Regional Development Australia

Australia

MIDWEST GASCOYNE

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Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Regional Development Australia Midwest Gascoyne (RDAMWG) has been working with the IOT community since June 2010, when we were approached to include them in the Midwest Gascoyne region for the RDA network, with additional funds to support our assistance. This arrangement has remained unfunded for 2 years and it is unclear if the IOT is now still part of the RDA network or outside of the network?

During our time, many hours were spent engaging with the community to understand the issues impacting on the community and how these might be addressed to take the community forward. The result was the production of the IOT Regional Plan 2012- 2017, Attached.

The community was found to be distrustful of any government processes, as they have been promised much and had little community projects delivered in their eyes, only projects that suited Government needs. Much of the work delivered has been for operational matters linked to the detention centre, such as sewerage works, recreation centre, power station, roads, jetty etc, whereas normal facilities, upgrades and maintenance requirements have been overlooked.

The biggest frustration the community has is they are unsure of what the Australians Government vision for the IOT is with so much strategic military discussion about the IOT, but little else, the community is unsure of the Governments intentions, which allows for speculation and misinterpretation of comments.

A communications report was commissioned by the Australian Government to assist the Government network improve communication arrangements within the organisation for the communities, but it would appear little has changed.

The role of the Administrator and the capacity (and appropriateness) of the Administrator taking on a stronger decision-making role;

During my time working with the Community, I have had the privilege of working with two Administrators, both highly respected people who have had successful careers in their professions. My experience working with these former Administrators was that they became totally frustrated with the current arrangements as they were appointed to the role with the expectation that they would be able to represent the community and deliver appropriate outcomes, but the reality was they could deliver nothing, they were ignored by the public service and their limited tenure allowed for little action from Government knowing that they would be leaving soon, what gains were made were discarded after they departed. See attached Public Apology from Jon Stanhope as an example.

It would appear that the inability of the Administrators to deliver outcomes stems from the period when there was no Administrators (formerly there were two, one for each Island Group) and responsibility was delegated back to senior public servants in Canberra and although the position of Administrator was reestablished the delegated responsibilities were never returned to the position of Administrator.

There may be reasons for this and this may be suitable in future arrangements, however what is required is a clearly articulated plan on how items will be progressed on the IOT that has engaged the community in its development and allows for an understanding of what can be expected and who can take responsibility should difficulties arise.]

It has been highlighted that the community has no real ability to deal with government services that are of concern to them, with services provided under contract by WA agencies, but they are not constituents of WA and therefore the responsibility of dealing with complaints would fall into a quagmire of responsibility shuffling between WA agencies, WA Ministers, Australian Government contract managers, Canberra based decision makers, on Island providers.

At the end of the day, it matters little who has the responsibility as there is no trust between the community and Government presently. This will only be overcome by establishing clear and meaningful actions for the future that have community agreement and ongoing implementation of the actions in however the smallest steps.

Existing consultation mechanisms undertaken by government representatives, including the IOT Regional Development Organisation, and best practice for similar small remote communities' engagement with Australian and state governments;

The IOT is not dissimilar from any other remote community, often the people that live there have an intimate knowledge of the local conditions and how things work. Often individuals represent many areas of the communities interest, by the nature of a small amount of people requires them to take multiple roles in the community. The community often has disparate views.

However, it would appear that the way the governance arrangements with multiple contracts for the delivery of services, it would seem that the community has been continuously consulted

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on issues with little outcome on the same issues, to the point that the community does not consider their time is worth providing any more.

During the development of the RDA IOT Regional plan, we took the approach on meeting one on one with people to engage them, until the issues became clearly defined as reported in the plan, but alas we have been unable to deliver any outcomes as there has been a change in direction to the Regional Development Organisation (RDO) and no continuation of this plan.

It would appear that the RDO has deviated from its original intent, with program funds from the former Economic Development program proposed to be provided to the new RDO, with the establishment of an Executive Officer and funds for programs now utilized for community grants?, which have little strategic direction overall. See attached draft RDO program proposed. Again this has been a symptom of changing Administrators and other staff.

It does not appear that the RDO has established appropriate governance arrangements for the delivery of programs and the management of funds as it has not been established as a self-autonomous body, simply an advisory group to the former Administrator. This diminishes its ability to provide services and generate its own sustainable future.

The RDA network provides a strong foundation as an organisation providing these services, with support from the Australian Government teams. However, any RDA group would require additional support to service the IOT.

Local government's role in supporting and representing communities in the Indian Ocean Territories; and

Local Governments are an essential service provider in any community. The IOT LGA's have been established under the WA model. Many WA LGA's are suffering from the limited ability to raise revenue as the WA Act limits the services that can be provided.

In contrast Qld LGA's have a greater scope to provide services, such as Water and Sewerage services and hence are more robust financially and more meaningful to their communities.

Again, from my experience it would appear that the LGA's have difficulty working through the processes required by the Australian Government in a timely manner to meet community's needs/expectations as all the decision making is off Island and frustratingly slow.

Opportunities to strengthen and diversify the economy, whilst maintaining and celebrating the unique cultural identity of the Indian Ocean Territories.

I would refer the committee to the RDA IOT Regional Plan that was develop with wide ranging community consultation which identified economic development opportunities.

Many reports have proposed opportunities for economic development, but little action seems forthcoming. For example since 2010, there has been talk of issuing a new Casino License, but progress seems glacial. Whereas, this could have been put into the open market to generate the

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best investment deal for the Christmas Island economy at the same time as the decline in detention center activities to keep the local economy buoyant.

Also, I would seek clarification from the Government on what they seek the IOT to become?

- Do they see its future as a strategic military asset, with this as the basis for its economy, providing services to military operations?
- Do they wish to see the population grow or decline? What is the population target?
- Do they wish to minimise the amount of public expenditure in the IOT by facilitating private investment in the growth and development of the IOT economy?

These questions cloud any progress for the future of the IOT and subsequently stifles any consideration of how the economy might progress.

I trust you find the above comments and attached documents of assistance in your enquiry. I would be happy to provide further clarification on any issues raised.

Yours sincerely,

Alan Bradley
RDAMWG
Executive Officer