



Thank you Chairperson,

Like our Indigenous brothers and sisters all over the world, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders of Australia are seeking greater economic independence from governments and liberation from the shackles of welfare.

Economic independence gives us the capacity to make more life choices which are consistent with the principles of self-determination and empowerment.

We are hampered, however, by a legal system which has currently all but killed off our hopes and aspirations for a just settlement on ownership of the land which was taken away from us some 215 years ago by non-Indigenous colonisers.

As some of you might be aware the historic High Court Mabo ruling of 1992 for the first time gave legal recognition of our people's land rights but our government significantly diluted its benefits with a package of amendments to our Native Title Act.

The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination ruled four years ago that these amendments were racially discriminatory and should be suspended to allow negotiations with Indigenous representatives.

Our government greeted this decision with hostility and indifference and have continued to ignore the CERD's findings to this day. During the same period successive court rulings have reduced access and the scope of land settlements to the point where many believe that native title is dead.

While there is a huge gulf between us and the government on this fundamental issue we are in agreement with them on the need to produce greater economic benefits from the land that we do own.

A senior government Minister Tony Abbott has suggested that Indigenous people be granted freehold title to their land and we see some merit in the proposal.

We say, however, the government should also consider introducing an Indigenous-specific category of land ownership to allow economic development which also respects traditional values and the communal nature of Indigenous land and resource ownership.

We also need to see a relaxation of rigid guidelines governing banks and financial institutions which prevent them from lending for development on Indigenous-owned land.

The government also needs to consider offering tax concessions to investors and joint venture partners to give business some added incentives to work with Indigenous peoples on economic development.

With limited resources, my organisation, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, has been able to successfully finance several hundred businesses in a wide range of industries. Without our help it is likely that many, if not all of them, would have been unable to get started.

The government shares our view that more needs to be done to encourage Indigenous economic development. It has recently begun an inquiry to consider the best means of supporting and expanding such development.

We welcome this initiative and look forward to its findings later this year. We are hopeful that its "start from scratch" approach to Indigenous economic development will yield some innovative and forward-thinking proposals.

With our government recently becoming involved in fast-track negotiations with the United States on a free trade agreement the Indigenous peoples of Australia must also now confront the challenges of globalisation.

We should not necessarily fear globalisation and we certainly cannot ignore its presence.

We need to consider how we can become involved in globalisation in a positive way while ensuring that our culture and traditions are not destroyed in the process.

We share the strong views of the Pacific Peoples that development should not be allowed on our lands unless there were free, prior and informed consent by Indigenous people.

I also ask our government to consider what benefits might be available to Indigenous people in a free trade agreement with the US and what steps it will be taking to protect our rights.

ATSIC, itself, is currently involved in developing a dialogue with our region based on historical cultural ties with our near neighbours.

We are planning to hold a Economic Forum in Bali during October this year which is aimed at bringing regional peoples together to discuss cultural and economic development opportunities in the region.