

Northern Australia Taskforce

RDA NT Consultation
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TRANSPORT INFRASTRUCTURE

Transport infrastructure projects can be transformational in regional areas. Improved road, rail and port facilities will open up the Northern Territory, encourage private investment, and thereby fuel economic development. The Central Arnhem Highway offers an example, following the closure of the Rio Tinto alumina refinery the township of Nhulunbuy's future depends on upgrades to this road to provide all-weather access to the town. Without this key infrastructure link the fourth largest community in the Northern Territory has a very bleak future despite its many strategic advantages. The Territory's port facilities are also essential to the region's future growth. The Darwin Port has seen steady expansion but continues to struggle with the weight of increasing demand. Additional port capacity will be necessary to support the desired increase in exports to Asia. The region's growth also depends on improvements to, and expansion of, the existing rail network.

Opportunities include:

- Sealing the Central Arnhem Highway to support the development of Nhulunbuy and the East Arnhem region. Other road priorities linked to economic development outcomes include the Tanami Road and the Outback Highway.
- Expanding port facilities is essential to achieving increased export activity.
- Duplication of the existing rail line (or other capacity augmentation measures) to allow for increased freight movement and an expanded rail network to support new investment opportunities.

ECONOMIC DIVERSIFICATION

Diversification of the economy is fundamental to the long-term sustainability of regional centres, as we have recently been reminded by the Nhulunbuy example. Each community offers unique opportunities within and beyond the economic pillars of mining, tourism and agriculture. Recent emphasis has been placed on the primary industry sector, and particularly on broad acre production. This is despite decades of research in the wet dry tropical region which encourages a 'mosaic' style of production. Support for multiple small and medium sized farms organised on a landscape scale is not simply justified by the natural resource management case. History shows that intensive and mixed production is more resilient to the challenges faced by the sector. Other diversification opportunities which have been considered include tropical knowledge industries, mineral processing, renewable energy production and export, and an expanded defence presence.

Opportunities include:

- Delivery of a Food Futures Forum in 2014 to identify cross-stakeholder strategies to increase food production and export in the region.
- Support for the proposed Northern Development CRC to ensure regionally relevant agriculture research and development, the need for this cannot be underestimated as past failures too often relate to crop selection and production practices which were not suited to the local environment.
- Establishment of agricultural precincts to facilitate investment and ongoing viability by providing essential infrastructure, streamlining regulatory processes, and assisting with supply chains and marketing.
- There are many opportunities to support the development of a diverse, skilled and adaptable SME sector across the region, in particular embracing the potential of the emerging digital economy to address many regional challenges.

GOVERNANCE AND LONG-TERM PLANNING

It has long been recognised that challenges and opportunities are often shared across the North of Australia, a vast, relatively unpopulated but resource rich and strategically located region. Nevertheless, distance and parochialism and the inadequacies of both government and non-government bureaucracies result in waste and duplication, mistakes being replicated, and opportunities being missed. Perhaps the two greatest factors undermining the development of the North are the principles that decision making should be centralised and expenditure based on population. Effective development of Northern Australia will depend on the negotiation of long-term planning which responds to national needs but is underpinned by local advice and an investment strategy which is based on a national cost benefit analysis rather than simple per-capita measures. Northern Australia has a great deal to offer in support of both the national economy and national values, maximising this potential will depend on more effective governance systems underpinned by improved research, collaborative and consultative processes.

Opportunities include:

- Reforming land tenure to address constraints on economic development and grow employment opportunities for indigenous people.
- Allocating water resources to ensure equity, sustainability and the optimisation of economic benefit from this fundamental asset.
- Support for, and development of, effective collaborative initiatives, including the Strategic Partnership proposed in *The Coalition's 2030 Vision for Developing Northern Australia* but also non-government collectives such as the RDA Northern Alliance. It is equally important to streamline representation and planning.
- A shared long-term regional development strategy, ensuring that future generations of Australians share the region's economic, natural and cultural wealth.