable remote development and employment scheme must have greater Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander input and control. In our submission, we propose that additional elements of the APONT model should be adopted. Although Option 1 is the superior model offered in the discussion paper, it ultimately does not go far enough in addressing high unemployment in remote communities.

The St Vincent de Paul Society in this submission does not claim any special authority and is not speaking on behalf of First Nations Peoples, but rather standing in respectful solidarity with them in sharing their concerns regarding inequality of employment, and advocating for policies that are developed and delivered in genuine partnership with the communities affected.

## Who we are

The St Vincent de Paul Society (the Society) is a respected lay Catholic charitable organisation operating in 149 countries around the world. Our work in Australia covers every state and territory, and is carried out by more than 64,000 members, volunteers, and employees. Our people are deeply committed to social assistance and social justice, and our mission is to provide help for those who are marginalised by structures of exclusion and injustice. Our programs assist millions of people each year, including people living with mental illness, people who are homeless and insecurely housed, migrants and refugees, women and children fleeing violence from men, and people experiencing poverty.

## Principles

As the deeply flawed CDP program has illustrated, the failure to listen to community concerns has led to programs that have had detrimental effects on communities. Current policy proposals, such as the continuation and expansion of the cashless debit card, risk perpetuating this approach and are inconsistent with the Government's stated commitment to working in partnership with communities.

Accordingly, this submission is informed by several key principles. First, reforms must be led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, who constitute the overwhelming majority of those affected by remote employment programs. This includes giving weight to the cultural and social priorities and aspirations of Indigenous Australians, including the right to stay on country. It also requires putting in place institutional arrangements that embed community input and decision-making into the ongoing implementation, governance and management of employment schemes. In addition, remote development and employment schemes need to move beyond a focus on individual behaviours and community characteristics, rather than structural factors, as the 'cause' of joblessness in remote communities. The assumption that a combination of 'hassling' with a little bit of 'help' or 'incentives' will enable people to get a job overlooks the nature of the labour market in many remote regions, where there simply are not enough jobs to go around.

Finally, underlying any new model should be the principle that it not directly or indirectly discriminate against Indigenous people.

## Objectives of the new approach

The St Vincent de Paul Society generally supports the proposed objectives of the new approach. As outlined in the discussion paper, these objectives are:

- growing the remote labour market by creating real subsidised jobs;
- providing incentives for job seekers to participate in their communities and move off welfare and into work, including through 'top-up' as an incentive;
- ensuring there is greater community control, with a focus on local decision making and less reliance on the national welfare system; and
- recognising that remote job seekers have varying capabilities and need support while they move along the pathway to work.

However, in bullet point two, the phrase "and move off welfare" should be removed. The phrase has ideological and negative connotations that are in opposition to the rest of the objectives. Notions such as welfare reliance and dependency also obscure the underlying issue in remote areas, which is market failure and lack of job opportunities. It would therefore be helpful to add the words "and opportunities" after the word incentives. Incentives without opportunities are meaningless and doomed to fail.

Bullet point three could be strengthened by the insertion of the phrase "and self-determination" after the phrase "greater community control". This would make this objective more positive and affirm the importance of a new approach that is genuinely community led.

## Preference for Option 1

In so far as Option 1, the New Wage-Based Model, better embodies the objectives outlined above, it is preferred to Options 2 and 3. We generally agree with the concerns outlined in the discussion paper about continued reliance on a national income support system and Centrelink rather than a tailored wage-based approach, and related to this the administration of the compliance framework that has resulted in an astounding number of breaches. The number of breaches and the resulting penalties are of particular concern to the Society because of the impact they have in entrenching poverty.

## Enhancements to Option 1

The government is fortunate in having such a detailed and well thought out Proposal for a Remote Development and Employment Scheme from APONT. This has been a difficult area for government and unfortunately there has been a long history of policy failures. While Option 1 takes up some of the recommendations from APONT, not all have been taken up. There is a danger in such an approach that, like in baking a cake, essential ingredients may be missing. One such ingredient that appears to be missing in Option 1 is the more holistic approach to development and employment that is apparent in the APONT proposal. To ensure a more holistic approach, there are several suggestions from APONT that should be included in a future Option 1. These include:

- a new remote jobs investment fund,
- a reformed enterprise development fund,
- high quality case management for those on income support
- a personal support stream for people with significant impairments to ensure quality assessment, treatment, access to correct payments, and development of a support plan
- engagement of young people to be a critical priority and an area that should be measured in the impact statement

The APONT also recommends that there be national oversight from an independent body which has substantial representation from remote Indigenous community groups. Furthermore, CPD providers would become Remote Job Centres with a much-expanded whole of person and whole of community approach.

One of the advantages of the APONT approach over the current Option 1 is that it overcomes the false distinction in the discussion paper between “real” jobs and “subsidised” jobs (page 8). Whether a job is real or not depends on whether it is worth doing and adds value to the community. For example, most jobs in the charity sector are subsidised through the taxation system, but few would claim that they are not real jobs. Society has decided that jobs in the charity sector are worth subsidising because the jobs are worth doing and it is important to attract high quality workers to the sector. A similar approach needs to be made regarding jobs in remote areas. To treat subsidised jobs as not real jobs threatens to undermine the whole thrust of Option 1.

Finally, a serious challenge for Option 1 is how it will manage the assessment and subsequent streaming of job seekers. Relying on formal, one size fits all, assessments will not work. Health and disability assessments are complex. How they are to be carried out in remote, culturally diverse

areas is not an easy problem to solve. For this aspect of the model to work, both local communities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and disability services must have input and control.

## Conclusion

The St Vincent de Paul Society National Council is pleased to be part of the ongoing discussion of what a new remote employment and participation model could look like. There are elements of Option 1 that the Society favours over the other two options in the discussion paper. However, we would urge the Department to integrate more features from the model proposed by the Aboriginal Peak Organisations of the Northern Territory. In not following the advice of APONT more closely, there is a danger that the Department will fall short in its aim of moving from a welfare model to a new wage-based model.

<sup>1</sup>APONT (2017) Fair Work and Strong Communities: Proposal for a Remote Development and Employment Scheme. <https://www.clc.org.au/index.php?/publications/content/proposal-for-remote-development-and-employment-scheme>