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Pathways for Aboriginal socio-economic development in the Beetaloo: Voices from the region



The Beetaloo region of the Northern Territory is experiencing rapid change. Onshore shale gas is being established alongside renewable energy, irrigated agriculture, data centres, pipelines, infrastructure and quarry projects.

The pace and scale of this activity raises important questions for Aboriginal people in the region. Development can bring jobs, contracts and other potential benefits. But it also impacts Country and communities, and places growing demands on people to understand proposals, take part in consultation and make decisions about change.

CSIRO engaged The University of Queensland to explore what this changing development landscape means for Aboriginal people in the Beetaloo.

The project centred Aboriginal perspectives, listening to people's aspirations, priorities and concerns, and exploring the conditions under which the development of these industries can support greater choice and control over the future.

The research found there is no single Aboriginal view of development or of particular industries, including onshore shale gas. People described diverse priorities, including employment and enterprise, improved services and infrastructure, caring for Country, maintaining culture and strengthening communities.

A central finding is that development should not only be assessed by the jobs, contracts, payments or projects it generates, but by whether it expands Aboriginal people's practical choices, strengthens their authority over decisions affecting Country and community, and increases their capacity to pursue their own priorities over the long term.

The Beetaloo region: a changing development landscape

The Beetaloo Sub-basin is part of the greater McArthur Basin and covers an area of about 28,000 square kilometres, approximately 600 kilometres south of Darwin. The region is sparsely populated, with settlement dispersed across towns, communities and outstations.

Aboriginal people make up a high proportion of the population across the broader region. According to the 2021 ABS Census, 67% of the population of the Barkly local government region and 75.2% of the Roper Gulf local government region identify as Aboriginal. People move regularly between towns, communities and outstations for family, cultural and practical reasons.

The region is culturally and linguistically diverse. Family, kinship and responsibilities to Country play an important role in shaping people's values and priorities. There is strong interest in improving livelihoods, creating opportunities for young people and supporting the long-term viability of communities, alongside a desire to protect the region's cultural and environmental values.

Development activity has accelerated in recent years. While onshore shale gas was an initial focus for this research, it is only one of several industries expanding or emerging across the Beetaloo.

During the 18-month research period, from February 2025 to July 2026 in the region, multiple Indigenous land use agreements (ILUAs) were signed for the appraisal of onshore shale gas, a gas pipeline and a large-scale solar farm. More than 30,000 hectares of land clearing for agriculture had also been approved, while the Northern Territory (NT) Government's Georgina Wiso Water Allocation Plan was being implemented.

Together, these activities create potential opportunities for employment, contracting, enterprise and other forms of economic participation. They also create cumulative demands and impacts that cannot be understood by considering individual projects or industries in isolation.

For Aboriginal people in the Beetaloo, the question is therefore not simply whether development occurs, but what choices are available, how decisions are made, who shares in the benefits and whether development strengthens people's ability to shape their own futures.

How was the research conducted?

CSIRO engaged researchers from The University of Queensland to undertake the field research and analysis for the project, drawing on the university's established experience and expertise in this field of research.

The study used a strengths-based approach that centred Aboriginal perspectives, rights and collective governance structures. Instead of focusing only on barriers, disadvantage or gaps in services, researchers also considered the capabilities and assets that already exist within communities – including cultural knowledge, local leadership, kinship networks, organisations, businesses, relationships and community-led initiatives – and how these could support future development.

The research combined a regional analysis with fieldwork, case studies, document analysis, semi-structured interviews, yarning and collaboration with Aboriginal research advisors. Four field trips were undertaken, totalling six weeks in the region and including visits to communities and towns in and around the Beetaloo.

Researchers interviewed 62 people, including Traditional Owners and Native Title Holders, and people with knowledge and experience of regional organisations, government, industry, pastoralism and other sectors. Aboriginal research advisors helped guide the fieldwork and identify people with relevant knowledge and experience.

Listening was not limited to a single interview or conversation. Researchers returned to participants to check that their perspectives had been accurately understood and represented. This helped ensure that Aboriginal voices and knowledge were reflected throughout the research.

The study also profiled 29 organisations, businesses and initiatives through case studies and vignettes. These included Aboriginal businesses and contractors, industry employees and cultural monitors, community organisations, cooperatives, ranger groups, governance initiatives and other livelihood activities.

Together, these examples provided a picture of socio-economic activity already taking place across the Beetaloo and broader region and helped researchers identify the factors that enable or constrain different development pathways.

The research was supported by an ethics process and a collaborative research model involving Aboriginal research guides and advisors, with findings informed by the experiences and perspectives shared by people across the region.

This research was funded through CSIRO's Gas Industry Social and Environmental Research Alliance (GISERA) with contributions from the Australian Government's Department of Industry, Science and Resources, the Northern Territory Government, and industry partners Santos, Tamboran Resources and Beetaloo Energy Australia.



Wilyuku – south camp Elliott (S. Holcombe)

What does socio-economic development mean in the Beetaloo?

The research found there is no single Aboriginal view of socio-economic development in the Beetaloo, or of particular industries including onshore shale gas. Aspirations, priorities and concerns vary according to people's individual, family and community circumstances.

Some people seek employment, contracts and benefits from emerging industries. Others prioritise ranger work, community services, cultural activities or advocacy. Many combine different pathways. People may also have concerns about development or oppose particular industries or projects.

These different perspectives are important. The research found that socio-economic development is never simply about money, jobs or business. Country, culture, family and community are closely connected to how people think about development, who has authority to make decisions, and how its benefits and impacts are understood.

Several factors were identified as supporting meaningful, self-determined development:

- Aboriginal leadership and shared decision-making
- Respect for cultural authority, kinship, language and responsibilities to Country
- Employment and enterprise that build lasting skills, assets and career pathways

Local Aboriginal organisations also have an important role in turning people's priorities and income from agreements into practical, collective and long-term benefits. Building the relationships, governance, skills and businesses needed to do this can take
many years.

Choice is an important part of self-determined development – but people do not always begin with the same choices or the same ability to influence what happens around them.

The practical choices available to Aboriginal people can depend on many factors. These include their legal rights and decision-making authority, the strength of local organisations and businesses, access to finance, housing and essential services, career pathways, family expectations and the type of development taking place.

The report therefore measures successful development not by participation in a particular industry, but by whether Aboriginal people have a meaningful range of pathways available to pursue the social, cultural, environmental and economic priorities that matter to them.

Case studies
Pathways already taking shape

The Beetaloo is not a blank canvas. Aboriginal people are already building businesses, organisations and other ways of working that reflect different priorities and circumstances.

The research profiled 29 Aboriginal businesses, contractors, employees, cultural monitors, community organisations, governance initiatives, cooperatives, ranger groups and other livelihood activities. Together they demonstrate the diversity of Aboriginal development pathways already underway.

Konan Contracting: business, employment and responsibility to Country

Ben Ulamari is a Jingili Native Title Holder who established Konan Contracting after working across the pastoral, mining, ranger, local government and gas sectors.

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Ben began as a sole trader in 2023 and established Konan Contracting in 2024. The business undertakes environmental monitoring, maintenance and operational support for Tamboran, including groundwater and surface-water sampling, weed monitoring and treatment, site inspections and cultural management support.

By late 2025, Ben employed six Aboriginal staff from Elliott and Marlinja, as well as two non-Indigenous staff. Ulamari organises and pays for training where needed and has developed flexible working arrangements that recognise employees' family and personal responsibilities.

For Ben, however, working with the gas industry is not simply a business relationship. As a Native Title Holder, he also has responsibilities to Country. He describes one of his main reasons for working on Country as being the "eyes and ears of my people" – observing what is happening and raising concerns if work is not being done properly.

His experience shows that working with industry and caring for Country are not necessarily separate roles. Aboriginal people may navigate both at the same time, while other people and families may make different choices about whether they want to work with particular industries.

Kulumindini Cleaning Services: building a business from the ground up

In Elliott, Ben Neade established Kulumindini Cleaning Services after identifying a practical local need and deciding that he wanted to build something of his own.

Ben started the town's only cleaning service and secured work including cleaning police housing and the Northern Land Council's Kulumindini office. But establishing the business was difficult. Without formal business training, financial backing or dedicated mentoring, he taught himself how to develop a business plan and gradually built his skills through experience.

Running a small business in a remote community also brings practical challenges, from accessing supplies and freight to meeting the requirements of larger clients and business support programs.

Ben sees the business as being about more than earning an income. He connects clean homes and workplaces with physical health, wellbeing and community pride, and hopes eventually to expand across the Barkly region and employ local people to clean schools and other facilities in their own communities.

His experience shows the initiative and business aspirations that already exist in remote communities, but also the practical barriers that can make it difficult for small Aboriginal businesses to become established and grow.



Stuart Highway – northern Beetaloo region (S. Holcombe)

GYGM Aboriginal Corporation: strengthening regional governance

The Gudanji Yanyuwa Garrwa Marra (GYGM) Aboriginal Corporation in Borroloola is developing a locally controlled model for Aboriginal governance and long-term regional development.

GYGM brings together four regional language groups – Gudanji, Yanyuwa, Garrwa and Marra – and is developing governance arrangements based on longstanding cultural relationships and ways of making decisions.

Although the McArthur River Mine is on Gudanji Country and its port is on Yanyuwa Country, GYGM includes neighbouring Garrwa and Marra people in its regional approach. At the same time, its proposed decision-making arrangements recognise that groups most directly affected by development should have greater influence over relevant decisions.

The organisation is developing arrangements to manage future agreement benefits, support community priorities and strengthen local involvement in decisions about cultural heritage, Country and development. It also aims to become a local Prescribed Body Corporate (PBC), giving Native Title Holders a locally based organisation through which to manage their native title rights and interests.

GYGM demonstrates how contemporary Aboriginal organisations can be designed around customary governance and local priorities, while also providing a structure for dealing with governments, industry and other organisations.

Manungurra Aboriginal Corporation: investing for the long term

The Manungurra Aboriginal Corporation (MAC), based in Tennant Creek, shows how income from a resource agreement can be used to build assets and support priorities over the long term.

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MAC was established to receive and manage payments from an ILUA associated with the Bootu Creek Manganese Mine. Rather than relying on cash distributions, and then the associated problems of alcohol and gambling with the payments, the corporation developed ways to use this income collectively.

Agreement income has helped support three outstations north-east of Tennant Creek. Investments have included all-weather roads that enabled people to live at the outstations year-round, renewable energy systems, housing maintenance and support for education and other community needs.

MAC also established a separate development corporation to hold investments intended to provide income beyond the life of the mine. These investments have enabled the organisation to continue operating since mining payments ceased in 2021.

MAC's experience shows the long timeframes involved in building governance, financial skills, assets and organisational capability. It also demonstrates how income from a finite resource project can be managed with the aim of supporting families and communities well beyond the life of that project.



(Photo credit: Russell Crosbie)

What enables and constrains Aboriginal self-determined development?

The research found that many existing socio-economic opportunities in the Beetaloo region have emerged through entrepreneurial initiative, partnerships and collaboration. However, turning opportunities into sustainable development pathways can require significant time, resources and support.

Aboriginal enterprises in remote regions often require their leaders to take on responsibilities beyond conventional business roles. They may recruit through family networks, help people become work-ready, fund training and equipment, support staff through personal and practical challenges, and find enough work across different industries to keep people employed.

Employment can be more accessible when workplace arrangements reflect the realities of life in remote communities. The research found that recruitment, training, rosters, pay cycles and workplace support can all affect whether people are able to take up and remain in jobs.

Community-based initiatives face similar challenges. Organisations managing agreements, assets, infrastructure, enterprises and complex external relationships generally build these skills and experience gradually over years or even decades. Progress is not always linear and projects may be redesigned or delayed as circumstances change.

The research identified several constraints that can affect the capacity of Aboriginal people, organisations and communities to pursue and sustain development pathways.

These include:

- A lack of local or regional organisations to directly support local development initiatives
- A lack of transparency, implementation and monitoring around agreement benefits
- Limited local business ecosystems, finance and market opportunities
- Fragmented service systems, housing shortages, health and wellbeing pressures, and transport and communications constraints
- Weak career-progression pathways beyond entry-level industry employment
- Consultation fatigue, low trust and uncertainty about responsibility for decisions and commitments
- Differing rights, leverage and visibility across land tenures, sectors and development processes.

These constraints do not reflect a lack of Aboriginal aspiration or capability. Rather, they influence the options available to people, organisations and communities and shape the support needed to pursue long-term aspirations.

The research also found that many organisations depend heavily on a small number of key people. Leadership changes, short-term funding, project delays and regulatory barriers can therefore affect progress.

Building strong organisations takes time. Governance systems, staff capability, financial management, trusted partnerships, technical knowledge, membership communication and organisational knowledge are all built through experience and need to be maintained over the long term.



Rights, governance and decision-making

Aboriginal people across the Beetaloo do not all have the same legal rights or ability to influence decisions about development. Their rights depend to a large extent on the type of land involved and the laws that apply to it.

Much of the region is pastoral-lease Country, with comparatively little Aboriginal Land held under the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976. That means native title is the main legal framework through which Aboriginal rights and interests are recognised.

Traditional Owners on Aboriginal Land and Native Title Holders on pastoral leases have different rights and different levels of decision-making leverage. Traditional Owners on Aboriginal Land have stronger rights to decide about development on their land. Native Title Holders may have rights to consultation and agreement-making for major developments, but do not have the same ability to determine whether development proceeds.

Rights can also differ depending on the type of development. Different laws and processes apply to activities such as gas, mining, pipelines, agriculture and water use.

This affects how Aboriginal people can participate in decisions and the influence they have over what happens on Country.

The research identified Prescribed Bodies Corporate (PBCs) as one area requiring particular attention. PBCs are organisations established to manage and protect native title rights and interests after native title has been formally recognised.

PBCs can provide a way for Native Title Holders to make decisions about Country, represent their interests in negotiations with government and industry, and develop longer-term economic plans. However, all native title determinations in the Beetaloo are currently managed through the Northern Land Council's Top End Default PBC.

Rather than recommending a single governance model, the research highlights the importance of rights holders having strong organisations that can represent their interests and build skills, knowledge and assets over time.

Depending on community needs, these organisations may need to support culturally appropriate decision-making; negotiate with governments, land councils and multiple development proponents; manage money, assets and investments; support businesses, employment and community initiatives; monitor Country, water and environmental impacts; and keep members informed.

The report identifies several possible organisational arrangements that may be relevant depending on local circumstances and the decisions of rights holders. These include locally constituted PBCs, shared-service or federated models, staged transition arrangements and connected development or benefit-holding entities.

The important point is not that every community should adopt the same model. It is that rights holders should have the ability and support to develop governance arrangements that suit their own circumstances and priorities. This is because governance and development are closely linked, as Aboriginal self-determined development is fundamentally a governance issue.

Agreements, benefits and accountability

Agreements between Aboriginal rights holders and development proponents can provide an important mechanism for securing benefits from development. However, the research found that agreements alone do not guarantee lasting employment, businesses or community outcomes.

What happens after an agreement is signed is just as important as what is negotiated in the first place. Outcomes depend on the commitments included in an agreement, as well as how those commitments are put into practice, monitored and reviewed over time.

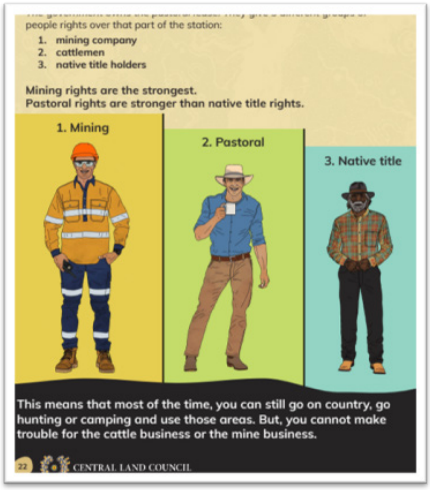
The research identified several features that can strengthen agreement outcomes:

- Informed decision making supported by expert advice
- Clear and measurable commitments for employment, training, procurement and business development
- Dedicated funding and responsibility for implementation
- Transparent reporting and access to information
- Regular review, evaluation and adaptation when circumstances change

The research found that agreement income can provide opportunities to build assets, establish businesses and support community priorities. The Manungurra Aboriginal Corporation provides a good example of this.

However, income and benefits from development should not be expected to pay for essential services that are the responsibility of government. Housing, health, education, water, transport, community safety and other basic services remain government responsibilities.

Agreements should therefore be seen as ongoing relationships rather than a one-off negotiation. How they are put into practice, monitored and governed – and how well they can respond to change – all affect whether they deliver lasting benefits.



Native Title, mining and pastoral leases (CLC 2022)



Marlinja solar microgrid (S. Holcombe)



PPP Contracting Roadside slasher equipment (S. Holcombe)



Manungurra vehicle at Ngurarra outstation (S. Holcombe)

Understanding cumulative impacts

The Beetaloo is experiencing rapid development across several industries at the same time. Alongside onshore shale gas, this includes renewable energy, agriculture, infrastructure and other large projects.

Looking at each development separately does not show the full picture. The research found that it is also important to consider their cumulative impacts – in other words, what happens when the effects of multiple developments build up or overlap over time.

Impacts may include increased dust, noise, traffic and changes to local areas. For Aboriginal people, there can also be impacts on places with cultural and spiritual significance, including damage to these places or reduced access to them. As development expands, these effects can combine with a loss of control over what happens on Country.

Multiple developments can create increasing demands on Aboriginal people and organisations. Each project may involve new information to understand, consultations to attend, agreements to negotiate and impacts to monitor. When several developments are happening at once, it can become increasingly difficult for people to keep up with the pace of change and fully consider what the combined effects may mean for Country and communities over the long term.

Water provides a clear example of where cumulative effects may emerge. The Georgina Wiso Water Allocation Plan includes an Aboriginal Water Reserve, which sets aside water that may be available for Aboriginal economic development. However, the research identified questions about who can access this water, who has authority to make decisions about it, and what organisational capacity is needed to use it.

At the same time, multiple industries are creating demand for water across the region. The report therefore highlights the importance of Aboriginal people being involved in water planning, protecting cultural water values, monitoring impacts and having access to information.

The research identifies a need for ways to understand cumulative impacts that are grounded in local communities but also coordinated across the region. Regional coordination can help address issues that cross project or community boundaries, but it should support – rather than replace – local Aboriginal authority and decision-making.



Mataranka (K. Witt)

Options for consideration

The research identifies a range of options that governments, industry and regional organisations may consider to support Aboriginal socio-economic development in the Beetaloo. These options are intended to strengthen Aboriginal choice, authority and capacity – not to determine what development should look like or replace local Aboriginal decision-making.

1 Support diverse pathways

Support multiple forms of socio-economic participation rather than assuming that jobs in a single industry are the principal measure of development. This includes employment, enterprise, ranger work, community services, cultural activities and other locally determined pathways.

2 Develop and strengthen rights-holder governance

Support rights holders to develop strong governance arrangements that reflect how they want to make decisions, represent their interests and engage with governments and organisations proposing development. This could include future PBC arrangements or other structures chosen by rights holders to suit their circumstances.

3 Invest in organisational capability

Provide long-term support for Aboriginal organisations to build and retain the people, skills and systems they need. This can include governance, staffing, financial management, technical knowledge, communication and organisational knowledge. Building this capacity over time can help organisations pursue community priorities and respond to change.

4 Support strong agreements

Support agreements that include clear and measurable commitments, dedicated funding to put those commitments into practice, clear responsibilities, transparent reporting and regular review. Aboriginal participation in monitoring can help rights holders understand whether commitments are being met and respond when circumstances change.

5 Ensure employment and procurement opportunities are accessible

Improve access to employment and procurement through early information about opportunities, realistic work packages, appropriate training, access to finance and pathways for career progression. Implementation support and transparent monitoring can help ensure commitments translate into practical opportunities.

6 Support basic needs and services

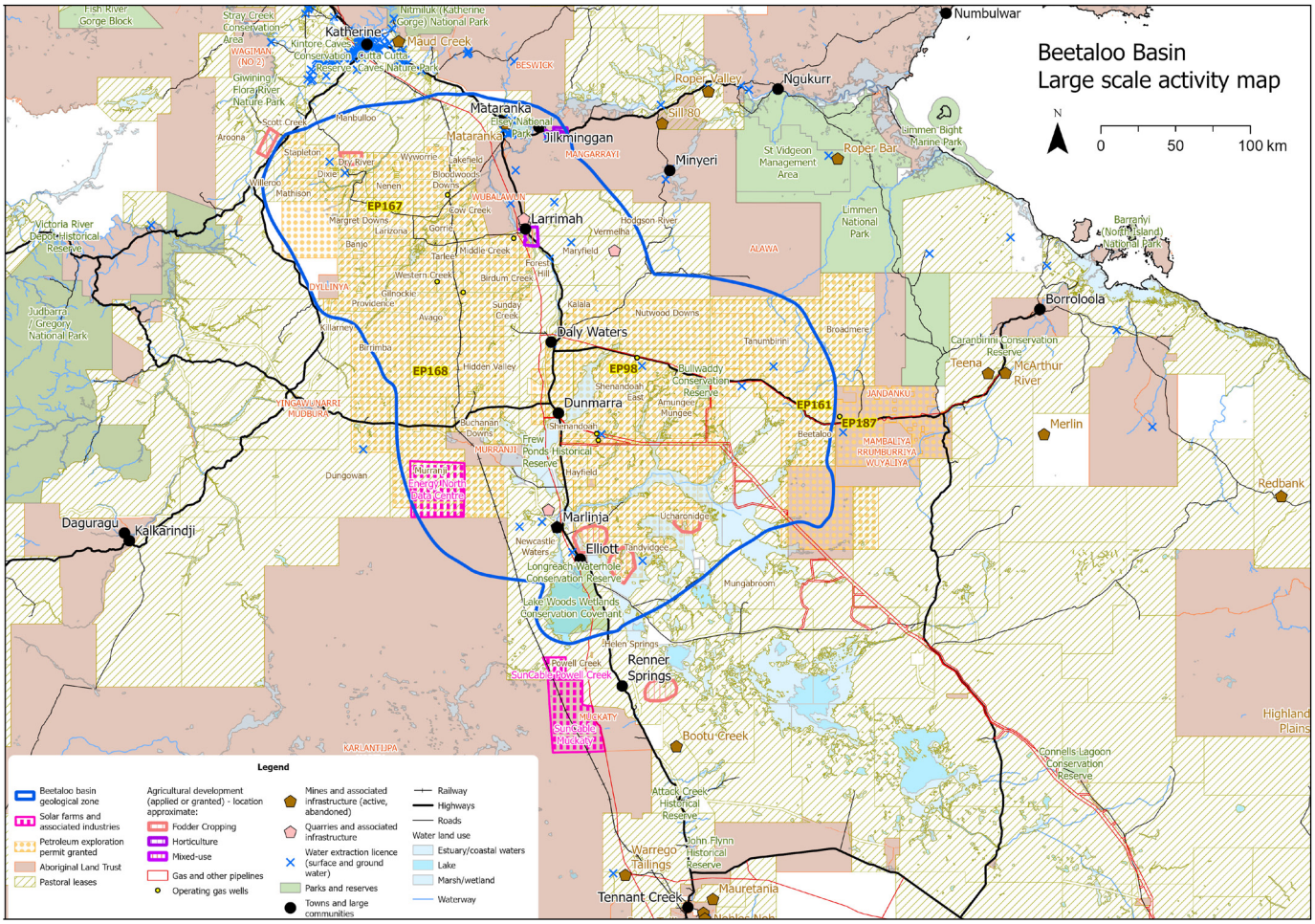
Maintain government responsibility for essential services and infrastructure, including housing, health, education, water, transport and community safety. Agreement income and development-related benefits should not be treated as substitutes for these responsibilities.

7 Address cumulative impacts

Strengthen Aboriginal participation in water planning, protection of cultural water values, Country monitoring and other processes for understanding and responding to the cumulative effects of multiple developments. These impacts need to be considered across projects and industries, rather than one development at a time.

8 Enable coordination

Improve coordination between industries, governments, researchers and regional organisations where this can reduce duplication, share information and address issues extending across individual projects. Regional coordination should support, rather than replace, local Aboriginal authority and decision-making.



Current and proposed Beetaloo Basin large scale activity. Not to scale. (Map by Kamila Svobodova, CSRM)

Looking ahead

The research shows that Aboriginal socio-economic development in the Beetaloo is not simply a question of how many jobs, contracts, payments or projects are generated by new development.

More meaningful indicators are whether development increases people's choices, strengthens their authority over decisions affecting Country and community, and builds the organisational capability needed to pursue long-term priorities.

The report identifies practical ways governments, industry and regional organisations can help create the conditions for this.

These include strengthening rights-holder governance, developing and putting into practice strong agreements, making employment and contracting more accessible, maintaining government responsibility for essential services, and improving how cumulative impacts are understood and managed.

These measures are intended to support rather than replace local Aboriginal authority and decision-making.

There is no single development pathway for Aboriginal people in the Beetaloo. Aspirations and priorities are diverse, and meaningful development depends on people having genuine choices about the social, cultural, environmental and economic futures they want to pursue.

The central message from the research is therefore to assess development by whether it expands those choices and strengthens Aboriginal people's capacity to shape their own futures.

Further information

The full report – *Pathways for Aboriginal socio-economic development in the Beetaloo (NT): Voices from the region* – was published in October 2026 and is available to read online.

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