

15 May 2015

Mr Wayne Bergmann
Chair, Expert Indigenous Advisory Group
COAG Investigation into Indigenous Land
Administration and Use
Dept of Prime Minister and Cabinet
PO Box 6500
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Mr Bergmann

Thank you for your letter of 7 May 2015 and your invitation to meet with members of the Expert Indigenous Working Group in Broome on 21 May 2015. Unfortunately, I am not available on that date due to other commitments in Perth.

In relation to the COAG Investigation into Indigenous Land Administration and Use, although Wunan Foundation is not an organisation that deals with these issues in depth, I have offered some thoughts below, which I hope might be useful.

Wunan does semi-regularly receive enquiries from businesses interested in developing commercial projects in the East Kimberley. These are projects that would employ local Indigenous people and provide other economic development benefits to Aboriginal people in the region, through leases and the opportunity to provide services. These projects have largely been in the forestry, pastoral and tourism sectors.

While Wunan provides a referral to the appropriate Traditional Owner groups in these instances, the feedback we have received from these business groups is that they have found the system within which they have had to operate in relation to these matters to be complicated and unwieldy.

In most cases, these initial expressions of interest by businesses have not resulted in development progressing, despite what had appeared to have been a serious intent to explore the opportunity and invest in the region, along with clear goodwill in wanting to engage with Indigenous people.

My thoughts on these issues, at a high level, would be to encourage the COAG Investigation Members to consider how best to facilitate investment from business and industry in these types of situations and perhaps putting in place formal arrangements whereby these types of investment opportunities could be managed all the way through from the initial enquiry, to engagement with traditional owners, through to commercial development. While this may already be occurring to some degree, the enquiries Wunan has received indicate that significant opportunities to advance economic development are being missed because of the current complex and ad hoc arrangements.

More generally, it is Wunan's view that private ownership of areas of Indigenous land could be a significant boost to economic development, as well as improving social outcomes for Indigenous people. The feedback we have received is that businesses seeking to invest in our region want either to procure very long leases or to purchase freehold land. As previously mentioned, it seems that this has been difficult for businesses to negotiate, resulting in a withdrawal of their interest. We believe that, where it is possible to create private ownership of land in Indigenous communities, either for commercial purposes or for individual/family investment in homes, this should be encouraged because it would both stimulate investment and give individuals and family groups the opportunity to develop personal assets.

If you feel that there is any benefit in having an informal discussion about these matters over the telephone, I am happy to make time available to do this. I wish the Expert Indigenous Working Group and the COAG Investigation into Indigenous Land Administration and Use every success in this important work.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ian Trust', written in a cursive style.

Ian Trust
Executive Chair