

National Emergency Management Agency - Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response

The Northern Australia Indigenous Reference Group (IRG) welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the National Emergency Management Agency – Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response 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. Brief IRG members biographies 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 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.

¹ Office of Northern Australia. (2021) *Developing Northern Australia* Retrieved from ona-developing-northern-australia-fact-sheet-final.pdf (infrastructure.gov.au) (p.1)

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 difficult⁴. This leads to a prevalence of fly-in, fly-out workers which results in 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 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

1. Acknowledging the primary role of state and territories in emergency response, what longer-term capacities and capabilities does the Commonwealth need to develop to meet the challenges of the evolving strategic environment?

In order to effectively address the challenges faced by First Nations communities in the north in the evolving strategic environment, the Commonwealth must play a proactive role in supporting and empowering these communities.

One of the most important aspects is the development of long-term capacities. This involves investing in infrastructure, resources, and training that can enhance the emergency response capabilities of First Nations communities and is specifically tailored to the needs of First Nations communities. By doing so, the Commonwealth can ensure that these communities have access to timely assistance during emergencies.

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).

It is essential for the Commonwealth to foster collaboration and coordination among different stakeholders involved in emergency response efforts. This includes working closely with states and territories as well as engaging with local Indigenous organisations and leaders. By building strong partnerships based on trust and mutual respect, a more comprehensive approach can be adopted to address the unique challenges faced by First Nations communities in the north.

Furthermore, given the constantly evolving nature of the strategic environment, it is imperative for the Commonwealth to remain adaptable and responsive. This involves staying updated on emerging technologies and innovative approaches that can enhance emergency preparedness and response efforts. Investing in research and development initiatives can help identify new tools or methodologies that are specifically tailored to meet the response needs of First Nations communities.

The IRG recommends the Australian Government:

1. Invest in infrastructure, resources, and training that can enhance the emergency response capabilities of First Nations communities and is specifically tailored to the needs of First Nations communities.
2. Foster collaboration and coordination between emergency response stakeholders including local Indigenous organisations and leaders.
3. Invest in research and development to identify new tools or methodologies that are specifically tailored to the response needs of First Nations communities.

2. At a national level, what are likely to be the key pressure points or challenges for the Commonwealth responding to competing and concurrent crises?

The challenges for the Commonwealth are complex and multi-faceted in responding to competing and concurrent crisis affecting First Nations communities in the north. These challenges are not only significant but also require urgent attention and comprehensive solutions.

A key pressure point is the need for effective coordination between various government departments and agencies, across multiple levels of government, responsible for addressing different aspects of these crises. The Commonwealth must navigate through multiple layers of bureaucracy to ensure a cohesive and comprehensive response. Importantly, in the wake of disasters, the Commonwealth must ensure that any response is driven by consultation with Indigenous leaders, elders and community members who possess invaluable knowledge about their own needs and aspirations.

Other challenges lay in balancing competing priorities amidst limited resources. For instance, the Commonwealth must allocate funding and resources strategically to address imminent health issues exacerbated by an already cavernous health disparity, socio-economic inequalities, housing shortages, and cultural preservation within First Nations communities.

The growing divide in digital connectivity also creates a barrier to disaster recovery efforts and could lead to life threatening situations. Funding needs to be directed to building and maintaining communications services and equipment. This could mean tailoring funding to train and employ local technicians, with consideration to warehousing a stockpile of essential parts, to enable quick resolution of outages. Other measures for consideration include, utilising Mobile Base Stations or low earth orbit satellite services such as Starlink.

In conclusion, responding to competing and concurrent crises in First Nations communities presents numerous pressure points and challenges for the Commonwealth in Australia. Effective coordination between government agencies, resource allocation amidst competing priorities, and ongoing engagement and consultation with Indigenous communities are crucial elements in navigating these challenges successfully.

The IRG recommend the Australian Government:

4. Coordinate responses across the various government departments and agencies, across multiple levels of government, that are responsible for addressing different aspects of these crises.
5. Response is driven by consultation with Indigenous leaders and community members who possess invaluable knowledge about their own needs and aspirations.
6. Direct funding to building and maintaining communications services and equipment.

3. How could the Commonwealth build community resilience and capability so they are better able to respond to and recover from national-level crises?

By listening to individual First Nations communities and their own unique set of circumstances and needs, only then could you develop true place-based disaster resilience capabilities that would be effective in crisis response situations.

The IRG advocate for the development of place-based disaster resilience strategies which foster a coordinated approach between Commonwealth, state and territory and local governments including industry and communities, to address shortcomings of planning and delivery. In a recent submission made by the IRG to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Regional Development Infrastructure and Transport's inquiry into the implications of severe weather events on the national regional, rural, and remote road network (the inquiry) we identified the increased frequency and magnitude of weather events as severely impacting First Nations communities across Northern Australia. We provided examples of rain events during

2023 that led to the closure of large sections of roads, isolating communities for months at a time and requiring evacuations of some distance. We acknowledged that while flood-proofing a lot of communities will not be possible, what is possible is to reduce the time of isolation by improving accessibility and the resilience of civil infrastructure in and around our communities. Doing this requires the development of place-based disaster resilience strategies, working in collaboration with communities in design and delivery.

During a public hearing to the inquiry, IRG member and Doomadgee Council CEO, Mr. Troy Fraser, illustrated that incorporating local knowledge in disaster resilience and response strategies could help reduce isolation times from months, to weeks. Mr. Fraser explained that there is no denying the need for better materials and improved ways of building infrastructure. However, had local knowledge around the need for a 1.5-metre-high bridge been incorporated into planning this would have reduced isolation times significantly.

Further, the IRG note that failure to make assessment criteria and damage reporting requirements available to Indigenous community organisations and representatives leads to a flawed process where local Indigenous knowledge is being left out of costing for any major disaster or extreme events. This includes the potential to consolidate service providers that operate in regional and remote communities.

Place-based disaster resilience strategies, by design, would embed and be informed by First Nations' knowledge and a deep understanding of local environments that build on more than 60,000 years of disaster resilience.

Our submission to that inquiry also highlighted the need for the Australian Government to implement a 'build back better' principle which aligns with Australia's commitments under the *Sendai Framework for Disaster Reduction 2015-2030*. To reduce the disaster risk of communities we need to build resilience into our infrastructure. Building back better requires place-based planning, using a common-sense approach and incorporating local knowledge and scientific evidence to build more accessible and resilient infrastructure.

Government must work with Communities and local authorities including service providers to ensure safety and appropriate planning is the blueprint for future rebuilds or building back better in regards to Disaster Recovery and response. To utilise the current system, resources and services that these Communities have on offer. The CDP's that operate in all Indigenous Communities and other services providers, there must be a contract weighting on all relief funding for Indigenous service providers.

The IRG recommend the Australian Government:

7. Develop place-based disaster resilience strategies which embed and are informed by First Nations' knowledge.

8. Share assessment criteria and damage reporting requirements with Indigenous community organisations.
9. Implement a 'build back better' principle which aligns with Australia's commitments under the Sendai Framework for Disaster Reduction 2015-2030.

4. What changes in the current system are necessary to help Australia have the right capabilities and capacity to handle concurrent crises?

The IRG would like the inquiry to acknowledge the constraints that Indigenous Local councils face in responding to the growing number of crises. For Indigenous Local Councils raising co-contributions to access funding to build and maintain resilient infrastructure such as roads and bridges is challenging. As non-ratable communities' Indigenous Councils mostly work with severely constrained budgets to deliver a complex level of community services. Importantly this includes services generally not provided by mainstream local governments such as aged care and accommodation.

To support our communities the IRG propose that funding be quarantined or set aside to enable Indigenous councils to seek up to 100 per cent of funding for infrastructure and maintenance projects where they can demonstrate need. This will help to ensure that our most vulnerable and disadvantaged Indigenous communities receive the support and resources they need. By prioritising these communities, more equitable distribution of funds can be achieved, while addressing historical inequalities and delivering on socio-economic objectives.

The IRG also propose that restrictions on Indigenous councils making a profit from disaster recovery funding should be lifted, treating councils in the same way as external contractors. Indigenous councils often have the plant, equipment and workforce to deliver projects such as road construction. Enabling Indigenous councils to conduct business like the private sector, would provide an opportunity to leverage their resources for economic growth, self-sufficiency and self-determination. This opportunity would lead to job creation within our communities and an improvement in living standards. Many of Australia's Indigenous communities face significant infrastructure gaps, including inadequate road networks. By enabling our communities to generate revenue from infrastructure projects, we would be better equipped to address infrastructure needs, improve transportation access, and foremost help reduce risk to the social wellbeing of residents by reducing isolation times caused by disaster events.

The IRG recommend the Australian Government:

10. Quarantine or set aside funding to enable Indigenous councils to seek up to 100 per cent of funding for infrastructure and maintenance projects where they can demonstrate need.

11. Relax restrictions on Indigenous Councils making a profit from disaster recovery funding, treating Councils in the same way as external contractors.

5. *What models could the Commonwealth explore to replace or supplement support currently provided by the ADF during domestic crisis?*

- a) *What does the right mix of Commonwealth capabilities look like?*
- b) *How could a Commonwealth workforce surge capacity be replicated in a scalable, efficient and effective way?*
- c) *How could we harness the critical role of volunteers and civilian groups under this model?*
- d) *How do these models supplement, but not replicate, existing models operating at a state and territory and local level?*
- e) *What role could industry / the private sector play? How can the Government attract increased investment in emergency management from the private sector?*
- f) *What gaps currently exist in state and territory emergency management capability?*

It is the IRG's view that all levels of government must collaborate closely during domestic crises to ensure efficient use of resources. Regular communication channels should be established to share information on funding allocation decisions and allowing for coordinated efforts that address both short-term emergency needs as well as long-term recovery plans.

It is our view, however, that government funding models lack a considered understanding of the unique situation that First Nations councils operate within. For these reasons, the IRG recommend that Commonwealth, State and Territory government authorities consider the steps taken by cash poor local governments, that by necessity transfer costs to local people through taxes and other means, especially in remote communities where the cost of living is already high. The IRG recommend a review of the contribution formula between the Commonwealth, state and territory and local governments for disaster funding to ensure that there is no downstream impact on the standard of living of already struggling communities.

Further, there is an opportunity to invest in equipment and capability building of local community controlled organisations to build the necessary surge capacity to respond to disasters, for example, volunteer state emergency services, rangers, other community controlled organisations such as health organisations or organisations that exist in communities such as PCYCs. To note, building the capacity of local community-controlled organisations aligns with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap Priority Reform 2.

Although the inquiry is calling for an alternative response to the use of the ADF, the ADF play a crucial role in providing support to community-controlled organisations in the continued delivery of their core business while adding capability to respond in disaster response situations.

Also, there is an opportunity to support local Councils or local Indigenous businesses (such as construction companies) which are likely to have plant and equipment that would be of use in response to natural disasters. Equipment that is housed locally will reduce response times and could save lives. Funding could be considered to cover the costs of local business contributions to emergency efforts much like that used to support businesses in the advent of the recent pandemic. This will help to keep local businesses viable in downturns triggered by disaster situations while at the same time enabling a more-timely response.

In summary, providing Indigenous Australian councils the opportunity to invest in equipment and capability building for community-controlled organisations is justifiable. It empowers these communities with the tools and equipment they need to protect themselves during times of crisis whilst respecting their unique cultural perspectives. By supporting these initiatives, we are fostering resilience within Indigenous communities while promoting self-determination and autonomy.

The IRG recommend the Australian Government:

12. Review the contribution formula between the Commonwealth, state and territory and local governments for disaster funding to ensure that there is no downstream impact on the standard of living of already struggling communities.
13. Commit to open communication channels established to share information on funding allocation decisions, allowing for coordinated efforts that address both short-term emergency needs as well as long-term recovery plans.
14. Invest in equipment and capability building of local community controlled organisations to respond to disasters.
15. Consider covering the costs of local business contributions to emergency efforts much like that used to support businesses in the advent of the recent pandemic.

6. Are there sectors that could replicate the capabilities provided by the ADF?

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 expanded 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, and like the ADF, be considered as an extension of their services, not a replacement.

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 recommend the Australian Government:

16. Invest in resources, training and equipment to enable community-controlled, not-for-profit or volunteer groups, such as the SES or Indigenous rangers, to contribute to emergency preparedness and response.

7. What are the critical functions the Commonwealth Government should continue to perform in disaster relief and recovery, in support of local, state and territory governments?

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.

Even in circumstances where you have multiple stakeholder involvement, however, the broader community are unlikely to provide the Commonwealth workforce surge capacity necessary to manage the crisis situations encountered in Australia over the last ten years.

The use 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.

Further 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.

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.

A local Indigenous workforce could be 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.

The IRG recommend the Australian Government:

17. Consider 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

8. *What legislative, regulatory or policy changes could be undertaken to make it financially viable for other sectors to contribute to a Commonwealth crisis response capability?*

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 in 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 needs 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 in 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 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.

As discussed previously, the IRG also note the need to relax restrictions on Indigenous Councils making a profit from disaster recovery funding, treating Councils in the same way as external contractors.

The IRG recommend the Australian Government:

18. Better enable local businesses to bid for disaster recovery funding by prioritising local Indigenous businesses in 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.

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)

In summary, improving Northern Australia's resilience and response to natural disasters 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.

Attachment A

IRG members

- **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 at Doomadgee Aboriginal Shire Council and formerly worked as 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.