

30 April 2018

Closing the Gap Taskforce
Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
PO Box 6500
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Effective and empowered Indigenous governance as the cornerstone of prosperity and wellbeing

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Closing the Gap Refresh and consulting with the Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA) Board.

The Torres Strait Islands are unique, because while they are part of Australia they have operated under quite separately defined and strongly principled governance arrangements prior to becoming part of Queensland in 1879. The Torres Strait is the only region of Australia that includes an international border, and is subject to an international Treaty (with Papua New Guinea) that requiring significant multiagency engagement for the Australian Government, including the TSRA.

It is largely a marine region (only 3% of Torres Strait is comprised of land in the form of over 270 island and reefs, (17 of which are inhabited), with a population that is predominantly Indigenous, with Native Title recognised over most islands and over approximately 40,000 square kilometres of Torres Strait waters.

The TSRA is an Australian Government corporate entity established under Section 142 of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Act 2005 (the Act). Specifically enshrined in the Act is the recognition of Ailan Kastom; the body of customs, traditions, observances and beliefs of the Torres Strait Islanders living in the Torres Strait region. The TSRA acknowledges this through ensuring that all its partnerships, programmes and services are developed and delivered in accordance with the principle of cultural empowerment and are respecting of the unique cultural protocols of the Kaiwalagal, Maluilgal, Guda Maluilgal, Kulkalgal, Meriam, Kaurareg and Northern Peninsula Area peoples.

This is expressed in the TSRA vision of "Empowering our people, in our decision, in our culture, for our future."

"Ngalpun yangu kaaba woeydhay, a ngalpun muruygaw danalagan mabaygal kunakan palayk, bathayngaka" (*Kala Lagau Ya*)

"Buaigiz kelar obaiswerare, merbi mir apuge mena obakedi, muige merbi areribi tonarge, ko merbi keub kerkerem" (*Meriam Mir*)

"Ngalpan moebaygal thoepoeriwoeyamoeyn, ngalpan ya kuduthoeraynu, ngalpan igililmaypa, sepa setha wara goeygil sey boey wagem" (*Kala Kawau Ya*)

The TSRA vision is expressed in the languages of our region, recognising the importance and diversity of our culture and traditional languages. Our vision signifies that the heart of our region is our

people, with culture an important part of our lives both now and into the future. Empowering our people to contribute to and make decisions regarding their future ensures that our culture will remain strong and that the future will be guided by the people who live in the region and understand and promote its unique characteristics.

TSRA Board supports the concept of Closing the Gap targets and its rationale to provide a clear way to hold all of us to account in improving the lives and prosperity of Indigenous people in Australia. The TSRA Board recognises the massive challenge that has been set to achieve these targets, falling short should again remind us of the incredibly complex and multidimensional nature of overcoming Indigenous disadvantage.

Reflecting the Productivity Commission's *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2016* findings on governance - "*Effective governance and leadership, and recognition of culture, play essential parts in the social and economic development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, and influence virtually all indicators in the framework.*" – the TSRA sees its role as the key regional representative body for leadership, governance and decision making as the cornerstone of ensuring prosperity and wellbeing for the people of the Torres Strait.

Effective community and regional governance have been the building blocks for our region and a very important part of our identity throughout our journey in modern times.

Regional governance is not about structures or levels of government, it is about the principle of Torres Strait Islanders having free, prior and informed consent and oversight of all things that happen in our homeland. It underpins everything related to our lands, territories and resources - our health, education and economic development right through to our climate change adaptation efforts.

The TSRA is currently working proactively with its key partners in the Torres Strait and Northern Peninsula Area of Australia to build on the existing governance arrangements so that by 2020 we will have the foundations to move to the next level of our region and our people's journey. That is to have a delivery and governance model that recognises Torres Strait's past and current success, while ensuring there is stronger accountability from all levels of government back to our people in communities.

While we only received the right to vote in Australia following the 1967 referendum, the Torres Strait has never let the challenges of national policy and systems stop its push to manage its own affairs - because nobody knows our homeland better than us.

There have been many attempts by the Queensland and the Australian Governments to give effect to our aspiration, through creating specific legislation for our area, forming and rationalising local governments and creating the Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA) in 1994 just to name a few.

Each of these has been subject to national and state policies. The volume of reforms over the past 20 years have led to significant changes due to externally imposed legislative amendments and brought us to a point where many communities feel they have lost their ability to make decisions for themselves in key service delivery areas.

The TSRA sees representative, effective and empowered local and regional decision making as central to meeting the Closing the Gap targets. Any successful partnership between Commonwealth, State, Territory and local government must recognise the importance of communities having a true stake and ownership in the decision making process. The TSRA's current work in developing an

Integrated Service Delivery model involves an intensive community consultation process to develop community plans, coupled with a Regional Governance framework that brings together the key decision makers from all levels of government up to the Commonwealth and State Ministers. Through a process of negotiation and mutual agreement, agencies and key stakeholders will be identified with responsibility for specific elements of the community plans to provide clear lines of accountability – a crucial element that the Special Gathering convened by the Prime Minister in 2018 noted was missing from the Closing the Gap framework. The Torres Strait model currently being developed could provide valuable lessons and a template for implementation on a wider scale. The TSRA Board is currently pursuing the development of Torres Strait specific targets through the Torres Strait Development Plan 2019-2022, these targets will reflect the aspirations of communities through a rigorous, comprehensive consultation process and enable the effective management of government policy and service delivery to our communities.

Not all Indigenous communities and regions have the same aspirations and goals, we recognise that – however the common thread that runs through all our communities is the desire to be part of the decision making process.

The TSRA remains strongly committed to the Closing the Gap targets and urges all levels of government to remain committed to the process and establish clear lines of accountability for targets and ensure that Indigenous communities are empowered to make decisions for themselves.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'NPS', enclosed within a large, loopy, scribbled oval shape.

Napau Pedro Stephen AM

TSRA Chairperson