Agenda Item 4: Study and advice on good practices and challenges in business and in access to financial services by indigenous peoples

INTERVENTION DELIVERED BY CATHRYN EATOCK AS CHAIR OF THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES ORGANISATION & THE ABORIGINAL RIGHTS COALITION-AUSTRALIA:

Thank-you Mr Chair, Honourable forum members and distinguished Indigenous Brothers and Sisters. I'm Cathryn Eatock, a Kairi and Budtjala woman, from Australia and I'm speaking as Chairperson of the Indigenous Peoples Organisation.

The IPO commends the EMRIP for this report. In Australia, as for many Indigenous communities, Indigenous peoples’ development is too often equated with resource extraction. While Australia’s ‘White Paper on Developing Northern Australia’¹ has a strong focus on extractive industries, it fails to recognise that remote Indigenous communities seek economic development options that align with cultural practice such as art sales, eco-tourism and environmental management, that enables custodial responsibilities, as caretakers of country.

Remote Aboriginal economies are based on a mix of traditional bush food harvesting and cultural practices, based on communal responsibility and sustainable development that promote well-being and guardianship of their lands and natural resources rather than premised on a solely economic model. The protection of lands is a key longer-term strategy for both economic development and community well-being. Indigenous peoples’ development requires the recognition of self-determination, with capacity to veto extractive industries.

Accessing finances is an important means of redressing historical injustices but needs to reflect principles of Indigenous self-determination. As this report highlights, we need to be wary that economic development and access to finance does not contribute to dependency, tying people into lengthy and onerous loans, which may become tools of assimilation that acts to undermine Indigenous decision making.

Financial management skills are necessary for self-determination and effective development objectives, however, developing these skills is difficult for Indigenous communities in Australia when access to social welfare payments are withheld and replaced with a cashless welfare card. These welfare reforms are based on the racially discriminatory Northern Territory Intervention

which removed access to cash for remote Aboriginal communities, and is now being rolled out in communities with high Indigenous populations, despite clear evidence that it doesn’t work and it reduces capacity\textsuperscript{2,3}.

While the Community Development Program, which is also implemented in remote Aboriginal communities, it requires Aboriginal people to undertake 26 hours work for welfare payments, this is more hours than required for non-Aboriginal people and is ongoing, while non-Aboriginal work is limited to six months\textsuperscript{4}. The penalty regime has no discretion and has quadrupled financial penalties, disproportionately impacting remote Aboriginal people, cutting card payments and leading to food insecurity, greater poverty. The program is beset by a lack of employment outcomes, resulting in a punitive program that is doing substantial harm. Aboriginal organisations have called on the Australian Government to commit to review the CDP program in collaboration with Aboriginal people and instead support Aboriginal service and development initiatives.

So, we urge the Australian government and other States to draw on this important report and ask them to work with Indigenous peoples, through approaches based on self-determination, to promote culturally aligned sustainable solutions to the economic development and social challenges communities face.

Thank you


\textsuperscript{3} Cox, Eva & Behrendt, Larissa, (2015) University of Technology, Submission to the Senate Finance and Public Administration Committee Senate Select Committee into Budget Cuts, April 2015, p2