First Australians First: Investing in regional infrastructure for the economic benefit and wellbeing of Indigenous Australians

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About the author

The focus of Dr Adam Paul Heaton's PhD is teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (or Indigenous) Studies to achieve anti-racism learning outcomes. He coined and developed the anti-prejudice teaching-learning framework *Reconciliation Education*. For 20 years he has been a policy advisor and researcher in Indigenous Affairs, education and social services at numerous NGOs and Australian Government departments. He has published over 20 peer-reviewed research papers and 60 submissions to Australian Government inquiries advocating for better outcomes for Indigenous Australians.

Abstract: *Despite prosperity in Australia, a high proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Indigenous) people in rural and remote (regional) communities across the nation continue to live in poverty. Regardless, in 2021 the Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade launched an inquiry into regional architecture with a view to progress Australia's international standing and business dealings in the Indo-Pacific region. The author submitted a response to this inquiry, arguing that the majority of regional infrastructure investment must be, first and foremost, for the wellbeing of Indigenous Australians, who are also known as First Australians. This paper explores the critical need for regional infrastructure to close the gap in economic inequality between Indigenous people and other Australians.*

Key words: *Closing the gap, Indigenous Australians, regional development, regional infrastructure*

I.   Prioritising development projects in regional Australia that empowers Indigenous Australians

Regional Australian communities with high numbers of Indigenous residents should enjoy the same quality of infrastructure as other Australian communities (Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation [LNAC], 2020), but this is often not the case. The new National Agreement on Closing the Gap, signed in June 2020 by federal, state, territory and local governments in Australia and the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations, sets out targets for improving outcomes for Indigenous Australians (see Coalition of Peaks, 2020).A target to measure the closing of the gap, currently under development, aims at measuring progress towards parity in infrastructure, essential services, environmental health conditions and data development for Indigenous people and communities. This includes improving regional community infrastructure and making essential services more accessible for Indigenous people, including water and sewerage, waste management, roads and electricity supply. As with other targets in the Agreement, improving regional infrastructure must centre formal partnership and shared decision-making between the different levels of government and Indigenous community representatives and organisations (Coalition of Peaks, 2020).

Placing a focus on the social and environmental determinants of health for Indigenous Australians in rural and remote communities is integral to closing the gap, and a greater federal, state and territory investment in

regional infrastructure, including housing, waste management and recycling and business enterprises, is essential to improving health, social-economic and other life outcomes for Indigenous Australians. Employment, education and training opportunities for Indigenous Australians created from such infrastructural investment would contribute significantly to achieving these outcomes. LNAC point out that economic development opportunities for Indigenous people across much of rural and remote Australia are limited by remoteness from basic infrastructure and social services, training options, high costs of living, difficult climatic conditions, lack of access to professional expertise and inadequate housing (LNAC, 2020). Poor regional connectivity, limited access to digital technologies and few business and employment opportunities impact many Indigenous communities, resulting in complex 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 Indigenous Council Alliance [TCICA], 2020). Heightened investment in regional infrastructure and related services can assist in improving outcomes for Indigenous communities, families and children, including reducing the number of Indigenous children in contact with the child protection system and Indigenous youth experiencing mental health, drug and alcohol, and criminal justice issues (LNAC, 2020).

However, as TCICA (2020) identify, there is currently very little funding from the Australian Government to address disadvantage facing Indigenous children, youth and adults in rural and remote regions(IRG, 2020). Unless Indigenous business and cultural leaders are invited by government to the table, in genuine and formal partnership and shared decision-making with federal, state, territory and local government when it comes to the development of regional Australia, and Indigenous Australians are equal beneficiaries of the economic, social and cultural dividends that result, initiatives will fail and rural and remote Australia will remain undeveloped. Indigenous self-determination is essential for developing regional Australia and for protecting traditional land and water access rights.

Strong representation from Indigenous Australians on committees and boards overseeing initiatives for developing regional Australia is imperative. Such initiatives include the National Australia Infrastructure Fund (NAIF), the Aboriginal Contracting Framework (ACF) and business solutions and investment and asset management services offered by Indigenous Business Australia (IBA). Solid Indigenous participation in the oversight of local decision-making initiatives, local housing solutions, water infrastructure projects and the National Water Infrastructure Development Fund is also required. Initiatives like Business on Country, developed by the North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance (NAILSMA), is crucial to having government, industry and Indigenous landowners commit to sustainable development on the vast Indigenous-owned estate, for the socioeconomic benefit of local communities (NAILSMA, 2019).

The construction of sustainable infrastructure, including roads, dams, digital communication networks and clean and renewable energy projects, will help address infrastructure deficits across regional Australia, meet the needs of Indigenous Australians and close the gap in inequality. While mining companies should proportionately contribute to investing in regional infrastructure, especially close to their mining activity, the federal government cannot expect the private sector to take entire responsibility for its funding. Federal government must work with state and territory governments to address gaps in public infrastructure like roads, ports and marine infrastructure, energy networks, water storage facilities and telecommunication networks. Complementary to investment in regional infrastructure must be greater investment in business support services to assist new and existing enterprises. A significant proportion of funding would be well spent on developing the capabilities of Indigenous Australians in regional communities and building Indigenous enterprises, which would also expand employment opportunities for Indigenous people on country.

Investing in regional housing infrastructure is integral, as housing is a crucial social and environmental determinant of health for residents (Prüss-Üstün & Corvalán, 2006). Indigenous Australians face a range of issues preventing 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 (Herath & 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

and viruses. An important first step is an audit of the total amount of funding required to ensure acceptable quality and quantity of housing for Indigenous people in regional Australia. Investing in regional housing and other infrastructure can strategically create training and employment opportunities for Indigenous Australians.

Increased investment in freight and shipping infrastructure is also essential. Despite some promising outcomes, TCICA point out that in the case of freight, coastal shipping is the only supply link for general cargo, fuel, machinery and business construction materials for island communities in Torres Strait and Mornington Shire. Policies and programs, including freight subsidies, are needed to drive down these costs for Indigenous and other businesses and industries in order to make communities more sustainable, competitive and innovative (TCICA, 2020), which in turn will improve socio-economic and health outcomes.

An essential outcome from investing in regional infrastructure is the curbing of environmental health risk factors. In recent years, there have been a number of national level initiatives which recognise the critical importance of environmental health issues, including the Preventing Disease and Injury through Healthy Environments. Regional infrastructure can, and must, assist improve water treatment and supply, food and water insecurity (a lack of access to quality and healthy food and water), rubbish collection and disposal and sewage disposal, and address damage to country (Prüss-Üstün & Corvalán, 2006). Curbing these risk factors will reduce the likelihood of Indigenous people being susceptible to diseases and infections, including blood borne, gastrointestinal, vaccine preventable and vector borne diseases, and bacterial infections, with entrenched poverty exacerbating illness and premature death (Dillon, 2018). More so, new infrastructure must revolve climate change mitigation strategies. NAILSMA (2019) identifies inadequate physical infrastructure, ineffective regional institutions, harsh climate and long distances to markets as being real challenges requiring real solutions.

Key to achieving greater health and wellbeing outcomes for Indigenous people in regional Australia is federal, state and territory governments' investment in Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs). Some ACCOs focus on delivering housing and community infrastructure construction, whereas others focus on other service types for local Indigenous people. ACCOs, governed by Boards comprising locally elected Indigenous leaders, are known and trusted in Indigenous communities, whereas government entities have often lost this trust. However, the infrastructure of ACCOs in regional Australia is often in dire need of repair and refurbishment, which would assist expand their local service offerings and the training and employment of more Indigenous Australians as environmental health workers, which would achieve health as well as employment outcomes as set out in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

II.   Conclusion and recommendations

There is great need for formal partnership and shared decision-making between Indigenous people, particularly Indigenous community representatives, and the federal, state, territory and local governments in Australia. Without Indigenous business and community representatives invited by government to the table to engage in such partnership and shared decision-making, and unless Indigenous Australians are equal beneficiaries of the economic, social and cultural dividends flowing from regional development, initiatives will fail, regional Australia will largely remain undeveloped, and the gap in inequalities faced by Indigenous Australians will not be closed as much as it would be otherwise. Through partnership and shared decision-making, federal, state and territory governments must invest in:

1. sustainable infrastructure, including housing, roads, ports, marine infrastructure, dams, energy networks, water storage facilities, telecommunication and digital communication networks, and renewable energy projects;

2. infrastructure associated with transportation and industry in the Torres Strait Islands, including shipping and fisheries;

3. safe, secure, sustainable and affordable housing for Indigenous Australians, with the total amount of required housing identified in genuine partnership with Indigenous community representatives;

4. training, employment and small business opportunities for Indigenous Australians living and working on Country, in pastoralism, tourism, construction, environmental health and other industries; and

5. The construction and upgrade of ACCO facilities in order that they may expand their service offerings and reach to Indigenous people in rural and remote communities.

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