

## World Vision Australia's Submission: Design of the First Nations Voice to Parliament

April 2021

### About World Vision Australia

World Vision is a child-focused international community development organisation and, since 1974, has adapted its successful community-led development approaches to support First Nations communities in Australia to realise their aspirations. In the past 12 years, we have brought our international development program approach to deliver First Nations early childhood education, youth resilience and, domestic violence prevention and leadership building across Australia.

### Introduction

The Uluru Statement proclaimed the rights of the First Peoples of this country to establish a voice which can provide true self-determination to protect the culture, health and wellbeing of the First Peoples. The three main aims of the Uluru Statement are: (1) constitutional recognition, where First Nations Voices are enshrined in the constitution; (2) legislative change to enable First Nations governance to be incorporated into the Australian Parliament; and (3) truth telling, which is to be overseen by the Makarrata Commission.

While it is stated that sovereignty was never ceded, it should also be recognised that some First Nations people do not accept the Uluru Statement until a Treaty has been signed between First Nations people and the Crown. World Vision Australia recognises and respects these voices. For the purpose of this submission, however, we will focus on the Voice to Parliament and call on the Australian Government to honour its election promise to hold a referendum on the issue once a model for a constitutionally-enshrined First Nations Voice to Parliament has been decided.

The benefits from having increased self-determination and control of First Nations people over their own destiny is not just a political exercise, but one which would have far reaching benefits for the health and wellbeing of First Nations people. This can be seen in the better health and social outcomes of First Nations people in countries such as Canada, USA and New Zealand where there is a treaty in place and where stronger community control exists. In Australia, the challenges facing First Nations communities are immense. Over half of children in youth detention and a third of the adult prison population are First Nations people, despite only comprising about 3% of the general population. The over representation in Out of Home Care is staggering, with approximately 36% of all children removed from their families and homes being First Nations. When it comes to health and wellbeing, the Gap is not closing, and it is in fact widening in real terms. Half of the First Nations population are in the lowest income quartile, and education and employment outcomes do not show promise for transitioning more First Nations people into middle class Australia. Major and significant changes are required, and First Nations people and communities are critical in leading this change.

### Towards a principles-based approach

In this submission, World Vision Australia advocates for four key principles to guide the design of the First Nations Voice to Parliament. These include ensuring the Voice to Parliament is (i) **representative** of the diversity of Australia's First Nations peoples, that it is (ii) **recognised** in the constitution, that it is (iii) **respected** and listened to by policymakers and legislators, that it both (iv) **empowers** First Nations people to speak into policy debates, and is empowered to make recommendations to the government of the day and for those recommendations to be considered and responded to in a timely way. In World Vision's view, applying these design principles will help

ensure that that the Voice to Parliament achieves its intended purpose as a representative body giving First Nations a say in law and policy and deliberations that affect them.

### ***Design principle 1: Representation***

The Voice to Parliament should be representative of the diverse First Nations people of Australia. Local, regional and national voices need to be heard. There should be a diversity of representation and systems and processes which provide platforms for First Nations people to speak into policy debates. These platforms should not be a continuation of current systems that have roots in colonial structures, nor should they replace well-functioning bodies which already strongly represent communities.

There needs to be a robust mechanism established which ensures all First Nations people are empowered through this process and not a select few through colonial political processes. The Voice to Parliament should not perpetuate existing First Nations power structures rather it should provide an opportunity for emerging leaders and a greater diversity of leadership and representation within First Nations communities.

There will be a need for State governments to be effectively engaged in the political process as they are often the delivery arm of programs and services. However, it should also be recognised that States are colonial structures and therefore the ongoing cross border challenges which First Nations communities face will persist. Regional bodies should resemble traditional cultural boundaries to ensure appropriate representation of communities in the Voice to Parliament.

The interim Voice Co-Design Report proposed a maximum 18-person membership model for the National Voice. This would be a challenging number of representatives to ensure gender equity, representation across urban, rural, and remote settings and representation across population distributions. There does also need to be equity in representation beyond bureaucratic government boundaries of states and territories. Therefore, a broader scale of membership which is representative of population distribution and diversity of populations may be more appropriate and workable.

### ***Design principle 2: Recognition***

In line with the Uluru Statement, the First Nations Voice to Parliament should be enshrined in the constitution of Australia. This will give it status, permanence, visibility and profile.

There are different international examples of how First Nations Voices are enshrined in Parliaments. For example, in countries which have similar political structures to Australia, such as New Zealand and Fiji, there are quotas for First Peoples in Senate seats. In New Zealand, five seats out of 120 total seats are allocated for Maori people. In Fiji, 23 of the 71 total seats are for set aside for Indigenous Fiji members. Having designated senate seats within the Australian Parliament could complement the model proposed by the Uluru statement by strengthening First Nations representation and recognition in the halls of power.

### ***Design principle 3: Respect***

The Voice to Parliament should be a voice respected and listened to by the government of the day. It should provide advice and input on decisions, laws, policies, programs and services that are important to First Nations. Integrating First Nations perspectives into policymaking is extremely vital for ensuring they informed and shaped by First Nations epistemologies, ontologies and axiologies (ways of being, doing and knowing).

It is also important to be clear on what the Voice to Parliament is and what it is not. It should not be a service delivery arm of the government, or a third chamber of Parliament. But it should inform and

guide the delivery of services and it should have a significant influence across all levels of government as a constitutionally enshrined advisory body.

#### **Design principle 4: Empowerment**

Enabling true self-determination has been an aspiration of First Nations peoples since colonisation commenced. There is a significant body of evidence which articulates how self-determination (which can also be described as mastery and control over ones' individual, family and community life) has large benefits for optimal health and wellbeing outcomes. In this sense, self-determination is about First Nations people having more power (hence 'empowerment) over their lives, over the decisions of others that impact their lives and over the systems that have historically disempowered First Nations people.

The First Nations Voice to Parliament should empower First Nations people, and the National Voice should be empowered to make recommendations to government and for those recommendations to be considered and responded to in a timely way.

There has been strong public support for a First Nations Voice to Parliament over recent years, signalling that the Australian public understands the importance of recognising the role of First Nations people in self-determining their future through legislative assemblies. A survey in 2017 found that 61% of Australians supported a First Nations Voice to Parliament and this was affirmed by a recent 2021 survey which again found 61% of support among the Australian public.

#### **Conclusion**

A First Nations Voice to Parliament is a unique opportunity for enabling true First Nations leadership on First Nations matters. There is much detail which will be required to realise this initiative, some of which will be at the Federal level and some of which will be at the equally important local level. True empowerment will be achieved when all First Nation people are engaged in the Voice to Parliament and true change will be seen when First Nations people are not only informing the change but leading the change. World Vision Australia supports the development of a First Nations Voice to Parliament as articulated in the Uluru Statement, and that it be enshrined in the constitution pending a referendum. The First Nations Voice to Parliament should be representative, recognised, respected, and be empowered to influence and advise on policymaking.

For more information on this submission, please contact:

Scott Winch  
Senior Policy Advisor (First Nations)  
World Vision Australia  
[Scott.Winch@worldvision.com.au](mailto:Scott.Winch@worldvision.com.au)