



**C**entre for  
**A**ppropriate  
**T**echnology

Submission to the  
Australian Government  
on the

Indigenous Economic Development Strategy  
Draft for consultation and Action Plan 2010-2012

December 2010

The Centre for Appropriate Technology (CAT) welcomes the opportunity to submit the following comments in response to the **Indigenous Economic Development Strategy: Draft for Consultation and Action Plan 2010-2012**.

The Centre for Appropriate Technology (CAT) is a national Indigenous science and technology NGO which facilitates access to knowledge, information, support and practical and workable responses to technical issues and service delivery problems encountered by remote communities.

CAT's five *core capability* areas are:

- Housing and infrastructure services in remote communities,
- Community engagement,
- Project management,
- Technology evaluation and research,
- Capacity building, training and employment.

CAT works with and through a number of partnerships to secure better understanding of and services to remote Indigenous communities. These include partnerships with industry associations such as Water Quality Research Australia, research institutions such as the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation and Swinburne University as well as Private Corporations. CAT also has a Joint Venture partnership with Batchelor Institute for Indigenous Tertiary Education - the Desert Peoples Centre – that is currently implementing a range of initiatives around Livelihood Pathways and Social Enterprise. CAT is supported by the Australian, Northern Territory and Western Australian Governments and their agencies, in areas such as renewable energy services particularly through the Bushlight Project, the development of the National Indigenous Infrastructure Guide and remote community water planning with the Community Water Planner Field Guide.

CAT's head office is in Alice Springs and its regional offices are in Derby WA, Cairns QLD, and Darwin NT.

## Summary of Key Points

- Remote Australia, with its distinct geographies, settlement patterns and cultural and socio-economic landscapes requires a suite of considered economic and community development investments, that leverage from this distinctiveness, rather than attempting to replicate or transfer approaches premised on assumptions derived from mainstream (often urban) contexts. The strategy prioritises a programmatic approach rather than establishing an enabling framework that can support place based and locally tailored investments in economic and social development as well as economic participation.
- In remote Indigenous Australia the creation of economic opportunity is the necessary precursor to economic participation. This is as much about creating jobs, as has been engineered through the Australian Government support for Ranger programs, as it is about supporting reinvigorated social and economic infrastructure so that civic participation and service delivery can be recognized as critical pathways for supporting the transition from economic exclusion to participation. Access to effective education programs is critical but given the current population peak of young and working aged Indigenous people across remote Australia, with little formal schooling or job opportunities, new and innovative approaches to second-chance adult learning and earning opportunities must also be created. This is particularly the case as CDEP is progressively wound back and people are transited from 'work' to unemployment.
- Telecommunications infrastructure and affordable access has the potential to revolutionise service delivery and economic opportunity across remote Australia. As the only area of Australia not set to attain benefits through the rollout of the NBN, the economic opportunities that could flow from progressing the connectness of remote Australia, may indeed be subsumed by an ever widening digital divide.
- Investment in Social Enterprise as an approach to ameliorating social and economic exclusion is expanding in other areas of the country. Its potential in remote Indigenous as a strategy for providing supported transitions into economic participation, for addressing service deficits and in building the institutions through which economic and social participation can occur, should be invested in.
- The current service models for supporting infrastructure and associated services (water, energy, sewerage etc) across remote Indigenous Australia are unsustainable. They also tend to drive ever incremental cost blowouts, repeated infrastructure breakdown and overall compound health risks to an already ill-health burdened population. Alternative service delivery models, especially those that leverage local skills, knowledge and therefore the potential for economic participation, need to be implemented.

- The Strategy makes no reference to the plethora of local, regional and State based economic development strategies, including those being developed as part of the Local Implementation Plans for RSD communities or Territory Growth Towns. There is significant risk in promulgating yet another layer of policy that may further fracture efforts to achieve coordination and streamlining of government services to remote Indigenous people.

## Discussion

The stated aim of the strategy is “to increase the wellbeing of Indigenous Australians by supporting greater economic participation and self reliance”. Wellbeing is clearly the outcome with economic participation and self reliance the means of achieving this. However the guiding principles in the strategy document repositions economic participation as the outcome and self reliance as the suite of responsibilities Indigenous people need to assume in order to achieve well-being. Whilst economic participation is undoubtedly important (and its nature potentially much broader than that envisaged in the strategy), the strategy excludes any consideration of the importance of social participation and the social infrastructure that is required to enable people who experience significant, multiple and intergenerational disadvantage to engage economically. Such social infrastructure (support services, civic institutions, social networks) are critical in building the self-reliance and self-esteem of individuals particularly as they negotiate the interface of cultures, societies and economies.

Some reference is made to the diversity of Indigenous Australians, the places where they live and the additional challenges facing those in remote Australia. This acknowledgement does not translate into any strategies nuanced to address such diversity. In remote and very remote Australia, which encapsulates some 75% of the continent of Australia and 25% of the Indigenous population; there are significant differences in contact histories, settlement patterns, cultural activities, Indigenous land estates, access to services and prevailing economic landscapes that require very different approaches to social and economic inclusion to those envisaged for the more densely populated regions of Australia. Remote Australia is noted for its dispersed populations of Indigenous and non Indigenous people, its vast mineral wealth (extracted from but benefits rarely reinvested in the region), its unique geographic and cultural landscapes and its distance from the seats of political power and decision-making. What this means for Indigenous economic development strategies for remote Australia is threefold.

Firstly, Indigenous economic development in remote Australia is inextricably linked to the social and economic fabric of remote Australia and implicates both Indigenous and non Indigenous Australians and those who ‘do business’ there. Tourist operators link with Indigenous communities for eco-tourism offerings; shops and galleries link with artists and art centres to sell and exhibit Indigenous art; mining companies fly in

workers or seek to utilize local and Indigenous workers if, and only if, the right mix of social and educational support services can be leveraged. Contractors provide a range of housing and essential services to remote Indigenous communities but rarely utilise local Indigenous labour because the underpinning education and training supports have been and continue to be ineffective. A key aspect must be enabling cohesive and inclusive interventions to drive regional economic capability.

Secondly, service delivery models premised on the market dynamics of densely populated urban regions, presume access to specialist skills sets and mainstream benchmarked 'standards' or 'regulations' are doomed to fail, especially where the measurements of the utility or effectiveness of those services is also based on mainstream assumptions. For example, funding models for vocational education and training require training providers in remote areas to ensure a critical mass of learners (at least 12) to underpin their financial viability. Furthermore VET trainers are required to teach mainstream industry competency standards to learners who speak English as a second language, who have usually been unable to progress beyond primary school education and for whom there are few jobs even if they successfully complete the training. Whilst investment in schooling in remote areas is gaining momentum there is a generation of 15 to 35 year olds who will remain a socio-economically 'lost' generation unless innovative additional investments in nurturing their skills and capabilities are forthcoming. This loss in terms of community cohesion and the impacts of social dysfunction is already palpable across remote Australia.

Thirdly, a critical issue for remote Australia is not merely opening up pathways to employment in extant economic activities, whether that be mining, business or government jobs, but creating a depth and breadth of economic opportunities that address service delivery failings and leverage further the assets and aspirations of the Indigenous people and communities who live there. An immediate challenge is to shape new pathways towards social and economic inclusion. Social enterprise is certainly being fostered as a strategy for social and economic inclusion for disadvantaged Australians in other parts of the country and needs to be considered a critical part of the mix in remote Australia. The deficits in service provision (whether that be essential services, land management services or social services) across remote Australian Indigenous communities is very apparent and further exacerbated by sectoral standards and regimes imported from entirely different mainstream contexts. A stark example of the perverse consequences from a 'one size fits all' approach is a newly built aged care centre in a remote community that was unable to open. No local person had the required qualifications (even though they had been running the aged care service prior to new standards accompanying the new facility) and no applicants from elsewhere could be found. A simple but momentous innovation could be the creation of a suite of paraprofessional roles across service areas (aged care, essential services etc) that would provide employment opportunities for locals, deliver services and nurture applied capacity building opportunities. Such services could be auspiced by credentialed organisations utilising risk management approaches to implementing service guidelines. The impact could be improved services, expanded local work opportunities, and significant cost benefit opportunities for governments.

The potential of new information and communication technologies to address some of the ongoing issues around education, health and other services in remote Indigenous

Australia has been flagged for many years. It is raised again in this strategy, but again there is no consideration of the range of investments needed to leverage such potential. Remote Australia will benefit the least from the rollout of the NBN. The innovative engagement of young Indigenous people with new communications, multimedia and social networking technologies where they are available, suggests significant opportunities for reinvigorated social and economic participation, if investments in reliable and affordable telecommunications infrastructure were made.

A strategic focus on the different regions of Australia, including a specific focus on remote Australia, resonates strongly with the available evidence base of what can work and is also consistent with previous Australian Government policy recommendations. For example the Aboriginal Economic Development Plan 1994 outlined a strong case for a heavily regional approach to the setting of strategies and policy for Indigenous employment, enterprise, education and training. Certainly the re-emergence of a strong push for distinctive regional infrastructure and investment strategies was validated at the recent elections. This provides a clear window of opportunity for the development of regionally calibrated approaches to Indigenous development, alongside smarter and responsive engagement with what might constitute economic and social opportunities beyond the urban mindset.

## CAT Expertise

CAT has been working with remote communities of Indigenous people for more than 30 years. Guided by the organisation's mission to *secure sustainable livelihoods through appropriate technology*, CAT's endeavours have focused on the connections between assets, infrastructure and service delivery, skills and capabilities and livelihood opportunities and aspirations. Our work has clearly demonstrated that investments in improved infrastructure or services in remote communities need to be framed by an understanding of user demand, skills and aspirations to ensure both the sustainability of the investment and the opportunity for end users to leverage skills and livelihood benefits from that investment. For example, research undertaken by CAT over ten years ago into the state of renewable energy infrastructure in remote communities identified systemic breakdown of the systems. This was attributed to the installation of inappropriate systems in the first place (size, type of technology etc ) limited local knowledge and understanding of the systems and their required maintenance and the exorbitant costs of required specialist maintenance leading to poor repair and maintenance regimes.

In response the Bushlight<sup>1</sup> project was implemented. Aiming to ensure reliable and affordable energy services to small remote communities, each system to be installed was configured to respond to the extensive energy planning undertaken with each community, and training in system troubleshooting was also undertaken. Furthermore energy systems were designed to support existing livelihoods activities (eg. study, art and craft, tourism) as well as enable future development.

Similarly, for over ten years CAT has been developing approaches to enhance the management of remote community water supplies<sup>2</sup>. This has involved undertaking applied research, trialling and developing resources and providing training to local residents. The impact of well managed water supplies in terms of reduced health risks, reduced service delivery costs and capable local water managers is growing and the potential to innovative work roles in this and related areas, as has been done for land management rangers exists.

The National Indigenous Infrastructure Guide<sup>3</sup> was developed by CAT with the support of the Department of Families, Housing Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. The Guide provides an overview of the challenges, opportunities and good practice approaches to installing and managing infrastructure and essential services in remote Indigenous Australia, including approaches to community engagement. The Guide elucidates mechanisms through which investments in remote Indigenous communities and services can be sustained and enhanced and suggests new ways of enabling community development and socio-economic participation.

CAT has been delivering a suite of accredited technical training services to communities of Indigenous people across remote Australia for over 15 years. It is clear that across remote Australia, and especially with Indigenous learners, the issue is

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<sup>1</sup> [www.bushlight.org.au](http://www.bushlight.org.au)

<sup>2</sup> [www.wqra.com.au/cwplanner/CWPlanner.htm](http://www.wqra.com.au/cwplanner/CWPlanner.htm)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.icat.org.au/niig/>

far more complex than merely aligning training offerings with industry requirements or better matching of demand to supply. Pathways for Indigenous people into VET are difficult. This is partly because of poor prior educational attainment, partly because VET programs tend to be ad hoc and patchy as they straddle settlement dispersion, variable facilities and extreme climatic conditions, and partly because the nature of work specialisation that underpins the Training Packages being delivered is often irrelevant to the types of work and opportunities available<sup>4</sup>. Education interventions that straddle the widening gap between school achievement and VET requirements are needed, as are community development and enterprise learning initiatives that can diversify and multiply community and economic development possibilities. Language, literacy and numeracy programs are but one small part of the equation.

With the support of the Commonwealth Bank of Australia the Desert Peoples Centre (CAT's joint venture partnership with Batchelor Institute) is establishing a Social Enterprise Hub in central Australia. The vision of the Hub is *Social Inclusion through Enterprise*. Its key rationale is to innovate new opportunities for Indigenous economic participation that leverage the aspirations of organisations and individuals, and provide social and community benefit. CAT believes that the current focus on opening up jobs in the mainstream, as envisioned by initiatives such as Generation One, is necessary, but will never alone address the pervasiveness of social and economic exclusion in remote Australia with its fast growing populations of Indigenous people.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1911.html>

Centre for Appropriate Technology  
Desert Peoples Centre  
Desert Knowledge Precinct  
South Stuart Highway  
Alice Springs  
PO Box 8044, 0871

P 08 8959 6100

F 08 8959 6111

[www.icat.org.au](http://www.icat.org.au)

Contact [peter.taylor@icat.org.au](mailto:peter.taylor@icat.org.au)