

# Speech to the TCMA Conference

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I would like to acknowledge that we are on Aboriginal Land. The land of the Gadigal people of the Euroa Nation. These people were the first to encounter the newcomers and suffer at their hands. And they, like the rest of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, are still suffering today. I would like us to pause for a moment to remember them.

I note from your conference theme that you are going to be grappling with some big issues over the next few days. They are issues that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples grapple with constantly.

We constantly grapple with how to ensure that our spiritual and cultural essence does not get eaten away by the demands of having to make it in the modern world.

We constantly have to address issues of how to educate our people in ways that are sustaining for them as Indigenous peoples, but will also prepare them to take their part in the modern economy.

Those of you who work with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders will probably be aware of some of the issues facing these students. Getting to tertiary education can be a major achievement. Finishing high school is sadly still a noteworthy achievement in many indigenous communities. And once they get there things can be tough. They have more things to worry about than just passing their assignments; they have to endure knowledge creation that is essentially western in nature and does not easily encompass Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing.

The Western way of so called "objective" research and pulling down the richness of people's life experiences into statistics, for example, can seem a long way from the traditional way of learning. Our way of education is listening to each other's stories, observing, waiting, being together. In fact it could be said that we were the originators of Qualitative research and you mob are just catching up!

I raise this issue because how we DO education will impact on how we can get people into education in the first place.

I want to talk to a little bit today about a new campaign that NATSIEC is working on. It is relevant to you today because it encompasses some of the issues of education facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

I imagine you are all familiar with the Millennium Development Goals and the pledge by the world's leaders made a pledge to halve poverty by 2015. They are 8 measurable and time bound goals to reduce poverty. You are also probably aware of the International Make Poverty History Campaign.

NATSIEC wholeheartedly supports the Make Poverty History Campaign and its aim to ensure that those leaders who signed up to the MDGs do deliver poverty relief for the poor of this world.

Unfortunately though, Indigenous Peoples are largely invisible in the debate about the MDGs. This is despite being overrepresented in all the key indicators of extreme poverty.

So we at NATSIEC believe that we need to “indigenise” the MDGs and we have launched a campaign to Make Indigenous Poverty History.

Things are dire out there. We need to urgently bring Indigenous affairs back to the centre of our common concerns.

One way we can try to do this is through the MDGs.

The MDGs are “outcomes” focused and there is a danger that in defining and measuring poverty in such a way that the specific causes of poverty amongst Indigenous Peoples will not be addressed.

They must be aligned with poverty reduction strategies that address the particular needs of Indigenous Peoples. Without the meaningful participation of Indigenous Peoples their marginalisation and exclusion will continue.

In practical terms this means that Indigenous Peoples must be involved in describing and defining what poverty is to them. Key Indicators must be devised by and be meaningful to Indigenous Peoples. Non – Indigenous Peoples must examine the structural exclusion that occurs at all levels of power and decision making. Measuring how many dollars a day somebody lives on will not encompass the wide gamut of factors that creates indigenous poverty including; colonisation, loss of traditional lands, loss of languages, loss of traditional law and loss of cultural practices – to name a few.

Even then the MDGs will not go all the way to relieving poverty and we make the point that they are one tool to raise awareness and focus on measurable outcomes in order to ensure that we as a society do not shirk our responsibility to ensure that what is the right of every human being - to live free from poverty – is guaranteed.

According to a statement on poverty adopted by the UN’s Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 2001, poverty is defined as:

“ a human condition characterised by the deprivation of the resources, capabilities, choices, security and power necessary for the enjoyment of an adequate standard of living and other civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights.” (E/C.12/2001/10).

It is true that key indicators for social and economic disadvantage show that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples do suffer similar standards of health and wellbeing as the poorest of the poor, including those in least developed countries and Africa. And that gives us a clear picture that poverty is a very real and debilitating experience for many of our people. But it is vital to remember that behind the statistics of low income, unemployment, lack of education, family violence there are stories of dispossession, cultural annihilation, loss of languages, stolen generations and lack of recognition of our ownership of this country.

We must remember that for every statistic there is a real person, a family, and a community.

To really understand what it means to be poor we need to hear the stories and talk to people who are suffering. Only then will we really understand the causes of poverty and the effects of it on the lives of our fellow Australians and understand what we can do to eradicate poverty.

But let me just take some time to remind you of some statistics that should give us pause for thought – I will focus on education as that is of particular relevance for you here today. There are problems throughout the system, not only in Tertiary education. And of course what happens in the

early years of education will have an effect on the ability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to continue on to tertiary education. So it is important for us to know the situation all the way through the system.

There have been gradual improvements in school attendance rates for Indigenous People; however the levels remain lower than for the non – Indigenous population. This is due in part to:

- Chronic health problems experienced by Indigenous students
- Lack of access to educational institutions
- Financial constraints
- Social, cultural and language barriers (ABS AIHW 2005)
- In 2003, national school participation rates for Indigenous children five to eight years old were 87 per cent, compared to 93 percent for non indigenous children (HREOC).
- The apparent retention rate for Indigenous full – time students in 2004 from Year 7/8 to Year 10 was 86 % for non –Indigenous students it's 98.5 % a difference of 12.1 %. Whilst this is improving slightly it's still a large gap. (ABS AIHW 2005).
- We know that people who attain a year 12 qualification are more likely to continue their involvement in further education and have better employment prospects.
- But the Year 12 apparent retention rate is only 40 % compared to 77 % for non – Indigenous students. (ABS AIHW 2005).
- In 2002 Year 3 Indigenous students had significantly lower reading, writing and numeracy achievements than year 3 students overall. By Year 5 this had worsened.
- Less than 10 % of Indigenous women have a post – school qualification.

And let's put the problems of trying to complete education in the context of the life expectations of Indigenous peoples.

- The average life expectancy for an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander man is 59 years or about 18 years less than non – Indigenous men.
- The leading cause of death for women in the Northern Territory is from homicide. It is a national disgrace that more women are being murdered in the Northern Territory than are being killed from accidents or ill health.
- It is also a national disgrace that our babies are twice as likely to die before they reach their first birthday.
- Our men are 2.6 times more likely to kill themselves and our women twice as likely.
- Our men are 10 times more likely to have diabetes and our women 7 times more likely.
- Our unemployment rate is three times higher than that of non – Indigenous people.

The key message of this campaign therefore is to ensure that we can claim the same rights as citizens of this country that our non – Indigenous Australians have.

Poverty is relative and, to appreciate the disadvantage that Indigenous Australians suffer, we must compare the key indicators which describe the poverty experienced by Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples with the key indicators describing the experiences of the rest of Australia.

We need to ensure that the Indigenous Peoples of Australia have the same opportunities to live as long, to create as much wealth, to see their children grow into healthy and productive adults as non indigenous people do.

We have to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are able to continue living culturally – in ways that is meaningful to us. We must maintain ancient traditions, but we must also find a way to ensure that our culture retains its vibrancy and doesn't get destroyed by this modern world. We must ensure that our kids can inherit a culture that empowers them and that they are proud to claim.

It is easy to blame the Indigenous peoples themselves, but it is the responsibility of non – Indigenous people to understand the historical and contemporary context that conspires to degrade our lives. To understand the real situation and not get swayed by political rhetoric.

We are also calling on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to stand up and demand an end to our suffering. We must not trade our human rights for swimming pools and face cloths.

We have been there and done that.

We traded away so much for scratchy blankets and flour. This country is built on the back of our labour. This country continues to trade on our labour. This country sells our images to people all over the world and calls it tourism. This country sells our cultural artefacts all over the world and calls it art.

But we are not simply cultural artefacts, we are living breathing human beings who have been colonised and stripped bare of our culture. And it is that which causes our material, spiritual and cultural poverty today.

As Chaplains you play an important role in our fight. Students have traditionally been at the coal face of social justice. But we know that the pressure is on for them as well to focus on their studies, ensure they do well and can continue on in successful careers. But we must constantly remind people with whom we come into contact that we don't all have this privilege and where we see injustice we are called to do something about it. Your role is vital in supporting and understanding the complex issues that are specific to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

Tertiary education can be a frightening place to be for all people, but even more so for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Writing can be a torment; we are far more comfortable with verbal ways of learning. Understanding academic language is hard for many people, it can be an overwhelming obstacle for Indigenous people, especially those for whom English is not their first language.

And usually students are not alone; they are part of families and communities. This is an important support mechanism, but it can also create its own problems. If you are one of a very few that have achieved tertiary education there is a lot of pressure on you to perform. At the same time you may have family obligations that can seriously hamper your study attempts. As Chaplains you can offer that support and understanding that can often make the difference for a person to succeed or falter.

I wish you much luck in your deliberations in coming days. And will finish by reminding you that we are on Aboriginal Land - the land of the Gadigal people - and as I started, so I'll finish by paying my respect and acknowledging their country.

Thank you.