



Secretariat National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care

MEDIA RELEASE

9 December 2011

Statement by SNAICC Chairperson Dawn Wallam to mark
United Nations Human Rights Day

We have a fundamental right to participate in decisions that impact on our children and our communities

Human Rights Day across the world on 10 December each year marks an important day to reflect on struggles for human rights of all peoples around the world.

It is also an important day for us to reflect on our progress in ensuring that, here in Australia, each Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child and youth is in a position to enjoy their human rights.

Human rights span the whole spectrum of our fundamental needs as human beings. They also reflect our ongoing collective struggle to choose how we, as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders — as First Peoples of Australia — will lead our lives.

We have a fundamental right to participate in decisions that impact on our children and our communities, and to express our culture, to develop our culture and to raise our children in the ways of our culture.

Human rights are not things for governments to grant at will: they are entitlements that, as human beings, belong to us all.

Some important recent strides have been made in this area. This year has witnessed, among other notable developments:

- government agreement on national standards in out-of-home care,
- the establishment of a new peak body for Aboriginal children and family interests in the Northern Territory,
- a landmark agreement in NSW to transfer out-of-home care service provision to the non-government sector, and
- the first steps in a process to change Australia's Constitution to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

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However, basic rights across the board remain grossly violated. Simple statistics continue to proclaim the endemic discrimination and generational trauma requiring redress.

Graphic examples of these are the rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care — at around 10 times the rate of other children — and the over-representation of our children in the juvenile justice system, which runs at 24 times the rate for non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Community-driven solutions work — processes that are developed, designed and delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for our people.

Every day small changes at this level take place. In fact, so much is happening on the ground. We need to look at how government systems, services and processes can better empower people to make these changes and to profile, resource and expand this knowledge, to enable it to transform the lives of our children and families.

The resilience, beauty, strength and wisdom of our people continue to amaze me every day. Through our collective action we can pave a way to the future we want for our children.

This is an opportune time for strong leadership in Australia, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, and a change in the way we do things together.

We are excited about building more respectful partnerships that value the role of all involved. Such equal partnerships can see better plans and systems to ensure that important initiatives, like Closing the Gap, lead to their envisaged outcomes of healthy, strong, proud and engaged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities.

These partnerships can make a difference. They can change the way we all do business.

We look forward to opportunities to work with government on significant new initiatives. The proposal for a National Children's Commissioner to champion the issues impacting children is, for example, an exciting and much-needed step to provide leadership and attention to redress systemic human rights violations impacting children across Australia.

The inclusion of a Deputy Commissioner with powers, functions and resources to advocate for issues impacting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and youth, is critical to enable this body to respond to the unique issues our children face and develop specific, culturally-appropriate responses that will lead our children into the future.

This is a journey, and we are moving forward. Each day, however, we at SNAICC are conscious of the devastating and unnecessary realities that continue to plague Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and youth across Australia.

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Using a children's rights approach is fundamental to redressing the issues they face — of poverty and exclusion, inequality and the removal of culture.

SNAICC, in support of its work on human rights, is proud to release its new web pages on international legal human rights instruments and processes — what these rights mean in practice for us here in Australia and how we can mobilise and take action to realise them for our children. (The pages can be found at www.snaicc.asn.au/policy-advocacy)

We look forward to our ongoing work with communities and with government over the next year as we strive even harder to improve the opportunities and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

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