FEDERAL PRIORITIES – NOVEMBER 2022

Our Priorities – a summary

1. REMOTE INDIGENOUS HOUSING

o Work cooperatively with the Queensland Government under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap on a new long-term agreement to support the delivery of new housing in remote and discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Queensland.

o Involve TCICA in the establishment of a new place-based partnership on housing, as per commitments made under Priority Reform 1: Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision Making.

2. TELECOMMUNICATIONS AND DIGITAL CONNECTIVTY

o Commit $200,000 to developing and implementing a strategic digital infrastructure investment plan for the TCICA region.

o Compel Telstra through the force of legislation to upgrade its infrastructure in Cape York so that it meets acceptable standards of reliability and addresses critical safety issues.

3. FREIGHT EQUALISATION

o Commit to working with the Queensland Government on the establishment of a freight equalisation scheme to alleviate the freight cost disadvantage faced by remote communities in Cape York, the Torres Strait, and Lower Gulf communities.

4. INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT

o A commitment in the 2023-24 Budget to seamlessly fund the third and final stages of the Peninsula Development Road (Cape York Regional Package) to ensure the road can be fully sealed in the next 10 years.

o Extend the Roads of Strategic Importance corridor to Weipa or Bamaga at the tip of Cape York to support regional economic growth.

o Commit to funding the Regional Aviation Access Program for another four years from 2023-24 and quarantine a portion of funds for projects in northern Australia.

o Establish a program like the Regional Aviation Access Program to support investment in marine access infrastructure to communities serviced by sea.

o Prioritise remote community marine infrastructure development in the guidelines for the Government's $7.4 billion investment in programs to support regional economic development.

o Expand the Investment Road and Rail Program to include ongoing development of the Savannah Way.

5. WATER SECURITY

o Adopt in full the seven recommendations in the *Closing the Water for People and Communities Gap* report.

Our Priorities – a summary (cont.)

6. FINANCIALLY SUSTAINABLE LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

o   Commit to restoring Financial Assistance Grants to at least one percent of Commonwealth taxation revenue so that local councils can meet the increasing costs of delivering local government services in their communities.

o   Recognise the unique situation of remote and Indigenous local governments in Provider of Last Resort arrangements (for example, local governments providing Commonwealth Home Support Programme services) and ensure services are funded up front, not in arrears.

7. STRATEGIC REGIONAL POSITIONING

o   Recognise the role Weipa, and the Cape York and Torres Strait region can play as an operating base for regional engagement and border control operations.
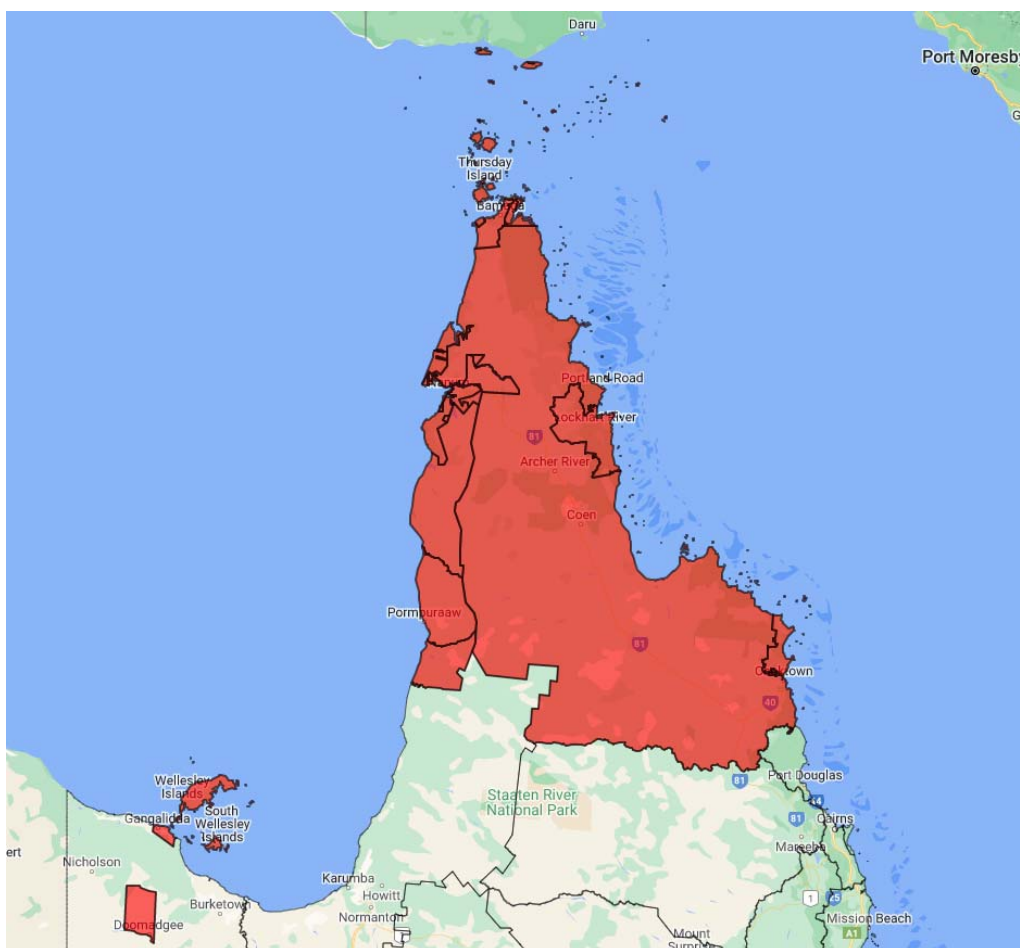
8. NORTHERN AUSTRALIA DEVELOPMENT

o   Include a much greater focus on addressing social and economic disadvantages faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Northern Australia, including quarantining at least half of all competitive funding available for economic, infrastructure and regional development programs for projects in Northern Australia to overcome years of chronic underfunding.

o   Bring local governments into the Ministerial Forum on Northern Development so that they can provide advice directly to the forum and provide opportunities for local governments to engage with the Indigenous Reference Group.

9. STRONG INDIGENOUS ORGANISATIONS

o   Commit to implementing the recommendations in the report of the Joint Standing Committee on Northern Australia's inquiry into the opportunities and challenges of the engagement of Traditional Owners in the economic development of northern Australia, particularly those relating to strengthening representative bodies.

About us

The Torres Cape Indigenous Council Alliance is a membership-based alliance of local governments which represents 13 of Queensland's 17 First Nations councils, as well as Cook Shire Council and Weipa Town Authority. Centred in the Torres Strait, Cape and Lower Gulf region, we operate as a collaborative partnership of councils to represent the common interests of local governing bodies within the region. Our members are committed to working together with the State and Federal governments to help shape place-based responses and solutions to the challenges and opportunities in front of us.

Regional Snapshot

- **132,846 km^2 total land area** – 7.6% of Queensland
- **20%** of the total land area is **National Park** – or 25,660 km^2
- **Approximately 30,000 residents** – 0.6% of Queensland's total population
- **63.2% Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples**, compared to 4.6% for whole of Queensland
- **15-year gap in health adjusted life expectancy** compared to total Queensland population
- **100%** of the region is **Very Remote Australia or Remote Australia**
- **$1.561 billion** contribution to Queensland's **GRP**
- **Major industries** include mining, agriculture, public administration, health and education
- **Tourism** is a growth industry

Priority 1: Remote Indigenous housing

A long-term commitment to remote Indigenous housing to address overcrowding, homelessness, poor housing conditions and severe housing shortages in remote and discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Closing the Gap Target 9: By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in appropriately sized (not overcrowded) housing to 88 per cent.

Issue

Some Indigenous people living in our region already face more than a 20-year gap in health adjusted life expectancy compared to the total Queensland population. People are dying from entirely preventable diseases because of poverty and disadvantage which can be linked back to poor housing conditions, overcrowding and homelessness. Access to safe and secure houses is critical if the disparity between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the non-Indigenous population is to be closed and lives improved for the long term.

New housing at Lockhart River

It is disappointing that the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing was not re-negotiated to continue to provide the funding needed for new housing, however TCICA welcomed the Australian Government's 2019 commitment of $105 million over three years to fund Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander local governments to deliver some housing in the short term. But more is needed. The Government's own Remote Housing Review in 2017 noted that in Queensland an additional 1,100 homes will be required by 2028 to address population growth and reduce the levels of overcrowding to acceptable levels.

The Commonwealth, through the National Agreement of Closing the Gap, must work with the Queensland Government on a new long-term commitment if it is to come close to meeting its *Closing the Gap* targets.

Importantly, any partnership agreement must consider and provide for the costs of negotiating Indigenous Land Use Agreements and the capital costs of trunk infrastructure necessary to support new housing developments. Many communities are constrained by land tenure issues and the need

New housing at Pormpuraaw

to negotiate with Land Trusts and Traditional Owners for access to land for new housing. These issues must be addressed within policy development and planning for remote Indigenous housing.

Recommendations

That the Australian Government works cooperatively with the Queensland Government under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap on a new long-term agreement to support the delivery of new housing in remote and discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Involve TCICA in the establishment of a new place-based partnership on housing (as announced in the 2022-23 Budget), and as per commitments made under Priority Reform 1: Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision Making ('*The Joint Council on Closing the Gap will establish six new place-based partnerships between the Commonwealth, relevant state or territory governments, local government, and agreed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities*').

Priority 2: Telecommunications and digital connectivity

Strategic infrastructure investment planning to maximise economic, social, cultural, health and education benefits of digital connectivity in our communities.

Closing the Gap Target 17: By 2026, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have equal levels of digital inclusion.

Issue 1: Infrastructure

Digital connectivity is fundamental to people's lives, underpinning the economic and social development of communities. Lack of digital and mobile connectivity has been an ongoing issue for businesses and communities across the entire region.

National Map of Reported Blackspots, 20 May 2021

According to data held by the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications, there are more than 50 reported blackspot locations on the PDR alone, and more than 200 reported across the whole region.

To address these issues, TCICA commissioned The Cairns Institute at James Cook University (JCU) to develop a telecommunications and digital connectivity strategy to outline a strategic direction to fix the digital divide across Cape, Torres and Gulf region. The *TCICA Regional Telecommunications and Digital Connectivity Final Report 2021* found a range of key challenges such as infrastructure gaps, service quality and social infrastructure gaps, and limited digital skills, but that some progressive investments are being made into the region. The report concluded that a lack of regional-scale planning is leaving communities to resolve complex digital planning and service development issues themselves. We know that new technologies will enable significant change but the lack of community awareness of the technology solutions available is holding the region back.

A Regional Strategic Digital Infrastructure Investment Plan is needed so that communities are not left on their own to address connectivity issues without the necessary evidence base to make informed decisions. Importantly, infrastructure investment planning needs a community-led approach to addressing telecommunications and digital connectivity issues, as opposed to meeting critical infrastructure needs with an industry driven approach based on business and profit models.

Courtesy of AirBridge Networks

The recently released report of the Regional Telecommunications Review 2021 made a number of key findings in support of the need for long term investment planning:

- Increased coordination and investment between the Australian, state and territory governments is needed to address a 'patchwork quilt' approach to connectivity in the regions. Relates to Review Recommendations: 1, 2.

- Local councils and other regional stakeholders are increasingly expected to facilitate telecommunications service delivery but are not appropriately resourced to identify connectivity needs and support the deployment of suitable solutions. Relates to Review Recommendations: 1, 5.

- Regional consumers, businesses and local governments experience difficulty in resolving telecommunications issues and providers are not adequately addressing the complex needs of regional users. Relates to Review Recommendations: 5, 7.

- Regional consumers, businesses and local government need access to independent advice and improved connectivity literacy to support them in making informed connectivity choices. Relates to Review Recommendations: 1, 5.

Courtesy of AirBridge Networks

An infrastructure investment plan for the Cape, Torres and Gulf region aligns with the intent of these recommendations and will provide evidence-based direction to Government and other investment decision-makers to maximise the impact of programs such as the Regional Connectivity Program, Mobile Black Spot Program, and Strengthening Telecommunications Against Natural Disasters (STAND) program.

In the meantime, we welcome the Government's 2022-2023 Budget announcement of a further $1.2billion under the Better Connectivity for Regional and Rural Australia Plan and look forward to understanding more about how this investment will address the issues our region is facing.

Recommendation

Commit $200,000 to develop and implement a strategic digital infrastructure investment plan for the TCICA region.

Issue 2: Universal Service Guarantee

There are perceptions across the region that the Universal Service Guarantee (USG) is not being met by service providers, and suggestions that the USG is not reflective of the needs and expectations of consumers. Despite Telstra's commitment to invest in repairing and replacing aspects of its network to reduce faults and improve reliability following the 2018 Regional Telecommunications Independent Review, there is little evidence to suggest the company has done so in Cape York. During 2020 the Lockhart River community experienced landline and internet outages for two weeks because of Telstra's inability to source replacement parts. Questions have to be asked about the serviceability of ageing infrastructure and loopholes in the *Telecommunications (Consumer Protection and Service Standards) Act 1999* that allow companies such as Telstra to escape responsibilities to provide equitable standards of service and reliability to remote regions.

Recommendation

Compel Telstra through the force of legislation to upgrade its infrastructure in Cape York so that it meets acceptable standards of reliability and addresses critical safety issues.

Priority 3: Freight equalisation

Commit to a freight equalisation scheme to help drive down living costs so communities are no longer unfairly disadvantaged by their geographic location.

Closing the Gap Target 1: Close the Gap in life expectancy within a generation.

Issue

The cost of freight is a major contributor to the high cost of living and doing business in remote communities in the TCICA region. Challenging distances, transport infrastructure, climatic conditions and poor coordination all impact supply chains and drive up freight costs. Costs become even higher during the wet season when roads are impassable for months at a time and communities become totally reliant on air and sea freight for food, household goods and general cargo.

Flood camera image – Archer River crossing

Freight can account for 20 per cent or more of the cost of everyday groceries and can be five times higher in the wet season than in the dry season. Food and other necessities can become unaffordable for some families, contributing to the food security issues faced by people in the region. Poor nutrition contributes significantly to the burden of disease people face and negatively impacts a child's academic performance, social, emotional, physical, and developmental health. Adults impacted by food insecurity may also experience worry and anxiety, compromising their social and emotional wellbeing. Achieving food security will have far reaching and long-term health and economic benefits for communities.

Freight costs also add considerably to the cost of building and construction, much of which is borne by local governments. It can cost more than twice as much to build a house on Mornington Island than it does in a regional centre like Cairns, meaning governments get poor value of money for investments in new housing and other infrastructure. Inbound freight costs make new economic opportunities unviable and export opportunities continue to be stifled by unsustainable costs. For households, whitegoods can double in price by the time they reach communities and even the cost of second-hand furniture becomes cost prohibitive when freight costs from Cairns to remote communities are added.

Freight equalisation is needed to drive down living costs for some of Australia's most disadvantaged communities and that is why TCICA has commissioned a study to cost a scheme for our region. Precedent exists for a freight equalisation scheme – The Tasmanian Freight Equalisation Scheme, which was established by the Commonwealth in 1976 to facilitate economic growth by subsidising freight costs in recognition of the high costs of shipping goods by sea when there is no option to ship by road or rail.

Island communities in the Torres Strait and Gulf of Carpentaria face the same challenges as Tasmania, exacerbated by small populations, poor infrastructure, climatic conditions, and the significant economic and social disadvantage communities' face. Communities in Cape York and the Lower Gulf also become virtual islands during the wet season. Freight equalisation must be considered as a matter of priority if we are to come anywhere near to achieving Closing the Gap targets and improving the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the region.

Recommendation

Commit to working with the Queensland Government on the establishment of a freight equalisation scheme to alleviate the freight cost disadvantage faced by remote communities in Cape York, the Torres Strait, and Lower Gulf communities.
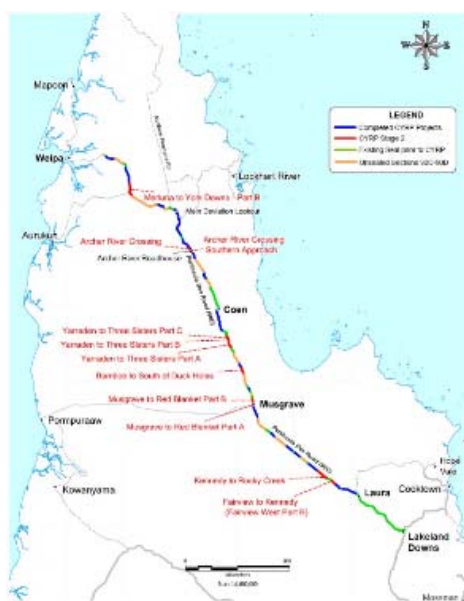
Priority 4: Critical access infrastructure and transport development

Support the development of foundational infrastructure to help stimulate economic growth and quality of life improvements in the Cape York, Torres Strait and Gulf region.

Closing the Gap Outcome 8: Strong economic participation and development of people and their communities.

Issue 1: Cape York Regional Package

TCICA welcomed the Australian Government's 2019 commitment of a further $190 million under the Roads of Strategic Importance Initiative (ROSI) for the second of four stages of the PDR sealing program. Around 208 kilometres remains unsealed, with CYRP T2 to seal just over 50 kilometres and construct bridges at major crossings including a bridge at Archer River.

Stage One of the Cape York Regional Package created employment and training opportunities for over 100 local Indigenous people and during various stages supported up to 30 Indigenous businesses or joint ventures. Our members in Cape York will again support the delivery of nearly $50 million worth of community access road projects under CYRP T2. This is money that will largely stay in the region through contracts delivered by Indigenous owned or led businesses, or councils delivering the projects themselves.

While funding under the second stage will help connect Weipa and remote Indigenous communities to essential services and remove barriers to economic development, it is not until the entire road is sealed that communities will fully benefit from improved community accessibility, reduced living costs, new jobs and investment.

Queensland's Department of Transport and Main Roads has commenced planning for stages 3 and 4 of the PDR to help facilitate a seamless transition between stages. It is critical for funding to be seamless to ensure continuity of training and employment outcomes, especially given the seasonal nature of construction activity in the Cape. This means funding needs to be guaranteed now.

Consideration should be given to extending the ROSI corridor to Weipa or Bamaga, to support ongoing investment in the region's most important road corridor and ensure access to the economic powerhouse of Weipa or to Australia's most iconic destinations the Tip of Australia, is safe and efficient for all road users. Extending the corridor delivers against the ROSI principles and will support regional economic growth and improvements to regional freight movements.

Sealing on the Peninsula Development Road

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Recommendations

A commitment in the 2023-24 Budget to fund the third and final stages of the Peninsula Development Road to ensure the road can be fully sealed in the next 10 years.

Extend the ROSI corridor to either Weipa or Bamaga, at the tip of Cape York.

Issue 2: Regional and Remote Airstrips

Regional and remote airstrips are a lifeline for communities and provide access to essential services such as health and help facilitate the supply of much-needed provisions like fresh foods, medicines, and other goods and services. TCICA acknowledges the success of the Australian Government's Regional Aviation Access Program, which has supported several airstrip upgrades and safety enhancements across our region.

With the current program coming to an end in 2023-24, there is an opportunity to review it to ensure communities most in need of funding support are prioritised. It is no secret that small rural and remote local governments struggle to self-fund capital and maintenance costs of critical infrastructure like airports and airstrips, so they have little choice but to rely on programs like this. Further, maintaining infrastructure in remote northern Australia is costly due to severe climatic conditions, and increased materials and labour costs. The Australian Government should consider quarantining funds for a specific northern Australia program to help level the playing field and increasing the amount of funding available for the highly competitive program.

New airstrip at Mapoon

Recommendation

Commit to funding the *Regional Aviation Access Program* for another four years from 2023-24 and quarantine a portion of funds for projects in northern Australia.

Issue 3: Marine Infrastructure

The Australian Government's commitment of $40 million towards maintaining marine infrastructure in the Torres Strait is welcome, but more is needed to address the full range of infrastructure deficiencies from years of wear and tear, challenging environmental conditions, and chronic underfunding. The Torres Strait Island Regional Council requires nearly $130 million to make wharf infrastructure safe for the 15 communities it services, however a further $100 million is needed for channel dredging, barge ramp renewals and new jetty infrastructure across the region.

This critical access infrastructure is needed by all remote island communities including Mornington Island in the Gulf as they have no choice to rely on it to live, work, and do business.

Marine infrastructure, courtesy of Torres Strait Island Regional Council

Government should consider establishing a program like the Regional Aviation Access Program which supports investment in marine access infrastructure to communities serviced by sea.

Alternatively, ensure marine infrastructure for remote coastal and island communities is prioritised under its $7.4 billion investment to support regional development across Australia, including the new $1 billion Growing Regions Program, new regional Precincts and Partnerships Program, Priority Community Infrastructure Program, and Investing in Our Communities Program.

Recommendation

Establish a program like the *Regional Aviation Access Program* to support investment in marine access infrastructure to communities serviced by sea.

Prioritise remote community marine infrastructure development in the guidelines to be written for the Government's $7.4 billion investment in programs to support regional economic development.

Issue 4: Savannah Way

The Savannah Way links the east coast of northern Australia to the west, with much of it unsealed west of Doomadgee in Queensland and beyond into the Northern Territory.

Ongoing investment in this important road link is needed to improve safety for road users, increase freight reliability and improve freight supply chains, and increase economic productivity and industry growth in areas

such as mining and tourism, helping to unlock benefits for Indigenous communities like Doomadgee. Funding under the Investment Road and Rail Program, which is supporting the development of the Outback Way for the same objectives, should be considered.

Recommendation

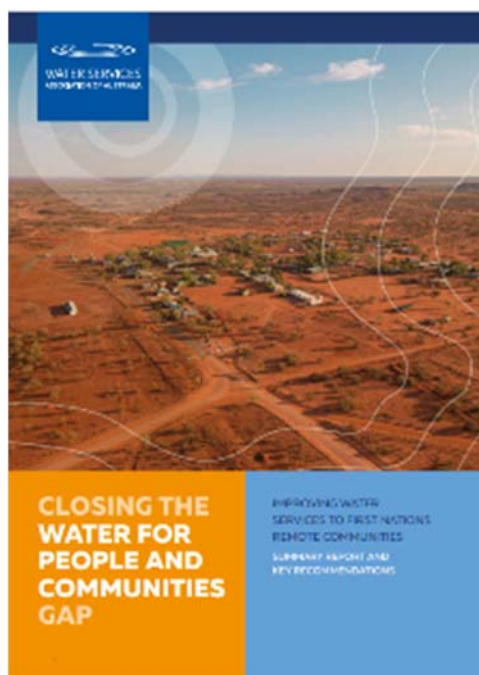Expand the Investment Road and Rail Program to include ongoing development of the Savannah Way.

Priority 5: Water Security

Ensure every Australian community has access to water that meets or exceeds the Australian Drinking Water Guidelines.

Closing the Gap Outcome 1: Everyone enjoys long and healthy lives.

Issue

The recent *Closing the Water for People and Communities Gap* report, launched by the Hon Linda Burney MP, Minister for Indigenous Australians in early November highlights the challenges of delivering safe drinking water and wastewater services to First Nations and remote communities. Shockingly, the report notes significant shortcomings in the provision of water services to remote communities and non-compliance with the Australian Drinking Water Guidelines. Lack of access to reliable and safe drinking water and wastewater has been shown to have a direct impact on the health of people and is a key contributing factor to the gap in life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Australia.

"(The report) provides a comprehensive review of remote water services and elevates the voices of First Nations people. I thank you for your efforts to drive change for First Nations communities and thank you for working with the communities themselves. After all, we know that better outcomes are achieved when First Nations peoples are involved in decision making on policies and programs that affect their daily lives."
  The Hon Linda Burney MP, 7 November 2022, Parliament House

The Australian Government must work with the Queensland Government and local governments to address these issues, and as an absolute minimum ensure that every Australian community has access to water that meets or exceeds the Australian Drinking Water Guidelines. We urge the Government to adopt in full the seven recommendations of the *Closing the Water for People and Communities Gap* report and urgently work towards implementing change.

Recommendation

Adopt in full the seven recommendations of the *Closing the Water for People and Communities Gap* report and place a level of urgency on implementing change.

Priority 6: Financially sustainable local governments

Acknowledge the true cost of delivering local government services in rural, remote, and discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and increase financial assistance to local government.

Issue

Local governments across the Torres Strait, Cape York and Gulf region of Far North Queensland deliver a wide range of services to their communities, such as aged care, health, social welfare, land and sea management, infrastructure, recreation and community services, particularly as thin markets in our region force local governments into Provider of Last Resort arrangements. But while we plan to operate services as economically and efficiently as possible, balancing the cost of service delivery with the standard of service aimed for is challenged by scarce resources and the hugely increased cost of doing business in remote locations.

Sewage ponds at Pormpuraaw

Environmental, climatic, social and economic conditions in our communities compound our ability to deliver services to a standard not lower than the average standard of other local governing authorities. Our region is frequently impacted by natural disaster events such as bushfires, cyclones, floods and tidal inundation, we face significant biosecurity threats as Australia's northern frontier, and many of our people are highly socially and economically disadvantaged through both remoteness and historical government policies.

All TCICA members actively seek to drive best practice and process efficiency to meet community expectations, however the opportunity to transform the way we operate is hindered by an inability to sufficiently levy rates and charges to generate own-source revenue. The relative decline in core federal funding to local government has further reduced the capacity of TCICA members to develop and maintain services and infrastructure in our communities.

Additional investment through local government is essential to help maintain the living standards of people living, working and doing business in the Torres Strait, Cape York and Gulf region.

Further, Commonwealth funding models often require local governments to fund services up front, with reimbursements in arrears. It is important that potential impacts are recognised and steps to mitigate adverse impacts are taken.

Kids of Aurukun

Recommendations

A commitment to restoring *Financial Assistance Grants* to at least one percent of Commonwealth taxation revenue so that local councils can meet the increasing costs of delivering local government services in their communities.

Recognise the unique situation of remote and Indigenous local governments in Provider of Last Resort arrangements (for example, local governments providing Commonwealth Home Support Programme services) and ensure services are funded up front, not in arrears.

Priority 7: Strategic Regional Positioning

A commitment to positioning Weipa and the broader region as a strategic base for regional engagement in national defence and border control operations.

Issue

The Cape York and Torres Strait region has the potential to be at the forefront of Australia's regional engagement in the Indo-Pacific on matters including defence, border control and disaster response. The northernmost islands of the Torres Strait are a mere five kilometres from Papua New Guinea and in recent times have become the frontline for protecting Australia's border from COVID-19.

The town of Weipa on Cape York's northwest coast is home to RAAF Base Scherger, which is designed

to allow operational units to move into existing facilities at little notice and is used annually for at least one major exercise. The proximity of the TCICA region to our nearest international neighbour, as well as Australia's major strategic competitor China, geographically positions us as an ideal location for expanded defence and border control operations. The Department of Defence's own 2020 Defence Strategic Update notes the need to prioritise the Australian Defence Force's 'geographical focus to the area ranging from the north-eastern Indian Ocean through maritime and mainland South East Asia to Papua New Guinea and the South West Pacific', as well as the need to prioritise investments in the ADF's capability to support responses to natural disasters and crises.

With its deep-water harbour and associated maritime facilities, Weipa offers an ideal location for expansion in the short term, especially as an operating base to support naval operations. This will no doubt become apparent during Exercise Talisman Sabre in 2023, when up to 1000 troops are expected to make their presence known. Defence representatives from the United States already showing a very keen interest in the capacity of the Weipa region to provide a unique training opportunity and for its future potential.

Weipa Port

Other opportunities include enhancing RAAF Scherger to support the ADF's engagement in the Indo-Pacific, and the deployment of forces to respond to disasters.

TCICA welcomes the independently led review into Defence's force posture and force structure now underway and looks forward to engaging in the review process.

Recommendations

Consider the merits of Weipa and the broader region as an operating base to support the ADF's strategic goals and tactical objectives.

Priority 8: Northern Australia Development

A renewed focus on developing Northern Australia, including addressing the social and economic disadvantages faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and enhancing the governance model.

Issue

Overcoming social and economic disadvantage

The Commonwealth's Northern Australia agenda generated considerable expectation around the potential of Australia's north to drive economic growth and prosperity for the nation. While investments in infrastructure are extremely important, these alone will not create a foundation for addressing broader regional disadvantage. Overcoming the social disadvantage faced by any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in remote communities must be front and centre if Northern Australia is to come close to realising its true potential. Lack of community infrastructure, housing shortages, poor regional connectivity, limited access to digital technologies, few business and employment opportunities, and poor access to health and education all contribute to the social disadvantage faced by people in remote and Indigenous communities every day.

Napranum, courtesy of Cape York Weekly

Governance

The Ministerial Forum on Northern Development must play a more significant role in driving outcomes for remote Indigenous communities, including through direct engagement with local governments. The governance model for Northern Australia has not been consultative and has operated in isolation from major stakeholders in the region. Effort should be directed towards bringing local governments into the partnership so that they can provide advice directly to the Forum.

The Indigenous Reference Group (IRG) plays an important role in advising Northern Australian governments on opportunities for the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities on northern development. The TCICA would welcome opportunities to engage directly with the IRG to ensure North Queensland's Indigenous communities have a strong voice in the advice provided to government.

Recommendations

Include a much greater focus on addressing social and economic disadvantages faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Northern Australia, including quarantining at least half of all competitive funding available for economic, infrastructure and regional development programs for projects in Northern Australia to overcome years of chronic underfunding.

Bring local governments into the Ministerial Forum on Northern Development so that they can provide advice directly to the forum and provide opportunities for local governments to engage with the Indigenous Reference Group.

Priority 9: Strong Indigenous Organisations

Strengthen the capacity of Indigenous representative bodies such as Registered Native Title Bodies Corporate and land trusts to support better engagement in economic, social and cultural development opportunities.

Closing the Gap Outcome 8: Strong economic participation and development of people and their communities.

Issue

Conflicting interests amongst Traditional Owners and the limited organisational capacity and resourcing of many registered native title bodies corporate (RNTBC) to manage their affairs and carry out their statutory responsibilities can lead to poor economic and social outcomes for communities. Similarly, the complexities of negotiating agreements with native title holders can challenge the ability of some local governments to deliver much needed public infrastructure such as social housing, water and waste, and other community services.

The report of the Joint Standing Committee on Northern Australia's inquiry into the opportunities and challenges of the engagement of Traditional Owners in the economic development of northern Australia recognised these issued and made several important recommendations including:

- Increased funding for PBCs and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander bodies and consider setting up a Future Fund to provide secure long-term funding for PBCs and NTRB/SPs. (Recommendation 1).
- Require PBCs and NTRB/SPs to demonstrate transparency and accountability in their decision-making processes. (Recommendation 1).
- Increase the level of capacity building support, and governance and management training resources, provided to PBCs and NTRB/SPs, including support to traditional owner groups before the determination of native title status. (Recommendation 2).
- Reviews systems for the appointment of PBCs Directors with a view to reducing the turnover of PBC leadership and ensuring stability and continuity of boards. (Recommendation 3).

These recommendations are aimed at addressing deficiencies in financial and capacity building assistance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander bodies. Importantly, they acknowledge that many native title and land rights bodies have not been getting the help they need to meet the statutory responsibilities vested in them. These, and the remaining recommendations in the report need to be implemented if Traditional Owners are to derive any real benefits from their land.

Recommendations

Commit to implementing the recommendations in the report of the Joint Standing Committee on Northern Australia's inquiry into the opportunities and challenges of the engagement of Traditional Owners in the economic development of northern Australia, particularly those relating to strengthening representative bodies.

Our Initiatives

Cape York, Torres Strait, and Gulf Opportunities Plan

The Cape York, Torres Strait and Gulf region has the potential to become one of Australia's most recognisable, sustainable and economically diverse regions. Aligned with the Commonwealth Government's Northern Australia agenda, the Cape, Torres and Gulf region presents significant opportunities for scalable change over time.

To harness this and build momentum, Arup was commissioned by TCICA to develop an economic opportunities plan to help grow the regional economy and guide public and private sector investment in the Cape York, Torres Strait and Gulf region.

The plan sets out five regional development objectives to guide sustainable growth. It also identifies a number of transformational strategies that represent the key levers or 'big moves' to help unlock growth for the region and the achievement of the regional development objectives and vision.

Imagining the Future for Indigenous Eco-Tourism – Cape York and Torres Strait

Cape York and Torres Strait are places of extraordinary wild landscapes, stunning unique wildlife and authentic Indigenous culture. The area holds great promise for tourism broadly, but to date the main type of tourism is 4x4 drive and camping, a sector that is growing and having some unintended negative side effects as a result. Luxury tourism is currently not offered in the region, other than at two Great Barrier Reef islands, and is an area that should be explored for its considerable socio-economic and environmental benefits.

Commissioned by TCICA, this study investigated the potential for applying the African safari approach to the region, focusing on luxury, Indigenous joint venture tourism development, exemplified by the Damaraland Camp model.

Cape, Torres and Gulf Region: Delivering food for all communities

The Cape, Torres and Gulf Opportunities Plan identifies agricultural ventures – including the development of a network of food production hubs – as a key building block to becoming recognised as a resilient region, reducing reliance on imported fresh food.

In recognition of the opportunities for food production in the region, TCICA commissioned Arup to carry out an investigation into potential food production locations and forms across the Cape, Torres and Gulf region. An increased focus on food production in the region, including new production areas, has the opportunity to bring many benefits to the people and economy – improving affordability and access to fresh food, bringing new employment opportunities and improving general health and wellbeing.

Digital Connectivity Strategy

Digital connectivity is fundamental to people's lives, underpinning the economic and social development of communities. Lack of digital and mobile connectivity has however been an ongoing issue for businesses and communities across the entire Cape York, Torres Strait and Gulf region.

The Telecommunications and Digital Connectivity Strategy commissioned by TCICA outlines a strategic direction to fix the digital divide across the TCICA region. It identifies options for the deployment of fibre, Wi-Fi, satellite and mobile technologies across the region to help boost economic growth, digital inclusion and deliver a range of social benefits including the more effective provision of local public services like health and education.

Regional Resilience

Indigenous local governments can struggle to meet the demands of disaster management, climate risk management and resilience building due to lack of resourcing. This project brings key partners together to help councils build their capacity and understanding of their resilience needs to help prepare them for engaging in long-term regional resilience planning and position them to better manage the social and economic impact of future disasters and climatic events.

TCICA acknowledges the financial support of the Queensland Government for these initiatives.

Demography and Society of the TCICA Region

41.8% of residents are aged 24 or under.   The median age is 30.1, compared to Queensland at 38.4%. 66% of the population is working age (15-64), which is on par with Queensland. 24.6% of people are on Jobseeker (6.5% for Queensland).

40.8% of people speak a language other than English at home, compared to 13.5% for the whole of Queensland.

8.1% of households are multiple family households (2% for Queensland). 70.1% of occupied private dwellings are rented (33.1% for Queensland). Home ownership stands at 20.6%, significantly less than for the whole of Queensland (63.5%). More than 430 people per 10,000 persons are homeless, compared to 45.6 per 10,000 persons for whole of Queensland.

Cook Shire, Torres Shire and Weipa have the highest number of people with a bachelor's degree or higher, reflecting the significant public sector and mining industries. 13.4% have 'engineering and related technologies' qualifications and 10.7% have 'management and commerce' qualifications. 9.4% have education qualifications.

Weipa has the highest median total family income, followed by Torres Shire and Cook Shire. Weipa's median family income at $170,716 per year. 49.7% of people in Weipa report a total family income of more than $156,000 per year. This is significantly higher than for Queensland as a whole (24.3%).

Across the region, the median total personal income is $28,489 per year and the median total family income is $69,471 per year. The region experiences an unemployment rate of over 25%. Pormpuraaw and Kowanyama have the highest unemployment rates – both above 50%.

Most communities are in the most disadvantaged quintile when measured against the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA). Only people living in Weipa are in the least disadvantaged quintile.

The region experiences three and a half times the rate of reported offences compared to Queensland as a whole.

Across the region there are 15 police stations, 17 ambulance stations, 2 fire stations, 19 schools and 37 hospitals.

The burden of disease for people living in the Torres Strait and Cape region is significantly higher than for the Queensland average. Rates of diabetes are 4 times higher, and incidences of coronary heart disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, are all two times higher. Gulf communities are likely to experience a similar burden of disease.

Source: Queensland Government Statisticians Office, Queensland Regional Profile for TCICA Region (custom region) October 2022; TorresHealth

Our Members