



PF13 Joseph 068

AUSTRALIAN MISSION TO THE UNITED NATIONS

E-mail australia@un.int

150 East 42nd Street, New York NY 10017-5612 Ph 212 - 351 6600 Fax 212 - 351 6610 www.AustraliaUN.org

United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
Tuesday, 21 May 2013

**Follow-up to the recommendations of the Permanent
Forum on Indigenous Issues:**

Agenda item 3(c) - Culture

***Cultural Maintenance and Supporting the Development of the
Emerging Torres Strait Arts Industry***

**Statement by Joseph Elu, Chairperson, Torres Strait
Regional Authority**

(Check against delivery)

Chair

I would like to begin by acknowledging the Traditional Owners of the land on which we are meeting today. I pay my respects to their Elders, past and present, and the Elders from other communities who may be here today.

This afternoon, I would like to speak about the critical importance of maintaining and promoting the unique culture of Indigenous peoples, including the Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal people of Australia.

In 2005, the National Indigenous languages survey report identified that the two main Torres Strait traditional languages, Kalau Lagau Ya and Meriam Mir were in critical danger of being lost. It is clear to us in the Torres Strait region, that if the remaining traditional language speakers pass away without there being a clear and practical strategy to maintain these languages, we will have lost the bedrock of our Torres Strait cultural identity.

Australia recognises that for Indigenous cultures to survive, traditional languages along with traditional storytelling, song and dance must be revived, maintained, developed and promoted. Without a strong connection with culture, underpinned by language, the homogenising effect of globalisation risks a loss of identity in the Torres Straits.

This loss of identity would be compounded by the reduced opportunity to participate in the emerging Indigenous culture and arts economies – a key opportunity for economic empowerment for local communities.

The Australian Indigenous arts industry generates several hundred million dollars in revenue a year. The raw materials required for participation in this industry, are strong and deeply rooted connections to culture.

Research shows that Government investment in Indigenous arts centres generates a financial return to artists and their communities at a rate of \$52 for every \$1 invested. It also shows that Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal artists reinvest around 40 per cent of revenue generated from art sales back into their community art centres.

The Torres Strait arts industry is in its infancy compared with the Australian mainland Aboriginal success. If Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal artists in the region are to see increases in income from arts activities, further work on cultural maintenance, particularly traditional languages, is needed.

This investment is, essentially, a long term strategy to promote and encourage sustained cultural development and thus ensures sustainable local economies.

Through the Torres Strait Regional Authority, the Government is supporting efforts to achieve two simple but broad outcomes for the region's culture, arts and heritage agenda – strong, supported and respected Ailan Kastom (Torres Strait customs and traditions), and an active and sustainable arts and craft industry. A critical focus of this program over the next five years and beyond is also the revival, maintenance, preservation and development of Torres Strait languages.

The United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples sets out the importance of the retention of cultural identity in all its forms, stating:

Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons,

In the spirit of this important statement and the Declaration as a whole, it is essential that all national governments prioritise the survival, maintenance and promotion of critically endangered Indigenous languages.

Thank you for hearing me today – or as we say in our Mother tongues - Koeyma Eso, and Au Esoao.