

# A Destiny Together

## Justice for First Peoples

### What injustice?

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Australia are the repository of the oldest living culture in the world, having inhabited the land for over 50 000 years. They have survived, despite what the United Nations has described as “oppressive treatment, including acts of genocide, dispossession of lands and social and cultural disintegration, as well as a history animated by racism.”

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, both remote and urban, experience heightened levels of disadvantage across a range of socio-economic indicators. Aboriginal people have worse health and education outcomes across the board than their non-Aboriginal counterparts. This is linked to the effects of racism on people’s lives, unchecked intergenerational poverty and reduced access to basic services that other Australians take for granted.

Some of the indicators of the issues facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities include the following:

- a lower median weekly income: approximately \$76 lower than the median Australian income;
- higher unemployment rates: 20% compared to 7% for non-Aboriginal Australians;
- lower educational attainment: 37% completing Year 12 compared to 74%;
- more crowded and inadequate housing;
- children six times more likely to be removed from their families;
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples make up 21% of the total prisoner population and 70% of the Northern Territory population (higher by 16 times than non-Aboriginal Australians);
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have the poorest health status of all Australians;
- an average life expectancy lower by 20 years; infant mortality three times that of the non-Aboriginal population;
- the mortality rate in the peak of adult life is 3 - 4 times greater
- rates of depression, suicide and self-harm are much higher;
- higher rates of mental disorders, correlated with higher rates of substance misuse;
- over twice as many deaths associated with mental and behavioural disorders; and
- 75% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have inadequate access to visiting or resident mental health workers.

Issues of ill-health, unemployment, disadvantage and poverty in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities must be approached with respect and any solutions must maximise self-determination.

**“Aboriginal culture is the oldest continuing culture in human history. Our survival, our nurturing of land, and our achievements are not simply a matter of our identity as peoples, but something that informs the nation’s identity.”**

**Mick Gooda, Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner**



Improvements in education, health, and housing will only come about through adequate resourcing and genuine partnerships with appropriate local, regional and national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations.

Despite assurances from successive federal governments that improving the situation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is a priority, in 2012 the UN Human Rights Committee again asked Australia to explain how a range of laws, policies and practices affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are compatible with international human rights standards ahead of a major review of Australia's human rights record. A range of human rights issues were raised by the Committee, including the disproportionate rate of incarceration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia, insufficient consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in decisions affecting their rights, failure to grant reparations to the Stolen Generation who were taken from their parents under the forced removal policies of the 19th and 20th centuries, and continued concerns over the 'Stronger Futures' legislation. A 2012 Report of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child also found that there was "serious and widespread" racial discrimination faced by Aboriginal youth, who are also grossly overrepresented in the juvenile justice and child protection systems.<sup>1</sup>

Justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples involves ensuring that First Peoples have access to all the rights and privileges of being an Australian, as well as recognition of the distinctive rights held as the first inhabitants of this country, including:

- the right to a distinct status and culture;
- the right to land; and
- the right to self-determination.

All Australians want to see an improvement in the social and health conditions faced by too many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. But there is more to creating a just society than this. We need to acknowledge, respect and celebrate the diversity of values, cultures and traditions to ensure that First Peoples are able to participate in Australian society as equals.

## Where can I find out more information?

You can access the latest resources on the A Destiny Together website  
<http://assembly.uca.org.au/adeptytogether>

The UnitingJustice website also contains resources that will be helpful as you learn more about issues faced by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders

<http://www.unitingjustice.org.au/justice-for-indigenous-australians>

***"Release the chains of control; give us our freedom let us walk once again as free human beings on this earth with our ancestors, spirits, songs and ceremonies.***

***We have an opportunity and one chance in our lifetime to get it right.***

***Let your hearts guide you not your government policies."***

**Richard Downs,  
Alyawarr leader**



<sup>1</sup> United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2012). *Concluding observations: Australia*. p. 7. Available: [http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/co/CRC\\_C\\_AUS\\_CO\\_4.pdf](http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/co/CRC_C_AUS_CO_4.pdf)

