

**A tsunami after a disaster:
Long-term implications of the Northern Territory Emergency Response**

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The Northern Territory Emergency Response (The Intervention) was created after the Anderson-Wild report, *Little Children are Sacred*, identified child sexual abuse in the Territory's remote Aboriginal communities. The then Prime Minister justified the scope of the Intervention – child health checks, restrictive income management, alcohol bans, direct government control of community functions – by saying it was like dealing with a natural disaster, like a tsunami.

It was an inappropriate description: there are systems and processes for dealing with conventional emergencies. In this case the tsunami came in the Response itself – shocked and demoralised people and a totally unprepared bureaucracy. Submissions to the Review of the Intervention consistently say it was poorly planned and ill-coordinated. Aboriginal countries were swamped by a bewildering variety of agencies with no idea of how to behave in a way that was culturally sensitive, particularly in the context of unfounded accusations of widespread child sexual abuse.

Overnight the Aboriginal Interpreter Service faced unprecedented demand for interpreters in all the languages we provide. The lack of notice left little time for planning, but a multiplicity of government agencies assumed that we could immediately respond to their complex and differing needs when we had been specifically set up to deal with the justice and the health systems. Interpreters need skilling in the cultures as well as the languages of these agencies to provide sensitive and accurate interpreting. This is a difficult enough task without demands constantly changing to meet emerging circumstances; like waves of changes to the income management swipe card systems. The lesson for the bureaucracy as a whole is that they need to see Aboriginal interpreters as central to their communication strategies in remote and urban settings and we're ready to help them do it.