

HREOC: LAND IS THE CRUCIAL ECONOMIC AND SPIRITUAL ASSET FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

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Federal Health Minister Tony Abbott's comments earlier this week that the problem with Indigenous land rights is that the land is usually a spiritual asset and not an economic one, demonstrates his lack of understanding of Indigenous people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Tom Calma said today.

"Mr Abbott has access to the Native Title and Social Justice reports I provide to Parliament each year which have discussed ways to facilitate Indigenous control over development goals and agendas. The ultimate success of these goals is dependent on our active participation," Mr Calma said.

"For the last three years these reports have highlighted how important government funding programs are to support business development and how Indigenous Land Use Agreements and Shared Responsibility Agreements can create economic development opportunities for Indigenous peoples on their lands.

"I have also made many recommendations to the government on ways to improve Indigenous peoples' access to these opportunities and ways for governments and industry to better engage Indigenous people in economic development," Mr Calma said.

"Mr Abbott misinterprets the rights and aims of Indigenous peoples to build and sustain economic development on their land. He should know that Indigenous people want to be involved in improving our life situation but we need support and encouragement to do so. We want to be the key players and not the passive recipients of government good intentions."

Commissioner Calma said consultations he and his Office has had with traditional owners and their representatives over the past year found that above all else, traditional owners are most likely to identify first as the custodians and the managers of their land and seas.

"This means that for the majority of people we spoke with, the importance of caring for land, living on land, and the recognition of ownership of land and seas has priority above all other purposes and activities," Mr Calma said.

"Traditional owners also told us that economic development is an important tool for gaining self-determination and independence, but they did not want it at the expense of their cultural responsibilities, identity and health."

Commissioner Calma said that native title and land rights processes are enabling Indigenous people to engage in economic development all over Australia, with some successfully achieving positive outcomes, and others requiring support to engage more effectively and to benefit from

economic development. "We want to be meaningful partners in our empowerment," he said.