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Australia

Dear Chairperson

National governments must give a greater priority to the needs of Indigenous children and youth if we are to secure the future of our unique cultures.

Nearly 60 per cent of the Indigenous population in Australia are aged under 25, compared with 35 per cent of the general population, and 39 per cent of all Indigenous peoples are aged 14 and under.

From the moment they are born, Indigenous children are confronted with death and disadvantage. Our infant mortality rates are three times the rate of non-Indigenous infant deaths and Indigenous babies are almost twice as likely to have low birth weight than non-Indigenous babies.

While there has been increased attention in recent years on the plight of our Stolen Generations about 25 per cent of Indigenous children removed under contemporary protection laws are still being placed with non-Indigenous foster parents.

Earlier this year our Government released a consultation paper, Towards the Development of a National Agenda for Early Childhood, which has nominated three areas for national attention; early child and maternal health, early learning and care and child-friendly communities.

Incredibly, however, there was no Indigenous specific section in the consultation document although it recognised that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were a risk group.

It's not good enough that our children are being marginalised and ignored in a process aimed at improving the national effort to care for our nation's children.

There has been some marginal improvement in Indigenous infant mortality rates but the Government should be trying to identify why we are not matching the improvements made for Indigenous mortality rates in countries such as the United States, Canada and New Zealand.

There are many other child-related issues which demand increased attention from Federal and State governments including the lack of adequate housing, high jobless rates and poor education outcomes.

School commencement rates relative to non-Indigenous students are falling, we have appallingly low school retention rates and an under-representation of Indigenous students and educators at all levels.

We have got to find the means to encourage more of our children and youth to attend schools and reap the benefits of an education. The population of Indigenous school-

aged children has increased at 10 times the rate of the general population yet many of our kids can't get past year three literacy benchmarks.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission's Board of Commissioners this year decided to give priority to the rights and needs of children and youth and they are also the theme of this year's annual celebration of Indigenous culture, NAIDOC.

ATSIC has also given priority to tackling the twin scourges of family violence and substance misuse in Indigenous communities which are threatening the future of our children.

Indigenous women are 45 times more likely to experience violence than non-Indigenous women and our children are up to four times more likely to suffer from abuse and neglect than non-Indigenous children.

Alcohol misuse and petrol sniffing is rife in many of our communities. Too many of our youths are going to jail. In some parts of my country the imprisonment rates of Indigenous people are among the highest in the world.

In such cases of social breakdown, the welfare of children is neglected. Clearly governments need to work with Indigenous people to develop and maintain a vision for the future of Indigenous youth and children in Australia.

We need to ensure everything we work towards in the future is in fulfilment of this vision.

Thank you Chairperson