



Response to the Discussion Paper 'Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory'

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Key messages

The points we wish to make in this submission are summarised as follows:

- Government should recognise that, while a substantial part of its contribution will be in directly engaging with the issues, it also has a role in supporting those individuals and organisations that are better-placed to bridge the divide between government agencies and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- Once the current concerted effort is over, there is a risk that government policy and practice will quickly return to the old silos. We would like to see continuing vigilance in this area. An important factor will be ensuring high standards of staff induction and performance management to achieve coordinated and integrated work that puts the needs of citizens at the centre of policy implementation.
- The Stronger Futures initiative must properly recognise the complexity of Aboriginal identity. A blanket approach to policy for Aboriginal people or communities, will always fail to analyse the differences between people and the needs and challenges they face.
- Economic strategy should be based on strong data, a coherent conceptual framework and a clear-sighted analysis of the history of initiatives in this field. We would like to see proper reflection on State and Territory efforts towards economic development. Too often, policy development is started with a blank sheet as if the past reveals nothing about some of the basic questions presented for discussion in the Stronger Futures paper.
- We believe there is a strong role for initiatives to support individual capabilities and resources in economic development. Ninti One has trained Aboriginal people to be community researchers, including with FaHCSIA support. The data and analysis provided by trained community researchers is a powerful commodity within the process of policy development and is one way in which governments can work better with communities.
- Key activities such as engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must receive the comprehensive attention they require and capability within government must be supported to meet the challenges of doing business differently. Long-term lack of investment in remote parts of the Territory is not only corrected but that ongoing recurrent funding is provided at suitable levels to make the most of the potential that exists.

Introduction

Ninti One Limited wishes to make this submission to the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) in response to the Discussion Paper entitled 'Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory', which was released in June 2011. In doing so, we draw on the research we have undertaken through the Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre (DKCRC), contract research projects for various clients including Federal, State and Territory Governments, as well as our current programs, which include the leadership of the CRC for Remote Economic Participation.

The Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre (DKCRC) existed from July 2003 to June 2010. It was a research and brokerage institution that linked researchers from 28 partner organisations. Much of our work took place in the Northern Territory in close collaboration with families, communities and organisations who were affected by the Northern Territory Emergency Response and the implementation of related policies.

In addition, our experience in the planning process and implementation of the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation (CRC-REP), which commenced operation in July 2010, is also relevant. Ninti One manages CRC-REP as well as the Australian Feral Camel Management Project. The constitution of the company provides for governance by a board with 50% of the members being Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and 50% who are non-Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. One-third of the 52 formal partners to Ninti One are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander organisations.

In providing this response, we will concentrate on economic participation and education, community engagement and policy development, which are core subjects in the work of Ninti One. In doing so, we draw on previous submissions made by Ninti One on the Draft Indigenous Economic Development Strategy and the Draft Indigenous Education Plan. We will also offer some overall observations on the future direction of policy for the Northern Territory.

Coordination and integration within government

In a remote territory with a widely-dispersed population and poor social and economic indicators, government agencies should certainly be playing a leading role in tackling the challenges that people face. The concerns and intentions expressed in the discussion paper are therefore important. However, government should recognise that, while a substantial part of its contribution will be in directly engaging with the issues, it also has a role in supporting those individuals and organisations that are well-placed to bridge the divide between government agencies and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In other words, government cannot and should do try to do everything, because this perpetuates some of the problems we see in remote Australia. An over-statement of the direct role of government can neglect the critical role of other agents of positive change in the Northern Territory. Results of research published by DKCRC provides pointers as to how this can be achieved in practice, especially the work of our partners in the Western Desert and the East Pilbara (McGrath et al. 2010) and the Northern Territory (Elvin et al. 2010).

Government has a propensity to roll out policy initiatives in a way that is experienced by citizens as inconsistent and sometimes incoherent waves of reform. A major lesson from the Northern Territory Emergency Response was that its implementation at the same time as the reform of local government in the Northern Territory only served to exacerbate the confusion of many local people. Despite worthwhile efforts to integrate and coordinate government programming between agencies and contractors through,



Regional Operations Centres and Government Business Managers, there remain great challenges in achieving true coordination.

Our concern is that, once the current concerted effort is over, government policy and practice will quickly return to the old silos. We would like to see continuing vigilance in this area. An important factor will be ensuring high standards of staff induction and performance management so that key individuals are supported to operate in a way that is coordinated and integrated with others and puts the needs of citizens at the centre of policy implementation. It is not good enough for government to, on the one hand, acknowledge that its own capacity in remote places has limitations, but on the other hand fail to provide adequate support to and management of the performance of key individuals in those locations.

Local understandings of ‘government’

In remote communities two complex worlds exist; the world of local Aboriginal people and the world of government. Progress towards stronger futures will depend on greater understanding across the boundaries that divide those worlds. A common criticism of the Northern Territory Emergency Response was that it treated everyone within the affected communities the same. Without retreading those arguments, the key point is that government departments and staff must bring into their focus the complexity and diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities.

Government has its internal structures, roles and responsibilities, hierarchies and cultures, each applying in different geographical areas. Similarly, our research on service delivery in Martu country in Western Australia has observed that ‘boundaries exist within the population on the ‘demand’ side of services. These include language group and ‘country’ origin, family, age (whether of not an individual is an elder), gender and the primary settlement at which an individual is seen to be based.’ (McGrath et al 2009:8). Further observations are that ‘government and non-government programs are often targeted either at Aboriginal people or at Martu people, (but) both of these categories render invisible the differences that exist within these categorised groups or the hybridity that may exist between them. Often programs are labelled as Aboriginal but target Martu people only, or on the other hand, target the generic ‘other’ Aboriginal people and do not attract Martu participants. Aboriginal people from elsewhere in Australia working for service organisations are often expected to naturally form relationships and/or represent Martu people’ (McGrath et al 2009:9).

This example from Western Australia could equally apply to an analysis of government-community understandings in the Northern Territory. We would like to see the Stronger Futures initiative properly recognise the complexity of Aboriginal identity. A blanket approach to policy for Aboriginal people or communities, will always fail to analyse the differences between people and the needs and challenges they face. And while we appreciate that this is a difficulty inherent to all public policy, the sophisticated approach required now must take steps to address it.

Economic development

Ninti One is currently working with FaHCSIA on projects relating to four of the priority communities under the National Indigenous Reform Agreement: Yuendumu, Ntaria, Amata and Mimili. Our experience to date is that the Local Implementation Plans (LIPs) developed in each location are valuable as a single over-arching document through which many initiatives can be taken across a wide range of topic areas. In some cases, the process of developing the LIPs itself has produced valuable knowledge on development goals for each community, within which economic development features prominently.



Policy responses to the challenge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander economic development so far suffer from poor data and information, a fragmented view of the issues, and 'imposed' initiatives generated from outside the regions which prove not to work on the ground. This situation is exacerbated by the inherent difficulty of implementing programs in remote regions, including logistics, expense, environment and cross-cultural misunderstanding.

Economic strategy should be based on strong data, a coherent conceptual framework and a clear-sighted analysis of the history of initiatives in this field. It is too often the case that new strategic development pays lip service to the lessons of the past. We would like to see proper reflection on State and Territory efforts towards economic development as well as those aspects of earlier policy work on Shared Responsibility Agreements, Regional Partnership Agreements and COAG trials taken into account so that the Strategy is informed by the experiences of the past. Too often, policy development is started with a blank sheet as if the past reveals nothing about some of the basic questions presented for discussion in the Stronger Futures paper.

The first ingredient in effective strategies for economic development is a thorough understanding of local perspectives on governance. Perceptions of the need for, and the role, value and functions of governance will vary across the range of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with an interest in the subject. The most stark divide is likely to lie between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on the one hand and government on the other. It will be coloured by individual experiences of the economic development, including those of the ATSIC era. And it will be influenced by recent developments, such as the Royalties for Regions policy in WA, the Northern Territory Emergency Response and Welfare Reform on Cape York, and how they have been felt by people and reported in the media.

Research by DKCRC in the Anmatyerr group of settlements in the Northern Territory and two settlements in Diamantina Shire, Western Queensland has shown that 'distance from markets and from the mental maps of urban-centric policy-makers means that small, remote settlements do generate economic practices locally' (Ingamells et al. 2010:1). The research pointed to the importance of local plans and strategies as a basis for economic development and sustainability. We argued that 'current economic policy facilitates national prosperity to the detriment of local economies. It points to the necessity for desert regions, of developing an internal economic agenda held by a local agency, in ways that bring both Aboriginal and settler cultures into economic expression' (Ingamells et al. 2010:1).

Ultimately, the conceptual basis for economic development strategy needs to be clearly articulated. We feel that this is an aspect of the Stronger Futures paper that merits some attention. Competing emphases include:

- National economic goals and the increased role that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people could play
- Localised economic development for self-reliance, for example through an emphasis on microenterprise and sustainable livelihoods
- Building connections between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the globalised economy
- Regional economic development driven by lead industries generating local demand for services.

In the case of one example above, sustainable livelihoods, Ninti One has extensive experience in applying conceptual thinking to the work we do. The Sustainable Livelihoods framework, commonly used in international development settings, is one way of conceptualising economic development (see Moran et al.



2007; Measham et al. 2006). Our view is that it offers potential for people to work out how to build conditions where they achieve local economic development aspirations.

But the key point we wish to make is that the over-arching conceptual framework for the Stronger Futures work on economic development would benefit from further analysis and description. It should take into account the conceptual and policy development behind the Indigenous Economic Development Strategy, which provides frameworks within which economic initiatives can be located in a more coherent way than is implied in the discussion paper. For groups with which we work, much can be achieved in supporting 'individual capabilities and resources', to use a term from the Indigenous Economic Development Strategy. This is because a significant proportion of people living in remote communities have not had the experience of production, enterprise or trading activities.

In communities where government transfers to individuals and families are the main source of income, young people are brought up in situations of welfare dependence rather than work or business. So an important starting point for them is support to work in an environment where people are producing or trading a good or service. The work of Enterprise Learning Projects (ELP) and Arnhem Human Enterprise Development (AHED) is also relevant here, as both organisations emphasise individual partnership with families and groups living in remote locations

We believe there is a strong role for initiatives in this area, which is why we have trained Aboriginal people to be community researchers during the DKCRC and have recently employed 29 other people to be researchers in the four communities mentioned at the start of this section. Data and analysis provided by trained community researchers is a powerful commodity within the process of policy development. It is one important response to the questions in the Stronger Futures paper under 'Governance' and which ask how governments can work better with communities. The support of FaHCSIA for these kinds of initiatives has been invaluable and we consider them to have a continuing important role in future developments in the Northern Territory.

Education and school transitions

In the area of education research, Ninti One provided a submission on the Indigenous Education Action Plan (IEAP). Our view is that government initiatives often concentrate on establishing a delivery system aimed at groups who are implicitly assumed to be passive recipients of the products of that system. The Stronger Futures initiative would benefit from recognising and encouraging students, families and communities to be active choosers and influencers of the quality of their services. Recent international research indicates that a key factor in the higher performance of private schools in many countries where school attendance and performance falls short of international benchmarks is that parents demand more of teachers and other education staff (Tooley 2008). This is an important pointer for Stronger Futures as it shows that engagement with families is not just about getting them involved in supporting their children but also encouraging them to express their expectations of the education system.

There are complex challenges in improving pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through education and training to employment and enterprise. We are committed to a program of research under the CRC-REP that will contribute to better outcomes in this area. The research commences in early 2011 and aims to:

- Understand the factors that support transition into sustainable employment
- Identify the barriers to effective transition



- Compare and contrast the strengths and weaknesses of existing approaches
- Document Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander job seekers' perspectives and experiences in order to identify key factors in particular results being achieved.

The research will build a picture of the system that supports pathways into work and enterprise, analysing the connections between different parts of the system, the behaviours that influence its effectiveness and the areas where specific improvements could be made that enhance the system as a whole. The methodology will draw greater attention to elements of the system that have not received consideration before, including conventions and standards in policy and professional practice and the engagement of family and community members.

In remote education, the CRC-REP will identify how education systems can be redesigned to better suit the needs of communities in remote regions by examining demand (what students, carers and the local economy need), supply (what systems need to provide, including better staff recruitment and retention), policy issues and alternative delivery models. For example, an area of focus is the idea that remote education systems would be more effective if they were constructed around social networks based on sparseness and high mobility, as well as taking into account the cultural and social practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Conclusion

We value the intent that underlies the Stronger Futures Discussion Paper and the extensive process of consultation that the government has introduced to support it. Ninti One does not take issue with the areas targeted by the paper. We are, however, concerned that key activities such as engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will not receive the comprehensive treatment they require or that capability within government will be insufficient to meet the challenges of doing business differently. It is important that long-term lack of investment in remote parts of the Territory is not only corrected but that ongoing recurrent funding is provided at suitable levels to make the most of the potential that exists.

Ninti One is committed to supporting a stronger future for the Northern Territory and for the many individuals, families, businesses and organisations with whom we are associated within the Territory. We are keen to contribute further to the development and implementation of policy emerging from the Stronger Futures process. We would be pleased to respond to any further opportunities to participate.



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*Submitted by Ninti One Ltd
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