Submission to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership General Review
Submitted by: The Cultural Intelligence Project Group
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Executive Summary

The Cultural Intelligence Project Group (TCIPG) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to Australia's input into the General Review of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

RCEP is the world's largest free trade agreement by members' GDP and connects Australia with ASEAN, China, Japan, the Republic of Korea and New Zealand. Its scope extends beyond goods to services, investment, electronic commerce, intellectual property, government procurement, economic cooperation and small and medium-sized enterprises.

TCIPG submits that the General Review presents an important opportunity to consider how RCEP's future implementation and development can better enable the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses, entrepreneurs, organisations and communities in international trade and investment. This opportunity is particularly significant for remote and northern Australia.

TCIPG is based in Broome in the Kimberley region of Western Australia, where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people comprised 41.1 per cent of the regional population at the 2021 Census. The Kimberley's geographic proximity to Asia, deep cultural assets, established tourism economy and growing entrepreneurial, creative and digital capability position it strongly for greater participation in Indo-Pacific markets. At the same time, distance from major Australian commercial centres, high operating costs, limited access to international buyer networks, digital and infrastructure constraints and the cost of building international relationships create material barriers to participation.

The central proposition of this submission is therefore: **Proximity to international markets does not automatically translate into access to those markets.**

First Nations businesses in remote and northern Australia require trade architecture, capability pathways and international networks that recognise the realities of where and how they operate.

Australia's contemporary trade policy is already beginning to recognise the economic potential of First Nations businesses. Under the Australia–United Arab Emirates Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, Australia established its first dedicated Indigenous Peoples Trade and Investment Economic Cooperation chapter and subsequently developed a First Nations Action Plan covering export capability, international business relationships, Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property and investment.

TCIPG recommends that this evolving policy direction also inform Australia's approach to the RCEP General Review.

We recommend that Australia pursue:

1. A structured First Nations participation mechanism within Australia's ongoing implementation and review of RCEP;
2. A First Nations RCEP Trade and Market Access Initiative;
3. A dedicated Remote and Northern First Nations Trade Pathway;
4. Greater recognition and development of First Nations services, digital, tourism, creative and knowledge-based exports;
5. Stronger protection and consideration of Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property, Traditional Knowledge and Traditional Cultural Expressions;
6. The integration of cultural intelligence and culturally informed market-entry capability into trade-development activity; and
7. Greater opportunities for First Nations businesses to build direct economic relationships with businesses, investors, buyers and Indigenous peoples across RCEP economies.

1. About The Cultural Intelligence Project Group

The Cultural Intelligence Project Group is a First Nations-led group based in Broome, Western Australia, working across cultural intelligence, strategic advisory, First Nations economic development, education, innovation, enterprise development and organisational transformation.

Our work engages government, industry, businesses and communities and combines First Nations knowledge and lived experience with contemporary strategy, commercial capability, systems design and innovation.

Relevant areas of our work include:

- The Cultural Intelligence Project, providing strategic advisory, cultural intelligence, governance and organisational capability;
- Cultural iQ, a First Nations-owned digital cultural intelligence education and capability platform;
- Make It Happen HQ, a First Nations female-founded independent innovation and gaming hub and think tank exploring innovation, technology, entrepreneurship, investment readiness and new economic participation;
- Work supporting First Nations business development, tourism, digital readiness, market development and commercial capability; and
- Broader engagement with questions of how First Nations businesses and communities can participate more effectively in international markets.

Our perspective is therefore grounded in practical experience at the intersection of culture, business, innovation, regional development and market capability.

2. Why First Nations Participation Matters to the RCEP General Review

DFAT is seeking views on RCEP's implementation, operation and impact, barriers to trade and investment, emerging opportunities and potential areas for improvement or expansion. This includes services, digital trade, investment and sector-specific opportunities.

TCIPG considers First Nations trade and investment participation to be an important emerging issue within this remit.Australia's First Nations business sector is already demonstrating meaningful economic and employment impact.

Australian Government data cited in the Australia–UAE CEPA First Nations Action Plan shows that, among 2,609 First Nations businesses studied in 2022–23, First Nations goods exporters generated almost **$18 million in exports**, approximately **$670 million in total turnover** and employed approximately **2,300 workers**. Those exporters employed, on average, **7.5 times more workers than non-exporting First Nations businesses** in the dataset.

This indicates that internationalisation has implications beyond individual firm growth. Export-capable First Nations businesses can contribute to employment, enterprise development, community economic participation and intergenerational wealth creation.

The question for RCEP should therefore not only be whether First Nations businesses can technically access the agreement. The more useful question is: **What conditions are required for First Nations businesses to participate meaningfully in the commercial opportunities created by RCEP?**

3. A Remote and Northern Australia Lens

A national approach to trade participation must recognise that businesses do not enter international markets from equal starting positions.

This is particularly relevant for remote and northern Australia. The Kimberley provides a strong example. At the 2021 Census, the Kimberley had **14,408 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents, representing 41.1 per cent of the region's population**, compared with 3.3 per cent across Western Australia. The median age of the Kimberley's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population was **26 years**.

These demographics matter economically. First Nations economic participation is not peripheral to the future development of the Kimberley. It is fundamental to it.

At the same time, businesses operating in the Kimberley and other remote regions can face:

- high domestic and international travel costs;
- limited access to specialised export advisers;
- fewer opportunities for face-to-face engagement with international buyers;
- smaller local markets;
- workforce and specialist capability constraints;
- limitations in digital connectivity and infrastructure;
- higher costs of professional and technical services;
- reduced access to investment and investor networks;
- greater cost and complexity in developing international distribution pathways; and
- fewer opportunities to participate regularly in trade missions, industry events and market-development activity concentrated in metropolitan areas.

These barriers become particularly important when international business depends on relationship development rather than transactional market access alone.

For many First Nations businesses, especially those in tourism, professional services, creative industries, cultural enterprises and knowledge-based sectors, relationships, trust, cultural understanding and repeated engagement are fundamental to successful market entry.

Proximity versus access

Northern Western Australia is geographically oriented toward the Indo-Pacific. RCEP includes Indonesia and other ASEAN economies as well as China, Japan and the Republic of Korea. These are markets with significant relevance to northern Australian tourism, services, education, creative industries and emerging digital industries.

However, geographic proximity should not be mistaken for commercial accessibility. A business in Broome may be physically closer to parts of Asia than to Sydney or Melbourne while having significantly less access to the institutions, networks, capital, advisers and international buyers that enable successful export development. RCEP implementation should recognise and respond to this distinction.

4. First Nations Participation Should Extend Beyond Goods

First Nations international trade is sometimes conceptualised primarily through products such as art, bush foods, agriculture and consumer goods. These sectors are important, but they represent only part of the opportunity.

RCEP also contains commitments and frameworks relating to **services, investment, electronic commerce, intellectual property, economic cooperation and SMEs**.

There is significant potential for First Nations businesses to participate in:

- Professional and advisory services;
- Cultural intelligence and cultural capability;
- Education and training;
- Digital learning;
- Tourism and visitor experiences;
- Creative industries;
- Design and media;
- Gaming and interactive experiences;
- Technology and digital services;
- Environmental and land-management knowledge;
- Innovation;
- Indigenous knowledge-based enterprises; and
- Other intellectual-property-led businesses.

These forms of trade can be particularly important for remote regions because they may reduce reliance on physical freight and create opportunities for businesses to reach markets digitally.

5. Practical Example: Cultural iQ and Digital Services Exports

TCIPG's Cultural iQ platform demonstrates the potential for First Nations knowledge-led businesses to participate in international services and digital trade.

Cultural iQ provides cultural intelligence education and capability through digital learning, facilitated education, organisational assessment and advisory services. A digital platform can theoretically reach customers internationally from a regional Australian base.

However, technical ability to deliver a service internationally does not itself create a market.

Successful internationalisation requires:

- market intelligence;
- identification of appropriate buyers;
- trusted local relationships;
- localisation;
- understanding of regulatory environments;
- protection of intellectual property and cultural knowledge;
- appropriate pricing and commercial models;
- payment and contracting capability;
- market-specific marketing; and
- cultural intelligence relating to the market being entered.

This distinction between digital availability and commercial market access should inform RCEP's future work on digital trade and SMEs.

6. Practical Example: First Nations Tourism and Asian Markets

Tourism provides another strong example of the difference between possessing a valuable product and accessing an international market. Northern Western Australia contains globally distinctive First Nations cultural, environmental and tourism experiences.

Yet international tourism distribution depends upon an ecosystem that can include:

- Inbound tour operators;
- Wholesalers;
- Travel agents;
- Destination marketing bodies;
- International buyers;
- Digital booking platforms;
- Airline connectivity;
- Accessible and translated market information;
- Trade events; and
- Sustained business-to-business relationships.

Initiatives such as Ancient Cultures Meet, which brings together First Nations tourism and international engagement with China, are useful examples of the kinds of cross-cultural and market-development activity that can help bridge the gap between strong Indigenous tourism offerings and international market access.

TCIPG was not involved in the delivery of Ancient Cultures Meet. We reference it because it illustrates a broader point relevant to the RCEP review: meaningful international tourism development requires capability and understanding on both sides of the market. First Nations operators need support to become internationally discoverable, bookable, commercially ready and connected to distribution.

At the same time, inbound operators, tourism buyers and international partners require appropriate understanding of First Nations cultures, cultural governance, protocols and the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia.

International tourism development therefore requires both commercial readiness and cultural intelligence. This is a useful area for practical RCEP economic cooperation.

7. Practical Example: Innovation, Gaming and Emerging Industries

Through Make It Happen HQ, TCIPG is also exploring First Nations participation in innovation, gaming, emerging technology and new economic models. These sectors are important because the future First Nations economy should not be constrained to industries traditionally associated with Indigenous enterprise.

Young First Nations people should be able to participate as founders, developers, designers, creators, researchers, investors and owners in the industries shaping the future economy. RCEP's digital economy and economic-cooperation frameworks create an opportunity to support greater First Nations participation in areas such as:

- Gaming;
- Digital storytelling;
- Creative technology;
- Artificial intelligence;
- Immersive and interactive experiences;
- Digital education;
- Entrepreneurship;
- Innovation ecosystems; and
- Cross-border research and commercial collaboration.

For remote regions with young First Nations populations, these industries can create economic pathways that are not wholly dependent on physical location.

8. Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property

Greater international market participation must be accompanied by appropriate protection of Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property. First Nations businesses can commercialise products and services involving:

- Stories;
- Cultural knowledge;
- Traditional knowledge;
- Artistic expression;
- Language;
- Imagery;
- Country;
- Cultural practices;
- Design; and
- Other forms of cultural expression.

International digital distribution increases both opportunity and risk.

The Australia–UAE CEPA provides a useful contemporary precedent. Its Indigenous Peoples Trade and Investment Economic Cooperation chapter recognises traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions, and the subsequent First Nations Action Plan identifies protection of Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property as one of its five central pillars.

TCIPG recommends that Australia explore how similar principles can be advanced within RCEP's intellectual-property, digital-trade and economic-cooperation mechanisms.

9. Cultural Intelligence as Trade Infrastructure

Trade capability is often framed in technical terms: regulation, tariffs, finance, logistics, documentation and market access. These elements are essential. However, successful international trade is also relational and cultural.

Businesses entering another market must understand how relationships are built, how trust is established, how communication operates, how decisions are made and how products and services need to be adapted to local expectations.

This is particularly relevant across an agreement as culturally diverse as RCEP. Cultural intelligence should therefore be considered part of market-entry capability. For First Nations businesses, this operates in two directions.

First, First Nations businesses entering international markets require culturally informed market-entry capability. Second, international investors, buyers and businesses seeking to engage with First Nations Australia require the capability to do so appropriately. This is particularly important where investment, tourism, land, cultural knowledge, community relationships or Indigenous intellectual property are involved.

10. Building Direct Indigenous and International Economic Relationships

First Nations Australians have long histories of regional trade and exchange that pre-date contemporary trade agreements. RCEP provides an opportunity not simply to insert First Nations businesses into existing Australian export pathways, but to facilitate direct relationships between:

- First Nations businesses;
- International buyers;
- Investors;
- Indigenous businesses and peoples internationally;
- Innovation ecosystems;
- Tourism organisations;
- Universities and research institutions; and
- Industry networks across RCEP economies.

Australia's current trade policy provides precedent for this type of approach.

The Australia–UAE CEPA First Nations Action Plan includes mechanisms such as an Australian First Nations–UAE Business Exchange Program and a First Nations Trade and Investment CEO

Network. Comparable approaches could be explored in RCEP implementation, adapted to the scale and diversity of the region.

11. Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Establish structured First Nations participation in RCEP implementation

Australia should establish an ongoing mechanism through which First Nations businesses, organisations and economic-development leaders can provide input into Australia's RCEP implementation, economic-cooperation activities and future reviews. This should include representation from regional and remote Australia.

Recommendation 2: Create a First Nations RCEP Trade and Market Access Initiative

Australia should explore a targeted program to support First Nations businesses to identify and pursue commercial opportunities across RCEP markets. The initiative could include:

- Market intelligence;
- Trade-readiness assessment;
- Export capability development;
- Buyer identification;
- Business matching;
- Trade missions;
- International showcases;
- Digital market-entry support;
- Investment readiness;
- Local market advisers; and
- Structured post-mission commercial follow-up.

Where possible, support should focus on converting capability development into measurable commercial outcomes.

Recommendation 3: Establish a Remote and Northern First Nations Trade Pathway

A dedicated pathway should recognise the additional barriers experienced by First Nations businesses operating in remote and northern Australia. This could include:

- subsidised access to international trade missions and buyer events;
- Remote-access export advisory services;
- Digital market-entry capability;
- International buyer delegations into northern Australia;
- Investment-readiness support;

- Targeted market intelligence;
- International relationship-building programs; and
- Support for regional First Nations businesses to collaborate and aggregate capability where scale is required.

The Kimberley could provide an appropriate location for piloting such an approach.

Recommendation 4: Prioritise First Nations services and digital exports

Australia should explicitly recognise First Nations services and knowledge-based exports within RCEP trade-promotion and economic-cooperation activity. Priority areas could include:

- Education;
- Cultural intelligence;
- Tourism;
- Consulting and advisory services;
- Creative industries;
- Digital content;
- Gaming;
- Technology;
- Environmental knowledge;
- Design; and
- Professional services.

Recommendation 5: Strengthen ICIP and Traditional Knowledge considerations

Australia should explore opportunities within RCEP to strengthen understanding, cooperation and protection relating to:

- Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property;
- Traditional Knowledge;
- Traditional Cultural Expressions;
- Indigenous digital content; and
- Culturally appropriate commercialisation.

Australia's UAE CEPA provides a relevant contemporary policy precedent for this work.

Recommendation 6: Embed cultural intelligence in market-entry capability

Trade-development initiatives should recognise cultural intelligence as an element of international business capability. Programs supporting entry into RCEP markets should incorporate:

- Cultural adaptability;
- Relationship development;
- Localisation;
- Communication;
- Culturally informed negotiation; and
- Understanding of local business practices.

Likewise, international investors and businesses engaging with First Nations Australia should have access to appropriate First Nations cultural and engagement capability.

Recommendation 7: Develop direct business and investment relationships

Australia should explore mechanisms that connect First Nations businesses directly with:

- RCEP buyers;
- Investors;
- Distributors;
- Tourism partners;
- Innovation ecosystems;
- Indigenous business networks;
- Research institutions; and
- Commercial partners.

Business exchanges, targeted delegations, buyer missions and sector-specific networks should complement broad trade missions.

12. A Contemporary Opportunity for RCEP

RCEP entered into force for Australia in January 2022. Australia's First Nations trade and investment policy has continued to develop since that time.

The Australia UAE CEPA now contains Australia's first dedicated Indigenous trade and investment chapter. Its First Nations Action Plan establishes practical measures relating to export capability, international networks, ICIP, promotion and investment.

First Nations organisations are also increasingly participating directly in broader Australian trade-policy consultations, including DFAT's recent Southeast Asia FTA Modernisation Review.

The RCEP General Review therefore provides a timely opportunity to consider how this evolving approach should be reflected in one of Australia's most economically significant regional agreements.

TCIPG does not suggest that a model designed for one bilateral agreement can simply be transplanted into a 15-party regional agreement. Rather, the UAE CEPA demonstrates an important principle:

First Nations economic participation can be intentionally designed into trade architecture rather than treated as an incidental outcome of it.

Conclusion

RCEP creates access to one of the world's largest economic regions.

For First Nations businesses, however, formal market access alone will not necessarily create participation.

This is particularly true in remote and northern Australia, where extraordinary cultural, tourism, creative, knowledge and entrepreneurial assets coexist with significant geographic and structural barriers to international market development. The Kimberley illustrates both sides of this equation.

It is a region with a large and young First Nations population, globally significant culture, established international tourism recognition and geographic proximity to Asian markets. It is also a region in which businesses operate thousands of kilometres from Australia's major commercial centres and international trade institutions.

Examples such as **Ancient Cultures Meet** demonstrate that there is already interest in building stronger connections between First Nations tourism and Asian markets. The opportunity for RCEP is to help create the broader trade, capability and relationship infrastructure that enables initiatives of this kind to translate into sustained commercial participation for First Nations businesses.

RCEP's General Review provides an opportunity to begin closing that gap.

Australia should use the Review to advance practical mechanisms that enable First Nations businesses to build capability, protect culture and knowledge, reach international buyers, attract appropriate investment, participate in digital and services trade, and build direct relationships throughout the Indo-Pacific.

Doing so would not only expand the businesses participating in RCEP. It would broaden the capabilities, knowledge, culture and innovation that Australia brings to the region.