

## **AFAC25 – ADRC PAPER**

**Title:** *Inaugural Recovery Programs for Aboriginal Communities – Kimberley Floods*

**Abstract (2000 words)**

### **Introduction**

In early 2023, the Kimberley region of Western Australia experienced the most devastating floods in its recorded history. Triggered by extreme weather conditions, these floods caused catastrophic damage to critical infrastructure, housing, and public services, significantly impacting the social, emotional, cultural and economic wellbeing of the region's communities. In response to the severity and widespread impact of the disaster, a coordinated approach was urgently required, prompting the development of the Kimberley Floods State Recovery and Resilience Plan (the Plan) to guide and enable long-term recovery efforts.

This paper presents the first-time development and implementation of two innovative recovery programs under the *Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements* (DRFA) Category D. The programs are: (1) *Prescribed Body Corporate (PBC) Recovery Support Program* and (2) *Aboriginal and Local Business Participation in Recovery (ALBPR) Program*. These programs, jointly funded by the Western Australian and Australian Governments, represent a national first in placing Aboriginal leadership and community voices at the centre of flood recovery, thereby creating a culturally informed and inclusive pathway to long-term resilience.

### **Strategic Framework: The Kimberley Floods State Recovery and Resilience Plan (the Plan)**

The Plan was developed to ensure a structured, holistic approach to disaster recovery in the Kimberley. It aims to deliver coordinated assistance to individuals, businesses, local governments and communities to rebuild from the damage and prepare more robustly for future events. Its priorities span four core pillars: infrastructure reconstruction, community wellbeing, environmental restoration and economic recovery.

Central to the Plan's implementation are 17 DRFA-funded programs that support tailored recovery initiatives across key domains: debris clean-up, road and housing repairs, infrastructure restoration, economic assistance for primary producers and businesses, as well as critical social and emotional wellbeing services. Notably, the Plan emphasises the needs and rights of Aboriginal communities, recognising their unique vulnerabilities, cultural responsibilities and vital role in regional resilience.

### **Aboriginal Leadership and the Fitzroy Valley Flood Recovery Working Group**

A defining feature of the recovery approach in the Kimberley is the active involvement of Aboriginal leaders, represented through the Fitzroy Valley Flood Recovery Working Group. This group comprises representatives from five major flood-affected language

groups, ensuring that all recovery efforts reflect the values, knowledge and priorities of Aboriginal communities.

Their involvement has played a crucial role in shaping a recovery that is locally led, culturally sensitive and community informed. Traditional ecological knowledge has been integrated into planning efforts and the restoration of environmental and cultural heritage sites has been identified as a central pillar of regional resilience.

### **Prime Ministerial Endorsement and National Prioritisation**

In June 2023, the Prime Minister proposed three critical priorities for the State of Western Australia's recovery approach:

1. Integration of betterment principles in road and housing reconstruction.
2. Allocation of funding to PBCs as pivotal community-led institutions.
3. Economic empowerment of First Nations communities through structured participation in the recovery economy.

These guiding principles shaped the development of two landmark DRFA Category D programs that are the focus of this paper. Their formation marks a national precedent in elevating Aboriginal agency in disaster recovery contexts.

---

### **The PBC Recovery Support Program**

The PBC Recovery Support Program was designed to empower PBCs to serve as community anchors in the recovery landscape. Seven language groups were severely impacted by the floods: Bunuba, Gooniyandi, Ngarinyin-Wilinggin, Nyikina Mangala, Walmajarri, Wangkatjungka and Yungngora. Each is represented by a PBC with native title interests and a commitment to support their respective communities.

Announced in October 2023 with \$2.095 million committed in funding, the PBC Recovery Support program provides resourcing for *Cultural Navigation* through Aboriginal-led positions embedded within PBCs to ensure service providers operate in culturally respectful and appropriate ways. Cultural Navigators serve as critical liaisons, fostering understanding between key recovery stakeholders, government agencies, non-government organisations and Aboriginal communities, while enabling locally led community participation in the recovery process.

The funding allocated to each eligible PBC is proportionate to the level of flood impact experienced in their respective communities. The program, delivered by the Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES), aims to promote long-term cultural safety, leadership, and capacity building across the region. In addition to Cultural Navigation, the program provides funding to support extraordinary expenses associated with recovery and resilience projects delivered by the PBC, for example,

the engagement of grant writing consultants to assist with applications for other recovery-related grant programs to support their community.

By strengthening local governance structures and centring Aboriginal voices in recovery planning and delivery, the PBC Recovery Support Program represents a shift toward a culturally informed community-led disaster recovery model that is inclusive and resilient, with Country and Culture at the centre of all activities.

### **Implementation Challenges**

Despite its strategic intent, the program has faced several implementation challenges:

- **Delayed Launch:** Significant time was needed for stakeholder consultation and program co-design, which delayed the program's start following its announcement.
- **Retrospective activity funding:** Many cultural navigation activities had already occurred prior to the funding's availability and collecting quantitative retrospective documentation has proved challenging.
- **Organisational Capacity:** The operational capacity of PBCs varies widely. Many have required sustained on-Country engagement and face-to-face support to participate effectively.
- **Bureaucratic Burden:** Complex reporting and funding documentation processes have created barriers for PBCs, particularly for those where English is not the first language for many participants.

Program delivery has since been adapted, with the creation of plain English documentation and visual aids created to support communication, alongside greater flexibility in evidence requirements and reporting timelines.

To date, the program has supported PBCs in delivering a wide variety of cultural navigation activities and advice, including assistance with temporary housing allocations, promoting recovery assistance to community members and community consultation associated with monitoring and evaluation of recovery programs. It has also successfully supported the provision of cultural ceremonial practices undertaken as part of recovery activities (i.e. Welcome to Country and Smoking Ceremonies to enable access to Country).

Significantly for Yanunijarra Aboriginal Corporation, the program committed to supporting essential legal work, preservation efforts and community engagement related to the Ngurrara II Canvas, which was relocated to Broome at the height of the floods. This support has occurred alongside the successful submission of an Environment, Heritage and Culture Flexible Grant to secure the long-term safe future of the canvas.

## **Aboriginal and Local Business Participation in Recovery (ALBPR) Program**

The \$3.5 million ALBPR program aims to unlock the economic potential of recovery by removing barriers that First Nations businesses and workers encounter in accessing government contracts and participating in rebuild, recovery and resilience activities.

This initiative draws on lessons from early infrastructure works, such as the Fitzroy Bridge rebuild, which saw significant employment gains for Aboriginal businesses when appropriate supports are made available. Over 90 Aboriginal businesses and approximately 300 local residents were employed during early recovery efforts, with many accessing training to support employment and career advancement.

### **Identified Barriers to Participation**

Consultation with local communities identified four major barriers to local workforce participation:

1. Limited capacity to prepare and submit tenders.
2. High upfront costs for insurance and mandatory training.
3. Lack of capital to purchase tools, machinery, or expand operations.
4. Insufficient networks linking Aboriginal contractors with larger head contractors.

### **Program Design and Delivery**

Delivered by the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, the ALBPR program provides targeted funding to support Aboriginal-owned businesses and sole traders. This includes grants for business development, upskilling, insurance, tools and equipment and other essentials required to participate in contracts. The program consists of the following components:

1. Business Support Services – advisory and mentoring for Aboriginal and local businesses.
2. Employment Support Services – job matching, training, onboarding and mentoring.
3. Grants Scheme – non-capital grants and capital grants for Aboriginal-owned businesses.

In addition to direct funding, the program facilitates networks between local businesses and prime contractors through coordinated pathways. The program has also funded the Department of Training Workforce and Development in the delivery of four 'Deadly Jobs' Expos connecting service providers and jobs with potential employees.

### **Challenges and Mitigation**

As with the PBC program, the ALBPR faced timing and contextual challenges:

- **Late commencement:** The delayed rollout meant many early-stage recovery works were awarded before businesses could benefit from the program.

- **Community-specific disruptions:** The Kimberley's wet season significantly curtailed construction windows and limited on-the-ground activities. Cultural sensitivities, such as funerals and other community events, have at times paused work requiring coordination and respect for cultural protocols.
- **Documentation burdens:** Similar to the PBC program, many applicants have struggled with complex requirements. These were addressed through the use of visual aids, simplified templates and hands-on assistance.

Despite these barriers, early outcomes from the ALBPR are promising, with increased Aboriginal business engagement, improved economic resilience and enhanced local capacity for future recovery participation.

On the ground, engagement targets for the delivery of business support services have already been exceeded, with a strong demand noted for the provision of detailed business planning, financial projections, identification of training needs, marketing and pricing strategies and grant application assistance. To date, six grants have been approved for new start-ups and expanding businesses. These grants have facilitated the purchase of new specialised business equipment and training needs.

---

## Outcomes, Reflections, and Lessons Learned

These inaugural programs have provided foundational learnings in disaster recovery led by and for Aboriginal communities:

- **Aboriginal Leadership is Non-Negotiable:** These programs demonstrate that Aboriginal leadership is not only possible but essential to effective disaster recovery in Aboriginal Communities. Culturally safe processes result in higher levels of engagement, trust, and local ownership.
  - **Flexibility is Key:** Rigid program structures and timelines do not reflect the realities of remote Aboriginal communities and are counterintuitive to the aims of these types of programs. Responsive design, extended timeframes and a willingness to adapt are crucial to success.
  - **Capacity Building is Long-Term:** Recovery cannot be limited to short-term economic stimuli or infrastructure fixes alone. Sustainable outcomes require investment in people, governance and culturally grounded institutions.
  - **Documentation Support is Critical:** Language barriers and complex paperwork requirements can significantly hinder engagement. Recovery programs must provide tailored support to ensure accessibility for all.
  - **Seasonality and Cultural Protocols Must Be Respected and Considered:** Environmental conditions and cultural practices must be incorporated into all project planning and delivery schedules.
-

## Conclusion

These two Kimberley Floods recovery programs are the first of their kind. They provide a critical blueprint for future disaster recovery models that centre on Aboriginal Communities, respect cultural protocols and seek holistic, long-term outcomes. To succeed, these programs require continued investment, ongoing learning and policy support at all levels. Most importantly, they demand a willingness to listen to the community.

Through the *PBC Recovery Support Program* and the *Aboriginal and Local Business Participation in Recovery Program*, a bold new approach has emerged — one that balances economic opportunity with cultural empowerment, infrastructure with identity and recovery with resilience. These programs remind us that the future of disaster recovery in Australia must be co-designed, community-led and adaptive. In conclusion, these programs demonstrate that placing Aboriginal leadership at the centre of recovery not only improves outcomes but is essential to building a more inclusive, resilient and equitable approach to disaster recovery in Australia.