

Scoping a policy partnership on First Nations Economic Development

The Northern Australia Indigenous Reference Group (IRG) welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the scoping of a partnership on First Nations Economic Development. In accordance with our role, we have focussed our submission on the Points 1 and 2 outlined in the Coalition of Peaks' Scoping Paper. Our submission is provided in addition to our face-to-face engagement with members of the Coalition of Peaks and the Department of Treasury on the development of the Partnership.

Northern Australia Indigenous Reference Group

The IRG is an expertise-based advisory group comprised of Indigenous leaders with experience in Indigenous business and economic development in northern Australia. Current IRG members were appointed in 2021 to provide policy advice to the Minister for Northern Australia and the Minister for Indigenous Australians on practical actions to enhance the economic prosperity of Indigenous Australians in the north. IRG members are presented at **Attachment A**.

Northern Australia

Northern Australia comprises 53 per cent of Australia's landmass, defined as all of the Northern Territory, as well as the Northern parts of Queensland and Western Australia that intersect with the Tropic of Capricorn, including the Indian Ocean Territories (see Figure 1).



Figure 1- Northern Australia¹

The region is abundant with untapped potential and talented people. Northern Australia has a competitive advantage in resources, energy, agriculture, aquaculture and tourism and its proximity to Asia and the Pacific creates trade potential to drive Australia's economic growth over the next decade and beyond. This continues on established trade between Indigenous Australians and South East Asian peoples over millennia. Northern Australia is mineral rich with deposits of lithium and rare earth metals that will be vital to the electrification of the

¹ Office of Northern Australia. (2021) *Our North, Our Future: 2021-2026*. Accessed on 06/03/2024. Retrieved from <https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/Our-North-Our-Future-2021-2026-Targeted-Growth.pdf> (p.2)

country as we move toward a net zero future.² It is on the frontline of the nation's defence, border protection and biosecurity and it is home to a young and growing Indigenous population which will play an increasing role in its growth. Unlocking the north's potential is key to the development of the nation as a whole.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have significant assets to bring to the northern Australia development agenda. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders comprise 17.4 per cent of the northern Australian population³, far greater than their four per cent share of the national population⁴, and maintain rights or interests in around 78 per cent of the land mass in the north.⁵ The Indigenous population is younger and growing at a faster rate than the rest of the Australian population.⁶ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are projected to constitute approximately half of the working age population of northern Australia by 2050.⁷ Outside of major population centres in northern Australia this is already the case.⁸

Developing the north, however, is not without its challenges. northern Australia is home to only 1.3 million people or around 5.3 per cent of the Australian population.⁹ Its sparse population, the vast distances between major centres and extreme weather conditions can make it difficult, and costly, to do business and to provide adequate social and economic infrastructure. Housing shortages and higher costs of living can make attracting and retaining a skilled workforce difficult¹⁰. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in the north remoteness, a lack of investment in infrastructure and industry and already significant disadvantage stemming from centuries of dispossession and marginalisation are exacerbated by increasing cost of living pressures.

² Invest Northern Territory. (2022) *Minerals*. Accessed on 24/10/2022. Retrieved from <https://invest.nt.gov.au/infrastructure-and-key-sectors/key-sectors/minerals>.

³ ABS, [Estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians](#), June 2021, 31/08/2023 release (based on SA2s for the mainland and LGAs for Christmas Island and Cocos Islands).

⁴ ABS, [Estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians](#), June 2023, 31/08/2023 release.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2017) in Australian Venture Consultants Pty Ltd, (2020) *A new framework for accelerated development of the Northern Australian Indigenous economy*, provided. Accessed on 26/10/2022. (p.38).

⁷ Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia (2014) in Australian Venture Consultants Pty Ltd, (2020) *A new framework for accelerated development of the Northern Australian Indigenous economy*, provided. Accessed on 26/10/2022. (p.38).

⁸ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2017) in Australian Venture Consultants Pty Ltd, (2020) *A new framework for accelerated development of the Northern Australian Indigenous economy*, provided. Accessed on 26/10/2022. (p.38).

⁹ Office of Northern Australia. (2021) *Our North, Our Future: 2021-2026*. Accessed on 06/03/2024. Retrieved from <https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/Our-North-Our-Future-2021-2026-Targeted-Growth.pdf> (p.2)

¹⁰ Ibid

Submission

The Northern Australia Indigenous Reference Group (IRG) has been vocal about the opportunities and challenges that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians face in achieving economic self-determination. Since our establishment in 2017 the IRG has made the case for a new approach to Indigenous economic self-determination to the Minister for Northern Australia and Minister for Indigenous Australians, noting that progress over the past half a century remains slow by any measure. We have also made the case, that on most standard economic participation measures, a northern Indigenous Australian is well below parity with the population and compare poorly with not only the mainstream economy but also the southern Indigenous economy.

1. Focus of the Partnership

It is the IRG's view that fostering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander economic independence and self-determination is a cornerstone to closing the gap in life outcomes for First Nations Australians. Economic independence can provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities with the resources, opportunities and self-determination needed to improve their socio-economic status. This includes building or strengthening an Indigenous economy, fostering entrepreneurship, creating jobs and employment opportunities, investing in education and skills development within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, enabling access to finance and leveraging growth industries as outlined under Point 1 of the Coalition of Peaks Scoping Paper¹¹. Economic independence can empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to preserve and promote their cultural heritage while participating more fully in the broader economy.

Australian governments spend is approximately \$5.3 billion¹² in programs targeted at or accessed by Indigenous Australians and growing. In 2019, in northern Australia alone, the IRG identified 138 enterprise and employment support programs open to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Despite the existence of a public sector Indigenous enterprise and employment support services landscape and the vast nature of the Indigenous estate and asset base in northern Australia, Indigenous northern Australian remain grossly under-represented in enterprise, employment markets and across most aspects of the northern Indigenous economy. Much of government expenditure is focused on social services to a population characterised by severe socio-economic disadvantage. The only way that this expenditure can be averted is by fostering economic independence through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enterprise, innovation and employment.

¹¹ [Coalition of Peaks: Scoping a policy partnership on First Nations Economic Development](#)

¹² [Australian Government Indigenous-specific bodies and budgets: a quick guide – Parliament of Australia \(aph.gov.au\)](#)

The IRG recommends:

1. the First Nations Economic Partnership acknowledges and reflects the fundamental structural differences between northern and southern Indigenous economies and
2. clear and achievable pathways to Indigenous economic self-determination in northern Australia are directed and managed through sustained program partnerships between Indigenous leaders from the north and governments.

2. Governance of the partnership

The IRG are a pivotal body that represents Indigenous interest in northern Australia's economic development strategies and policy. The IRG comprises of eight Indigenous leaders from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across northern Australia. IRG members were appointed by the Minister for Northern Australia for their business acumen, and ground-roots economic development expertise. The group have made substantial progress advising Australian government agencies on policies and initiatives that benefit Indigenous business and communities in northern Australia.

The IRG have been able to use their platform to engage and shape government policy-making, ensuring that economic development strategies are in line with the cultural, social, and economic goals of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. In the current fiscal year, notable achievements comprised participating in six government inquiries and nine consultations, with multiple appearances at public hearings in the House of Representatives, showcasing the group and their crucial role in advocating for Indigenous interest in the economic development

Recognising the fundamental structural differences between the economies of northern and southern Indigenous communities outlined in Point 1 above, the role and successes of the IRG, and to avoid duplication, the IRG proposes that an official link be made between the First Nations Economic Partnership and the IRG. This could be achieved in one of two ways:

1. The IRG is considered a working group of the First Nations Economic Partnership with a dedicated focus on improved economic outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in northern Australia (preferred).
2. The IRG Chair is made a standing member of the First Nations Economic Partnership.

Alternatively, and recognising that other organisations often play crucial roles in representing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander interests on economic development issues, the IRG, together with northern land councils, Native Title Representative Bodies and other Indigenous representative organisations from northern Australia, could come together as a working group of the First Nations Economic Partnership with a dedicated focus on improved economic outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in northern Australia.

In addition, the IRG recommend that representatives for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in decision making with government on economic development should:

- have a track record of advocating for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander economic self-determination or have demonstrated expertise in the Indigenous business sector;
- have a deep understanding of the economic, cultural, and social issues facing communities;
- be chosen by and from within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities; and
- be respected and trusted by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

We understand, for example, that the Coalition of Peaks is partnering with the Department of Treasury to scope this work. However, it is our view that not all states or regions, or the Indigenous business community, feel adequately represented within the current framework. From a northern perspective, this is particularly the case for the Torres Strait Islands and Western Australia and to some extent Queensland.

It is essential that the process of selecting representatives for the partnership moving forward is inclusive, transparent, and respects the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, ensuring that perspectives from various regions, including northern Australia, and cultural backgrounds are heard and represented effectively.

- State and Territory representation

It is our experience that many of the issues inhibiting economic opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in northern Australia are within the remit of State and Territory governments. For this reason, the IRG recommends that State and Territory representatives be invited to participate formally in the partnership or form a working group, similar to that proposed for northern Australia, to advise the partnership on actions that can be taken at a State and Territory level to progress economic self-determination.

- Accountability

Ensuring transparency, effectiveness and progress towards economic self-determination is critical to the success of the First Nations Economic Partnership. In alignment with the Closing the Gap policy partnerships, the IRG agrees that the Partnership:

- make commitments under the Partnership, public, and report on progress;
- make the outcomes of meetings public; and
- engage with stakeholders, including Indigenous communities, non-governmental organisations and government agencies on the work under the partnership and as a feedback mechanism.

Additionally, the IRG proposes that the partnership should be evaluated independently and periodically to gauge its effectiveness and impact.

The IRG recommends:

- The IRG is considered a working group of the First Nations Economic Partnership with a dedicated focus on improved economic outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in northern Australia (preferred).
- Representatives of the Partnership:
 - have a track record of advocating for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander economic self-determination or have demonstrated expertise in the Indigenous business sector;
 - have a deep understanding of the economic, cultural, and social issues facing communities;
 - be chosen by and from within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities; and
 - be respected and trusted by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- That State and Territory representatives be invited to participate formally in the Partnership or form a working group to advise the Partnership on actions that can be taken at a State and Territory level to progress economic self-determination
- That the Partnership:
 - make commitments under the Partnership public and report on progress;
 - make the outcomes of meetings public; and
 - engage with stakeholders, including Indigenous communities, non-governmental organisations and government agencies on the work under the partnership and as a feedback mechanism.
 - be subject to independent, periodic evaluations to assess the effectiveness and impact of the partnership.

Attachment A

IRG Membership

- **Mr Colin Saltmere**, Chair – Managing Director of the Indjalandji-Dhidhanu Aboriginal Corporation, the Myuma and Rainbow Gateway companies, and Adjunct Professor with the University of Queensland’s Aboriginal Environments Research Centre.
- **Ms Tara Craigie** – Managing Director of J&T Craigie Pty Ltd, Indigenous Engagement Consultant at AAM Investment Group, and President at Northern Cowboys Association and Founder of Territory Rodeo Services.
- **Mr Jerome Cubillo** – Chief Executive Officer of the Northern Territory Indigenous Business Network, Chairperson of Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation (LNAC), and on the Board of Ironbark Aboriginal Corporation representing LNAC.
- **Mr Troy Fraser** – Chief Executive Officer of Doomadgee Aboriginal Shire Council and formerly Community, Youth and Economic Development Manager at the Aboriginal Development Benefits Trust.
- **Mr Peter Jeffries** – Chief Executive Officer of Murujuga Aboriginal Corporation and has formerly worked with the WA Police Force, Rio Tinto, the Yamatji Marlpa Aboriginal Corporation, Woodside and his own business offering consulting services and Aboriginal cultural tourism.
- **Ms Gillian Mailman** – Managing Director of Fibre Optics NQ, Chief Executive Officer of MJB Solutions Pty Ltd, Director of Indigenous Wealth Hub, and Director of Illuminate FNQ.
- **Ms Ninielia Mills** – CEO of Nyamba Buru Yawuru (NBY), and a Traditional Owner from Yawuru country which includes Broome.
- **Ms Flora Warrior** – Principle Consultant of Saltwater Blue Consultancy Services and Traditional Owner and resident from Lag Mabuyag (Mabuyag Island in the Torres Strait) – Goemulgal people, and is from the Panai Dugong – Crocodile clan.