

Media Statement

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Closing the Gap isn't a silver bullet: real change needs rights

Ending disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples needs land rights, economic justice, and cultural authority – but the communities best-placed to lead change are being locked out of the economies emerging on their own Country, while the Commonwealth Government put all its eggs in the Closing the Gap basket, says the statewide body for the rights and interests of Victorian Traditional Owner groups.

The Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations acknowledges today's release of new Closing the Gap target progress data – 19 targets measuring parity in life outcomes between First Peoples and non-Indigenous Australians – and welcomes progress recorded in nine.

But Closing the Gap is just one lever of many that the Government should be pulling to improve First Peoples' life outcomes, said Federation CEO Kaley Nicholson – and an over-reliance on the government-funded health policy and programming intervention in fact stands in the way of meaningful progress for mob/

"Since the Voice referendum the Government's funnelled all its Aboriginal affairs commitments into Closing the Gap, and in doing so, successfully avoided having the critical conversations about how to create intergenerational prosperity for our people – which must include a seat at the table in today's emerging economies.

"We know what mob need to live good lives: connection to Country, strong in culture, and an independent and sustainable economic base, which doesn't rely on year-on-year grants that are tied to the priorities of the power-holders of the day. For years we've been calling for big, bold action to address the systemic barriers that lock First Peoples out of land rights and economic justice. Today's data release is yet another reminder Closing the Gap is just one piece of the puzzle – not the only solution."

The Federation is proud to represent Traditional Owners' rights and interests in the Victorian Aboriginal community accountability forum on the state's Closing the Gap target priorities, and is involved in the Commonwealth's work to set the Closing the Gap target for inland water ownership – but believes over-reliance on Closing the Gap in fact harms the Aboriginal self-determination it purports to promote.

"If there was adequate independent resourcing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, government could step away, and mob could make decisions for our own lives," said Ms Nicholson.

"That independent base comes from land rights, economic justice, and recognition of our capability and authority, as the right people for our Country.

"Traditional Owners are highly capable, efficient and effective actors, deeply connected with Country, culture and community. We want to see opportunities for self-determined development – a reorientation of power, not just government programs or dashboard trackers. That starts with increased access to markets, capital and land, especially in emerging economies on our Country, to improve community prosperity for generations to come."

– ENDS –

About the Federation

The Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations is the Victorian state-wide body that convenes and advocates for the rights of Traditional Owners while progressing wider social, economic, environmental and cultural objectives. It was established in 2013 by Traditional Owner Corporations who recognised they could be stronger together in advancing shared interests in policy, economic opportunity and caring for Country.

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