

## Submission to the Remote Jobs and Economic Development Program Discussion Paper

The Northern Australia Indigenous Reference Group (IRG) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the NIAA's Remote Jobs and Economic Development Program discussion paper. The focus of our submission will be maximising outcomes and economic self-determination in remote First Nation communities.

### 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 Australia<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>1</sup> 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)

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

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have significant assets to bring to the northern Australia development agenda. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders 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 the north.<sup>3</sup> The Indigenous population is younger and growing at a faster rate than the rest of the Australian population.<sup>4</sup> Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are projected to constitute approximately half of the working age population of northern Australia by 2050.<sup>5</sup> Outside of major population centres in northern Australia this is already the case.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup> 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<sup>8</sup>. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in the north, increasing cost of living pressures are exacerbated by remoteness, a lack of investment in infrastructure and already significant disadvantage stemming from centuries of dispossession and marginalisation.

## 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. The group has provided numerous perspectives on various key areas, including training, employment, business development, infrastructure development, capital unlocking, and most recently leveraging intellectual property.

The IRGs perspective also draws on international and intergenerational experiences to provide a comprehensive understanding of fostering economic independence for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> 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).

<sup>5</sup> 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).

<sup>6</sup> 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).

<sup>7</sup> 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)

<sup>8</sup> Ibidco

### *Community driven and place-based program design: What do we consider as place-based approaches?*

In order to be efficient, the IRG recommends that the Remote Jobs and Economic Development program adheres to place-based principles that will allow the program to align with local circumstances and aspirations. This will ensure the new program is not a reiteration of previous 'one size fits all approach', but rather, is tailored to meet the needs and goals of the community the program services.

This approach will contribute to the program achieving its intended outcomes by fostering a sense of ownership and investment through participation by community members. When participants are realising tangible outcomes that improve the livability of their towns and reflects the goals of the community, there is more likely to be active participation and support, contributing to its success. Participants are more inclined to actively participate and support the success of initiatives when they see tangible outcomes that enhance the livability of their towns and align with the community's goals.

The term place-based approaches encompass diverse community engagement levels, acknowledging the varied roles and objectives of communities, agencies and Governments.<sup>9</sup> When discussing place-based approaches, the IRG understands this work to be community led with locally designed governance structures; where the role of government is as a funding partner, working to enable change by activating and adjusting policy and funding levers in response to on the ground feedback<sup>10</sup>. In this way, the IRG envisions best practice as a circular and holistic system of change to service delivery that differs from top-down approaches historically favored by government.

Place-based approaches go beyond simply understanding communities. They offer a targeted way to support those facing entrenched disadvantage; poverty, trauma, and limited opportunities. Allowing program design the flexibility to address the specific needs of a community, particularly through the provision of pre-employment supports, can connect residents with crucial resources and invest in communities to deliver the tools needed to thrive. Anecdotal evidence collected by IRG members have found that this critical work needs to be rolled out to address general literacy and numeracy, financial literacy, obtaining identification documents, communication and problem solving, personal and mental health.

### *Unemployment in remote Communities is structural not behavioral: Recognise unpaid work that is critical to the community.*

There are unquestionable health and well-being benefits associated with working, however, community needs are often forced to adapt to program requirements, rather than programs being able to adapt to local needs and opportunities. This is evident in the amount of unpaid work undertaken in First Nation communities that should be considered legitimate economic contributions to community.

Mainstream definitions and application of 'care' do not account for the vast and complex way it is defined by First Nation communities. It is an understanding of the concept that extends beyond people to include communities, country and culture. For example, a recent study of

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<sup>9</sup> (Collaboration for Impact, 2022)

<sup>10</sup> (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023, p. 6)

time-use showed that on average 62% of women's time in Indigenous communities was spent caring for others and/or country and culture<sup>11</sup>. The previous iteration of CDP that penalized participants for failing to attend activities, did not account for this, and payment suspensions lowered incomes in already impoverished households. Instead of forcing participants to choose between fulfilling obligations to the RJEDP or caring for family and kin.

There's a critical need for employment programs to embrace flexibility and allow participants to fulfil their cultural obligations. By integrating these activities into the program, we can ensure these programs directly contribute to maintaining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. Recognizing cultural obligations as paid employment under the new RJEDP is vital. This approach would not only preserve a unique heritage but also strengthen the identity, wellbeing, and connection to land and sea for our First Nations Peoples.

While some caring for country work is recognised, the Indigenous Ranger program being the most prolific employer, much of the caring for country remains unsupported and unpaid<sup>12</sup>. Prioritising work that cares for country as legitimate employment worthy of a real wage has the potential to stimulate a circular economy in remote Indigenous communities, that could support new and emerging industries, and enable the efficient use and protection of natural resources. Although remote communities often have limited resources, they have a competitive advantage through the use of their traditional art and crafts, and their ability to utilise their natural environment in the production of these items.

The intersection of caring for country and developing economic industry is demonstrated in art programs already underway in communities in the Northern Territory. Discarded fishing nets, a forgotten menace to the Groote Eylandt coast's precious marine life, are being transformed into something beautiful. The Anindilyakwa Land and Sea Rangers collaborate with artists who breathe new life into these environmental hazards using traditional pandanus weaving techniques. These one-of-a-kind creations are stunning, and sustainable to the environment and the economy.

Providing amenities and improving livability in remote Indigenous communities in northern Australia presents unique challenges. These communities often have limited formal economies, making it difficult to implement the same approaches typically used by local governments in other parts of Australia. In this context the IRG sees a key role for the RJED program to address these challenges. The program has the potential to provide much needed source of local employment while simultaneously tackling essential tasks that improve amenity and livability. This could involve jobs in infrastructure maintenance, waste management, and essential service delivery, tailored to the specific needs of each community. By fostering a more sustainable local economy, the RJED program can contribute to more resilient remote Indigenous communities in northern Australia.

Hiring employees for real jobs triggers a cascade of legal obligations for employers. They become responsible for work place health and safety policies. Public liability, payroll systems and complex industrial relations law become an additional bureaucratic burden employment services in remote indigenous communities have not had to navigate previously. The IRG feels that the information currently available to providers lacks details on how to navigate the surge

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<sup>11</sup> (Brown, Glynn-Braun, Hunt, Klien, & Staines, 2024)

<sup>12</sup> (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2020)

in legal requirements that come with hiring real job starters through the RJED program, particularly regarding workplace health and safety and industrial relations compliance.

The IRG supports industrial protections, workers' rights, and equal pay for work of equal value for all people including those employed in remote communities. However, the IRG has real concerns about the complexity of requirements for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) access to the program and deliver services as mandated by Priority Reform Two under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. The IRG feels there is a lack of information available that demonstrates how the government will build capacity in ACCOs to handle this complex employment bureaucracy and enable providers to deliver community driven, place-based services. In addition to this, the IRG calls on the department to provide transparent long-term funding provisions to enable sustainable capacity building.

***The IRG recommends:***

- 1. responsibilities like providing care for family members are now acknowledged as legitimate roles that can receive payment through the RJED Program.*
- 2. reinterpreting cultural responsibilities as tasks in RJED programs.*
- 3. an expansion of the program to recognise and include traditional care for country as legitimate labour.*
- 4. the program encourages industries that promote economic self-sufficiency within Indigenous communities through some form of incentive scheme.*
- 5. tailoring the program to support the development of strong and secure communities that effectively meet the needs of residents in areas with an oversupply of labour.*
- 6. the consultation process should outline specific requirements, such as potential expenses and resources, to ensure that providers are well-informed before implementing the RJED program in northern Australia.*
- 7. allow communities to implement place-based plans inclusive of culture considerations and consideration of a community's specific needs and vulnerabilities.*

## 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 (Mabuiag Island in the Torres Strait) – Goemulgal people, and is from the Panai Dugong – Crocodile clan.