

**Aboriginal Peak Organisations
Northern Territory (APO NT)**

Committee Secretary
Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia
Ngunnawal Country
PO Box 6100, Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Via email: northernaustralia.joint@aph.gov.au

Dear Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia,

We welcome the opportunity to provide input to the *Inquiry into Northern Australia Workforce Development*, which is considering the impediments to building the economic and social infrastructure and workforce needed to support economic development.

Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory (APO NT) is an alliance of Aboriginal organisations working to promote and protect the rights of Aboriginal people living in the Northern Territory (NT). The APO NT alliance comprises the Central Land Council, Northern Land Council, Tiwi Land Council, Anindilyakwa Land Council, Northern Territory Indigenous Business Network, Aboriginal Housing Northern Territory, Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance of the NT, and North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency. Since APO NT's establishment in 2010, our members have been working to develop constructive policies on critical issues facing Aboriginal people in the NT to positively influence the work of the Australian and NT Governments.

Underlining our collective work is the right to self-determination as defined in the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People. Local Aboriginal engagement, ownership and control underpin APO NT's work in advocating for practical and sustainable solutions for Aboriginal people. As representatives from peak organisations in the NT, we share the aim of protecting and advancing the wellbeing and rights of Aboriginal people and communities.

Using the expertise and intimate knowledge of their members, APO NT builds and co-ordinates consensus to better amplify the voices of Aboriginal people in the NT. In this way we would like to echo the sentiments expressed in the submissions from the following members:

- Northern Land Council (NLC),
- Central Land Council (CLC),
- Northern Territory Indigenous Business Network (NT IBN)
- Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance Northern Territory (AMSANT) and

- Aboriginal Housing Northern Territory (AHNT)
- North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency (NAAJA)

We would like to also bring to the committee's attention our submission on the *Employment White Paper* [Attachment A]. APO NT has a long history in working to improve and increase Aboriginal people's access to employment, wherever they live, especially out bush. So much of the focus on how to attract and retain a Northern Australian workforce looks at populations from both interstate and overseas. Through our own submission we highlight the ethical and pragmatic need, to foster, grow and develop our own communities and local workforce.

The employment gap experienced by Aboriginal people in remote communities in the NT remains the widest in the NT. For non-Indigenous people, NT has the highest employment rate in the country (86.2% of non-Indigenous people aged 25-64 employed, based on 2021 ABS Census data¹). In contrast, for Indigenous people, the NT has by far the lowest rate of employment in the country, seeing a continued decline over the last decade from 42.8% of Indigenous people aged 25-64 employed in 2011, to 35.4% in 2016 and 34.3% in 2021.² Reflecting the commitments of all levels of government under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, this is not acceptable. Any efforts directed to developing the workforce in northern Australia must have the explicit aim of closing the employment gap experienced by Indigenous people.

A key strategy in this respect is a focus by government on facilitating job creation in remote Aboriginal communities. We note that significant investment of around \$300-400 million per year³ is currently funnelled by the Federal Government into the operation of the Community Development Program with minimal job outcomes achieved for participants: only around seven per cent of participants get a job lasting six months or more⁴. There is a clear need to redirect this investment.

To this end, APO NT advocates for a new approach, captured in the [Fair Work Strong Communities: Proposal for a Remote Development and Employment Scheme](#) (FWSC). This proposal has the following features:

- Increase the proportion of people in communities in work
- Remote Jobs Fund that creates a **critical mass of new jobs**
- More local Aboriginal people in work that is available, focusing on youth
- Stimulate Aboriginal business enterprise and economic development
- Increase participation of those who can work and get the right help for those who cannot
- Increase community involvement in decision making

¹ Analysis of 2021 ABS Census data by the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (unpublished)

² Ibid.

³ Hansard, Senate Estimates, Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee, 24 November 2022, page 12. This is funding to CDP providers and doesn't include income support and other payments to participants.

⁴ Evaluation: <https://www.niaa.gov.au/resource-centre/indigenous-affairs/community-development-programme-evaluation-participation-and-employment-outcomes>

The FWSC is a proposal that recognises that it is not just the form of labour market assistance that matters, but the extent to which it can be seen as a vehicle for local decision-making, and the rebuilding of local authority in tandem with creating meaningful jobs directed to meeting the needs and aspirations of local communities. Central to the proposal are governance arrangements that embed Indigenous control at every level – from the development of national policy to its application on the ground. This must include the ability for local communities to set goals and adapt program settings to local circumstances, and the establishment of governance arrangements that enshrine, in law, Indigenous leadership of the program at a national level.

“Business as usual” will not suffice to transform the lives of Aboriginal people living in the NT nor does it hold the solutions to ongoing workforce issues that Northern Australia faces. APO NT welcomes the Australian Government’s reform agenda across employment, income management and the Community Development Program. We believe that this committee has a unique opportunity to bring these elements together for a more coherent and holistic approach. We know that ensuring Aboriginal people have real and meaningful employment opportunities, career pathways for our young people through education, skill development and training will have benefits far beyond just the individuals impacted. What could be more logical than local Aboriginal people working for their community to fill workforce gaps in health, aging and disabilities services, housing including homelands as well as caring for Country and Culture? To transform the lives of Aboriginal people living out bush we need a critical reversal of fortunes through ***jobs creation, with a focus on youth, and employment programs designed and led by Aboriginal people.***

We thank the Committee for considering this submission and would also appreciate the opportunity to further discuss this issue more comprehensively with the committee during the next phase of consultations.

Kind regards,

Philip Brown
A/NAAJA CEO
On behalf of the APO NT Governing Group

Friday 23rd December 2022

