



Charles Darwin University

Northern Australia Workforce Development Submission 63

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Submission to

The Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia on workforce development in Northern Australia

This submission is based on my personal experience working with growers and Indigenous stakeholders, especially rangers across northern Australia.

I have worked with growers from the horticulture sector regarding their aspirations in relation to future agriculture development, projecting the real picture (paper attached). Likewise, my work with Indigenous rangers over the last 8-10 years involved developing economies in remote Indigenous communities (paper attached). Based on my knowledge and experience while working at Charles Darwin University, dealing with both groups, I would like to share some ideas and concerns on workforce development in Northern Australia.

Firstly, from a scientific perspective, we need to acknowledge the actual and limited potential for development in Northern Australia for obvious reasons i.e. largely poor soils with patchy fertile areas, very seasonal water availability, and lack of infrastructure and labour.

In relation to horticulture development: A key message that came out of our workshops with growers across northern Australia was that the existing produce from the north floods our domestic markets, and if we want to increase production in the north, we need to find export markets which require an in-depth understanding of the export protocols of the target country and to develop related support systems within Australia. The workforce is no doubt a major issue in the horticulture sector, and better arrangements to ensure workforce standards and relaxed visa regulations (for example, low English level requirement for work on-farm) can help address this issue, especially given our location close to the Asia Pacific.

In relation to Indigenous development: there are huge emerging opportunities in the Carbon, Biodiversity or overall Ecosystem Services (ES) markets. Indigenous peoples have ongoing, millennia-old experience of managing land in its natural form, and encouraging the development of these market opportunities will enable them to 'lead their lives in their way' – and ultimately that's what development is about – people can enjoy the life they want to enjoy. So far, the pressure has been to engage the Indigenous peoples in mainstream economies. When there are suitable, emerging nature-based economies, northern Australia with its significant Indigenous population should take the lead to advance these markets in this modern era. The recent COP 27 and IPBES reports highlight the need for these emerging nature-based markets.

The Australian Government should revisit its 'Developing the North' agenda asking key questions:

1. What kind of development?
2. Development for whom?

a. trends in Northern Australia that influence economic development and industry investment including population growth, economic and business growth, workforce development, infrastructure development, and Indigenous economic participation;

The key trends include:

1. Large-scale Corporate agriculture development in the north which does not result in the development of northern Australia as the corporates come and go after their profit.
2. Little support for the small-scale farmers (in WA, north Qld and NT) who are the real developers that have contributed towards the development in the region and need to be acknowledged and fully supported.
3. There is a huge gap between growers and Indigenous stakeholders while both are land managers, and efforts need to be put in to support building connections so there is a sharing of knowledge and skills which will benefit both.
4. A lot of efforts and funds to engage the Indigenous population in farming, which seems to yield little results to date and those results exist until the support is available. However, one needs to be aware of people's own interests which may not match well with farming.
5. Little consideration of developing unique opportunities that suit Indigenous interests. The carbon economy in the north, worth >30-40millions per year, is one such example and expanding this to ecosystem services economies can generate much greater benefits.
6. Enabling Indigenous peoples to engage in emergency management activities (with training) in their own communities, so the people are self-reliant and manage their emergencies in their way (could be a mix of traditional and modern approaches).

b. impediments to building the economic and social infrastructure required to support industry and business to expand and create regional jobs;

- Lack of understanding of what the growers (not corporates) want who contribute to the real development in the region

-Lack of understanding of what the Indigenous peoples want for development in the region.

c. challenges to attracting and retaining a skilled workforce across Northern Australia; and

- Relaxing visa/work requirements for workers, particularly in the north

- Incentivising people to stay here by offering more leave or medical services (better offerings than down south)

- Developing better work ethics and safety standards to work on-farm

- Better infrastructure and connectivity via roads and affordable flights to other cities within Australia and to neighbouring countries

d. empowering and upskilling the local Indigenous population.

- A key for the Australian Government is to develop opportunities that suit Indigenous capabilities such as land management. Following the Nobel Laureate, Prof Amartya Sen, development is about enabling people to lead their lives in their way. Indigenous people

have capabilities that need to be supported and utilized, and the government's responsibility is to develop opportunities that suit people's capabilities. For more details, please see our paper on SANGHA, K. K., GERRITSEN, R. & RUSSELL-SMITH, J. 2019. Repurposing government expenditure for enhancing Indigenous well-being in Australia: A scenario analysis for a new paradigm. *Economic Analysis and Policy*, 63, 75-91.

Sincerely,
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