Submission to the Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience

The Indigenous Reference Group (IRG) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the Senate Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience and would welcome the opportunity to provide further detail if needed.

Northern Australia Indigenous Reference Group

The IRG is an expertise-based advisory group comprised of Indigenous people with experience in Indigenous economic development in Northern Australia. Current IRG members were appointed in 2019 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. IRG members are presented at **Attachment A**.

Northern Australia

Northern Australia comprises 59 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 Australia[1]

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 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.

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[1] Analysis of Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2022). Regional Population (26/07/2022 release). Retrieved from <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/regional-population/latest-release>
[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.

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.[3] 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 difficult[4] and can lead to a prevalence of fly-in, fly-out workers leading to the benefits of economic activity being siphoned away to southern centres.

Indigenous Australians have significant assets to bring to the Northern Australia development agenda. Indigenous people comprise 16 per cent of the Northern Australian population, far greater than the their three per cent share of the national population, and maintain rights or interests in around 78 per cent of the land mass in Northern Australia.[5] The Indigenous population is younger and growing at a faster rate than the rest of the Australian population.[6] Indigenous Australians 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]

Submission

As Northern Australia's climate changes, with more frequent and intense weather events, the resilience of our communities and infrastructure will continue to be tested. The effects of natural disasters on major and regional cities have been devastating. For Indigenous communities some of these events have been catastrophic.

All levels of government have taken steps to mitigate the effects of climate change by reducing emissions and investing in renewable energy sources. However, it will take time for these measures to take effect.

While First Nations communities in Northern Australia are accustomed to the extremes of living in the north, they are not prepared to deal with the increasing frequency and magnitude of severe weather events. The long-term impacts on the well-being of Indigenous people, as events increase in frequency and severity, are yet to be fully understood. There is an urgent need to build resilience and prepare our communities for future events, build local capability to

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[3] Office of Northern Australia. (2021) *Developing Northern Australia.* Accessed on 29/10/2022. Retrieved from [ona-developing-northern-australia-fact-sheet-final.pdf (infrastructure.gov.au)](#) (p.1)

[4] Ibid

[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).

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respond and plan for support that is not only responsive but timely in the event of natural disasters.

(a) current preparedness, response and recovery workforce models, including:

    i.   *the role of the Australian Defence Force in responding to domestic natural disasters,*

    ii.   *the impact of more frequent and more intense natural disasters, due to climate change, on the ongoing capacity and capability of the Australian Defence Force,*

    iii.   *the impact on the Australian Defence Force in responding to domestic natural disasters,*

The scale and significance of numerous natural disasters over the last ten years have demonstrated that no single community has the resources or capability to respond and recover from their impacts alone. This is especially the experience of regional, remote and First Nations communities in the north. Disaster response and recovery efforts needs involvement from *multiple* stakeholders.

The IRG's position on the role of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) in responding to domestic natural disasters is based on a widely held assumption that the ADF has exceptional capability in logistics and human resource management. Coupled with access to machinery and equipment that could be mobilised in emergency situations, leaves little doubt that the ADF should, in some way, be involved in responding to natural disasters impacting our communities.

Consideration could be given to creating or adapting existing specialist units within the ADF Reserves that are located in Northern Australia and can mobilise quickly and work in collaboration with relevant local civil and volunteer groups, community-controlled organisations and emergency and first responders in the event of an emergency. For example, the IRG understands that the 51st Battalion Far North Queensland Regiment is an Australian Army Regional Force Surveillance unit which currently conducts reconnaissance and surveillance tasks in support of border security operations and that the regiment has a number of First Nations soldiers from Cape York and Torres Strait Island First Nations communities enrolled. Adapting such a unit to be able to work with First Nations communities in the region in the aftermath of natural disasters could provide culturally safe and timely responses. A similar approach could be adopted with Indigenous Ranger units in Northern Australia.
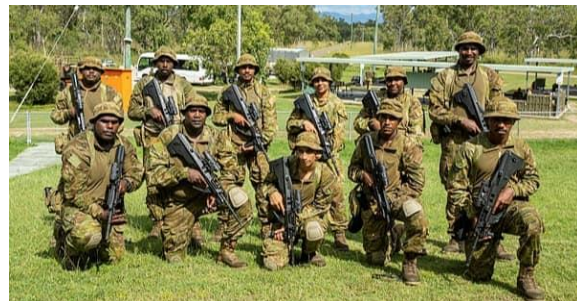

Figure 2: Figure 2: 51st Battalion Soldiers Far North Queensland Regiment

Bespoke arrangements could resemble a hub with local outreach units. For example, a unit headquartered in Cairns could work with outlying units in Cape York and Torres Strait Island communities. Outside of an event, continued training, and capability development could be provided on and off country.

There are several positive outcomes to be gained in the creation and/or adaptation of ADF Reserve First Responder units;

- Reduction of response times and, given that these soldiers are a part of the community, any community intervention would be culturally appropriate.

- Training of local community members to responding in the first instance to natural disasters and building of local community resilience and;

- Alleviation of some of the cost burden to local governments, allowing these organisations to focus their resources on resilience and prevention rather than response.

Essentially, you will have a local Indigenous workforce capable of responding quickly, efficiently and in a culturally appropriate manner to natural disasters such as floods, bushfires, storms and more. They could bring immediate aid in search and rescue operations, provide medical aid, and aid with evacuation procedures. Furthermore, they would be in a position to assist with the clean-up process in the aftermath of the disaster.

Focus should also include Indigenous knowledge systems relating to weather events as a preventative measure prior to disasters, building resilience and planning around disaster management. Shifting the focus from recovery to prevention, and incorporating Indigenous knowledge, requires a coordinated approach between Indigenous rangers, local governments, pastoralists and statutory authorities with responsibility (from biosecurity to road maintenance) as well as the ADF.

The IRG recommends:

1. Australian Government create or adapt ADF First Nations Reserves for First Responder units to work in collaboration with relevant local civil and volunteer groups, community-controlled organisations and emergency and first responders in the event of a natural disaster.

(a) current preparedness, response and recovery workforce models, including

iv. the role of Australian civil and volunteer groups, not-for-profit organisations and state-based services in preparing for, responding to and recovering from natural disasters, and the impact of more frequent and more intense natural disasters on their ongoing capacity and capability;

(b) consideration of alternative models, including:

i. repurposing or adapting existing Australian civil and volunteer groups, not-for-profit organisations and state-based services,

As the scale and magnitude of natural disasters increases across Northern Australia, so too does the need to build local capability to prepare for, respond to and recover from natural disasters. This is particularly the case for regional, remote and First Nations communities which by their very nature can be difficult to reach – a situation often exacerbated in times of emergency. A focussed effort is vital to reduce total reliance on the assistance afforded by external groups, a situation that is becoming increasingly unsustainable.

Many First Nations communities, particularly those with larger populations, have community-controlled, not-for-profit or volunteer groups such as the State Emergency Service (SES) that could be adapted to contribute to emergency preparedness and response. Further, Australian Government funded Indigenous ranger services could be increased to take on such a role.

Local Indigenous ranger groups are able to provide a unique perspective on how best to prepare for and respond to disasters. They could provide valuable insights into the local environment and culture, identify potential risks and vulnerabilities, and help develop strategies for mitigating the impacts of disasters. They could also provide invaluable knowledge of traditional land management practices strengthening disaster resilience plans. In March 2023, when Burketown in north-western Queensland experienced record-breaking flooding, for example, locals were alert to the impending danger through their observation of animal movements at least a month in advance. This knowledge of country and the behaviours of flora and fauna, stemming from a deep connection to land and wildlife, becomes increasingly important as the frequency and severity of natural disasters increases.

Adapting organisations such as local SES or Indigenous ranger groups to effectively participate in disaster risk management efforts, however, would require access to resources, training and equipment.

What is clear is that any process to identify local services that could be adapted should be in the hands of community. Community-led, place-based disaster strategies are required, that are tailored to communities' specific needs and vulnerabilities, are inclusive of culture and traditional knowledge and identify appropriate disaster risk-reduction strategies. This essentially

distils to training and preparing First Nations communities and organisations with the skills, knowledge and equipment required to help themselves in these events.

> The IRG recommends:
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> 2. Community-led, place-based disaster strategies should be at the forefront of any proposal to build First Nations community resilience, response and recovery capabilities; and
>
> 3. Indigenous knowledge systems relating to weather events and land management practices be incorporated into disaster management planning.

(c) consideration of the practical, legislative, and administrative arrangements that would be required to support improving Australia's resilience and response to natural disasters; and

(d) any related matters.

In 2015, Australia and other members of the United Nations adopted the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015 – 2030, which emphasised the importance of a 'build back better' approach to recovery. In 2020, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) endorsed the National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework, which included a national priority for enhanced investment in disaster risk reduction and resilience to decrease future disaster recovery costs.[9]

The IRG agrees that investment in resilience of our communities would have many benefits including a reduction in the costs associated with future natural disasters. An increase in resilience will result disaster cost avoidance. These costs are both tangible and intangible, with a large share of direct tangible costs borne by governments.[10]

However, funding needs to be channelled to the local area and be proportional to the needs of each community. Funding need to flow directly into the hands of those that know best about the resources, development and resilience needs of the community. In this regard, it is important that tender processes to build back better in regional, remote and First Nations communities consider local conditions. This includes better enabling local businesses to bid by prioritising local Indigenous businesses through procurement practices in the first instance and enabling local authorities (including governments) to bid to undertake work where there is limited local private sector capacity. Local authorities often have the relevant plant and

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[9] NEMA (2022), Australia's National Midterm Review of The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 Report; https://nema.gov.au/sites/default/files/inline-files/Australia

[10] Deloitte Access Economics, (2017). (pg31). Building resilience to natural disasters in our states and territories, ABR_building-resilience-in-our-states-and-territories.pdf (australianbusinessroundtable.com.au)

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equipment, can sub-contract to local Indigenous businesses and will employ locals. Tender processes should only be opened to external contractors as a means of last resort.

In summary, improving Northern Australia's resilience and response to natural disasters it is about empowerment. First Nations communities have the capacity and governance structures to mitigate risks, accept responsibility and implement initiatives. They understand that critical infrastructure is more resilient through risk reduction, mitigation, and innovation. Communities need to be empowered to use their local knowledge to develop solutions.

The IRG recommends:

4. Government funding be channelled directly to the local area and be proportional to the needs of each community. This will put funding directly into the hands of those that know best about the resources, development and resilience needs of the community.

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 Cara Peek** – lawyer, entrepreneurial leader, and cultural intelligence strategist. Cara has worked closely with many regional communities across Australia, the US, and Canada as part of her personal mission to create deep, positive social change for First Peoples globally.