

FIRST THINGS FIRST: INCREASING JOB OPPORTUNITIES AND IMPROVING LIFE OUTCOMES FOR ABORIGINAL PEOPLE IN RURAL AND REMOTE AUSTRALIA

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ABSTRACT

The gap in inequality between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians is largest in rural and remote Australia. An opportunity exists to address the challenges and suggest solutions into improving employment outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through the Australian Senate Select Committee on Job Security's 2021 inquiry into the impact of insecure or precarious employment on the economy, wages, social cohesion and workplace rights and conditions. In response to this inquiry, the author made a public submission to state his concern regarding improving employment and business prospects for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in rural and remote communities, through initiatives developed in genuine partnership between them and Federal, State, Territory and Local Governments.

Key Words: Rural and remote (regional) development; employment; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; closing the gap; genuine partnership; health and wellbeing .

1. INTRODUCTION

An introduction to the challenges

Improving the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including through increasing employment and economic participation, must be a priority in the development of rural and remote Australia. Social and environmental determinants of health, including business enterprises, employment, education and training opportunities, housing, community infrastructure (including waste management and recycling) and climate change mitigation strategies are central to achieve desired outcomes.

There are a number of challenges the Australian Government must overcome to successfully develop rural and remote Australia and benefit its residents. The North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance (NAILSMA) identifies inadequate physical infrastructure, ineffective regional institutions, harsh climate and long distances to markets as being real challenges requiring real solutions (NAILSMA, 2019). Port and marine infrastructure is desperately needed (NAILSMA, 2019). Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation (LNAC) point out that economic development opportunities across much of rural and remote Australia are limited by remoteness from basic services such as welfare and education, high cost of living, difficult climatic conditions, lack of access to professional expertise and inadequate housing. (LNAC, 2020)

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities face numerous other challenges. Poor regional connectivity, limited access to digital technologies and few business and employment opportunities impact many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. This results in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people facing great disadvantage, such as in the Torres Cape

where 71.1 per cent of people are in the most disadvantaged quintile for relative socio-economic disadvantage (Torres Cape Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Council Alliance [TCACA], 2020). Racial prejudice and discrimination also prevents many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including in rural and remote communities, from experiencing a fair go that Australia boasts it provides for all her people (Heaton, 2019).

Self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must be central to the development of rural and remote Australia and the expansion of employment opportunities, especially when there is a direct or indirect impact on traditional land and water. To ensure self-determination, it is imperative that there be strong representation from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on the committees or boards overseeing the numerous initiatives for developing rural and remote Australia, including the rural and remote Australia Infrastructure Fund (NAIF), the Northern Territory Aboriginal Contracting Framework (ACF), Local Decision Making (LDM) initiatives, and Business Solutions and Investment and Asset Management Services offered by Indigenous Business Australia (IBA).

Opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities

Closing the gap in economic inequalities, including via employment, must be a key outcome in the development of rural and remote Australia. As well as increasing opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to work and pursue business ventures, meeting infrastructural needs and boosting economic activity is essential. However, at present, as the TCACA (2020) identify, there is little such investment from that the Australian Government on addressing disadvantage facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in rural and remote regions.

The need to protect Aboriginal land rights

The development of rural and remote Australia, and the bolstering of jobs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, largely centre the protection of their rights to access and use of traditional lands. To protect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land rights, Federal, State, Territory and Local Governments must consider the interests of and genuinely consult with Traditional Owners when considering the interests of other Australians developers. Unless Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander civic, business and cultural leaders are genuinely involved in decision-making processes pertaining to the development of rural and remote Australia, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are equal beneficiaries of the economic, social and cultural dividends that result, initiatives will fail and rural and remote Australia will remain undeveloped (IRG, 2020).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and other communities with high numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents should enjoy the same quality of infrastructure as other Australian communities (LNAC, 2020). Unfortunately, however, often Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations in remote communities operate in geographic and/or service isolation from other organisations (TCACA, 2020), which is one factor that contributes to the perpetuation of inequality. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' cultural connections to homelands must be prioritised, as pointed out in the National Indigenous Reform Agreement (NIRA). To achieve this, greater support must be given to Registered Native Title Body Corporate (RNTBC) and other Native Title representative bodies to deliver equitable economic,

social and cultural benefits to rural and remote communities (TCACA, 2020), Initiatives like *Business on Country* developed by NAILSMA is crucial to having government, industry and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander landowners commit to sustainable development on the vast Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-owned estate, for the socioeconomic benefit of local communities (NAILSMA, 2019).

Potential in the pastoralism industry

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have historically played a key role in the development of rural and remote Australia's cattle and broader pastoral industry (Central Land Council, 2017). However, over the years, discrimination, the introduction of award wages, rural recession, low beef prices, increased fencing and technology and the introduction of road-trains and helicopter-mustering led to the unemployment of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the pastoral industry. While the Australian Government has invested in some pastoralism in rural and remote Australia since 1970 to reduce some of the socio-economic disadvantage faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, much more needs to be done.

Despite difficulties in making a profit from cattle, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people see the cattle industry as an economic opportunity in rural and remote Australia (NSW Government, 2019). Current economic opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within the pastoral industry include cattle companies that are commercial operations, grazing licences over Aboriginal land, pastoral contracting services, jobs on cattle stations and also harvesting feral cattle. The establishment of additional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cattle companies through the acquisition of properties in pastoral potential areas is required, which would also build capacity to train and provide longer term employment to more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. There is a need for greater provision of business development assistance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals and groups wishing to establish pastoral contracting enterprises, and support programs to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people gain employment on cattle stations.

It must be considered, however, that while pastoralism is often a desirable use of the land, including for local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, it is often inappropriate for a range of reasons, including native title and sacred site restrictions, land management considerations, unfavourable weather conditions, a lack of access to water, and no or limited housing for workers. Genuine, ongoing discussion and partnership between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander landowners and residents and Federal, State, Territory and Local Governments as per the new National Agreement for Closing the Gap (Coalition of Peaks, 2020) is required to ascertain the best use of land.

Expanding the environmental health sector

Aboriginal community controlled health organisations (ACCOs) in rural and remote Australia would benefit from a greater investment in the training and employment of more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers, including Environmental Health Workers (EWS). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in rural and remote communities would also benefit from the employment of more EHWs, as ACCOs would be able to further extend their service delivery

reach into these communities. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be trained, accredited and employed as EHWs by ACCOs and local governments to undertake essential environmental health services. This would build upon the strong work to date of EHWs in full partnership with housing, construction and maintenance community controlled organisations.

The training, accreditation and employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Rangers would also greatly assist in the protection of the natural environment and improving the health and wellbeing of local residents. The duties of Rangers include clearing back burning fauna to prevent or slow the out of control burning during a bushfire event. The need for this was particularly stark during the 2019-20 Black Summer.

Environmental health risk factors impacting on the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in many communities in rural and remote Australia include water treatment and supply, damage to country, food and water insecurity (a lack of access to quality and healthy food and water), rubbish collection and disposal and sewage disposal (Prüss-Üstün and Corvalán, 2006). These risk factors make Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people compared to other rural and remote Australians more susceptible to diseases and infections, including bloodborne, gastrointestinal, vaccine preventable and vector borne diseases, and bacterial infections, with entrenched poverty exacerbating illness and premature death (Dillon, 2018).

Federal, State, Territory and Local Governments, in genuine partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, need to invest in solutions that ensure food and water security for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. This must include ensuring their access to traditional foods and medicines.

Increasing employment and enterprise for Aboriginal people in the housing industry

Housing in rural and remote regions of Australia is a crucial social as well as environmental determinant of health of local residents (Prüss-Üstün and Corvalán, 2006), as well as an excellent employment opportunity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people face a range of issues that prevent them from accessing housing that is affordable, adequate, safe and sustainable. Overcrowding is increasingly prevalent, making household members further susceptible to the burden of disease, psychological distress and other health and wellbeing issues (Shanaka and Bentley, 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic is a stark reminder of the importance of housing for maintaining health and slowing and stopping the spread of disease.

Significant Federal, State and Territory Government leadership and investment is urgently needed to address these critical housing shortage and overcrowding issues. An important first step is an audit of the total amount of funding required to ensure acceptable quality and quantity of housing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in rural and remote communities, which needs to be undertaken in genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community representatives. The National Partnership on Remote Housing invests in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander housing, and has resulted in 850 jobs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Queensland. The large majority, 87 percent, of people employed on projects funded under the program were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, far exceeding the target of 20 per cent set by the Australian Government.

2. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There is great need to move forward in a spirit of genuine partnership between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, other land owners and developers and government in rural and remote Australia, in order to improve employment and business prospects. The development of rural and remote Australia, including through job and business creation, also provides opportunities to improve the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It is imperative that the development of employment and business initiatives be done in genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander landowners and residents.

Within such partnership, Federal, State and Territory Governments must invest in:

1. the development of:
 - sustainable infrastructure, including roads, ports, marine infrastructure, dams, energy networks, water storage facilities, telecommunication and digital communication networks and renewable energy projects; and
 - safe, secure, sustainable and affordable housing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, with the total amount of funding required identified in genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community representatives.
2. the transportation industry in the Torres Strait Islands, including shipping and fisheries;
3. environmental health services, including training, accreditation and employment of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as EWs as a way to provide jobs and optimise the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities; and
4. pastoralism, tourism, construction and other industries, which also required providing greater training, employment and small business opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on Country.

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About the author

Dr Adam Paul Heaton was awarded a PhD in education in 2014 at Charles Darwin University. The focus of his PhD was in Aboriginal Studies, with a focus on tackling racism. He has worked at numerous NGOs and Australian Government Departments in Aboriginal Affairs. Adam has published ten peer-reviewed research papers and over forty submissions into Australian Government inquiries, advocating for the rights of and better outcomes for Aboriginal people.