



Australian
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The Marramarra Murru (Creating Pathways) Communique

The Symposium

The Marramarra Murru First Nations Economic Development Symposium was held on the lands of the Ngambri and Ngunnawal peoples, at the Australian National University, on 21-23 June 2022.

The Symposium was attended by some 150 people, invited by the First Nations Portfolio, who are committed to First Nations economic development. The majority of attendees were men reflecting the continuing gender imbalance of women. Even though the participation of First Nations' women is increasing in the First Nations' economy, this imbalance must be addressed to secure their talent and leadership. A significant majority of participants were Indigenous, either entrepreneurs or leaders of First Nations Organisations from across Australia. A total of 40 Indigenous suppliers and artists provided goods and services for the Symposium and its side events.

Of great interest and significance was the participation of senior First Nations' international delegates from Canada, the United States and New Zealand.

The Purpose

The Symposium focussed on what is required to build a true, self-determined First Nations economy that leverages the assets and rights that continue to be reclaimed by Australia's First Nations people.

It was informed by an evidenced-based Symposium Background Paper prepared by the First Nations Portfolio that can be viewed at <https://anufirstnations.com.au/>.

Most endeavours to improve economic independence for Australia's First Nations peoples have focussed on government programs to create jobs and businesses in a non-First Nations orientated economy. The entrenched disparity in economic outcomes between First Nations peoples and the rest of Australia's population demonstrates that this approach is insufficient.

Through the lens of developing a self-determined First Nations economy, the Symposium sessions logically worked through providing a historical perspective; an assessment of where this history has landed the First Nations economy and why a self-determined economy is so important; the nature of the rapidly emerging First Nations economy; key capabilities required to rapidly grow that economy; systems for maximising Australian First Nation's unique competitive advantage; innovative ways of optimising access to product, factor and financial markets; and perspectives on future opportunities for the Australian First Nations economy.

Key Messages

Building on the spirit enshrined in the Uluru Statement from the Heart, the Marramarra Murru Symposium was a landmark dialogue for the nation.

The key messages that the First Nations leaders of the Symposium want to share with the nation are summarised below:

1. A caged bird: a historical perspective

Colonisation has immeasurably affected the economic well-being of First Nations in the most adverse way. It is yet to be reconciled by the nation, despite the recognition of native title. Most of the land that has been reacquired by First Nation peoples presents significant structural and attitudinal barriers for economic development while rights to sea and water country remain miniscule.

2. With Wings clipped and feet tied; where are we now?

A new policy framework for First Nations economic development needs to be built by First Nations peoples and Australian Governments which focusses on economic self-determination and is part of the implementation of the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

The new policy framework must be negotiated and agreed between representatives of First Nations and Governments.

Key ingredients for the new policy framework include a strong focus on building trust, flexibility to respond to the diverse needs and priorities of communities across Australia, recognition and support for collective ownership of assets and building capability, particularly with respect to governance.

3. A phoenix emerges: entrepreneurship, aspirations, and community economic development

There is a growing First Nations business sector in Australia which has received a significant boost from Indigenous procurement policies implemented over the past 5 years, particularly by the Commonwealth.

Nonetheless, development of the First Nations business sector in Australia has been slow relative to comparable nations. Canada, the United States and New Zealand have much bigger sectors and key reasons include that their governments have developed innovative and Indigenous led mechanisms for raising capital from the private sector such as the First Nations Financial Management Board.

‘Caring for Country’, an initiative of First Nations people, has been hugely successful and is a significant contributor to their economy. It has allowed land, sea, and water country to be better managed and has provided massive employment opportunities. Of most importance is that through establishing ranger projects wherever First Nations people live, in urban, regional, or remote environments, it has united First Nations people like no other initiative funded by Governments. It is also an important platform for community based economic development.

4. Hatching the unique competitive advantage: First Nations knowledge and innovation

The intellectual property of First Nations peoples is critically important to their economic development. Its protection will provide a competitive economic advantage for First Nations peoples which is their right.

Current legislation in Australia to protect intellectual property is inadequate, confusing, and not widely understood by First Nations communities. It puts them at significant risk of sharing traditional knowledge and losing control and ability to gain benefits from it.

A new system needs to be negotiated underpinned by international best practice starting with Australia ratifying the Nagoya Protocol. The system should include supporting the development and recognition of Indigenous protocols (as recognised by the Nagoya Protocol) and new legislation that authenticates Indigenous products and knowledge, protects Indigenous cultural and intellectual property, is adaptable to local and regional contexts and is relevant to the nuances of Indigenous knowledge as a form of intellectual property.

5. You need strong wings to soar: jobs, skills, and commercial capability

A First Nations workforce needs to be trained with 21st century skills including those to engage in the 4th Industrial Revolution. A forward facing, people centred approach, is essential. It is also vital that there is support for a workforce to remain on Country, which is connected to culture and community and infrastructure gaps must be plugged if this is to be successful.

New initiatives need to be taken to improve the capability of the mainstream economy, particularly businesses, to engage effectively with First Nations people. Another priority is building the collaboration of First Nations businesses nationally to support one another including sharing success and capability.

The lack of data collected by governments on First Nations businesses is also a policy inhibitor. What data there is cannot be accessed readily by First Nations organisations or universities. Data is also critical for securing private sector investment in the First Nations economy and the Commonwealth must lead in responding to this challenge.

6. From Fledgling to Flight: access to product, factor, and financial markets

There continues to be market failure impacting on the success of First Nations businesses. Access to financial markets, for example, remains a major challenge.

Government programs are having mixed success in addressing this market failure. They would have more success if they were co-designed and implemented with representatives of the First Nations economies.

There are emerging opportunities. One is the principle of Free, Prior and Informed Consent before developments proceed which if implemented in Australia could significantly improve the negotiating position of traditional owners.

Another is the adoption of Environmental, Social and Corporate Governance (ESG) principles which should influence Australia's private sector to support economic self-determination.

7. Eagle eyed: future perspectives

Global megatrends are presenting both opportunities and challenges for Australia and for the First Nations business sector. There is no doubt that a self-determined First Nations economy will be operating in a very different economic and social environment compared to today.

Australia's First Nations peoples are emerging from history to be better prepared for these trends than they were in the past. The increasing asset base of First Nations including reclaimed land and their growing business sector presents significant opportunities.

Call to Action

The symposium was a unique opportunity for First Nations economic development to be looked at through the eyes of First Nations people who practise it every day.

Practitioners agreed that the policy framework led by the Commonwealth for First Nations economic development was in urgent need of reform and that it is a critical component of implementing the Uluru Statement from the Heart in full.

That policy framework and the institutions supporting it in the Commonwealth were developed in the 20th century and are based on terra nullius thinking including that First Nations cannot be trusted to control and make decisions about their assets for themselves. It needs to be replaced by a policy framework for the 21st century that has a razor like focus on self-determination.

It is proposed to establish an Australian First Nations Economic Forum (the Forum). It will work towards developing an accord incorporating a plan of action to achieve economic self-determination.

The Forum will also guide the framing of key issues and terms of reference drawn from the Symposium for a subsequent series of expert seminars. These seminars, over the course of 12 months, will further interrogate identified issues and potential solutions in key enablers such as treaties, settlements, and compensation; activation of the First Nations estate and economic water rights, First Nations intellectual property rights; building the required commercial capacity; accessing financial resources; and leveraging the required social investment to deliver economic sustainability.

ANU is also committed to organising an International First Nations Symposium, hopefully in late 2023. The outcomes of the Marramarra Murru First Nations Economic Development Symposium and seminar series will be a centrepiece of ANU's participation in this international symposium, raising the profile of the Australian First Nations economy on the global stage.

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