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ADC Forum (Founded as the Australian Davos Connection) is a not-for-profit leadership organisation founded in 1996 by the Australian members and participants of the World Economic Forum.

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SUMMIT CUTS THROUGH OBSTACLES TO NORTHERN DEVELOPMENT

In the final days of the Northern Development Summit, some long-held historical myths were laid waste as obstacles to Northern Development were systematically identified, demystified and dismantled by new and bold ways of thinking.

Prof Paul Romer, international expert from New York University, said development will hinge on policy change, which then means it will live or die on voters who are actually living in the South. So, as many have concurred across the course of the Summit, we need a national dialogue that shows how northern development is critical to the future of Australia.

“There has also been consensus across the board that we must act to accommodate population growth for the whole of Australia,” says Mr Roux, CEO of ADC Forum, the think-tank responsible for organising the Summit. “But this confronts obstacles of its own, even if it serves the national interest.”

For example, says Mr Roux, there has been talk of accelerated depreciation regimes, quarantining \$800 million of the national infrastructure budget and even implementing special economic zones to help encourage larger-scale project investments.

“It turns out Australia is one of the last remaining continents that has never used a special economic zone to build rapid development in a single region – China itself has up to 200 of them,” said Mr Roux.

On day one of the Summit, The Hon Andrew Rob, Federal Minister for Trade and Investment also flagged a new migration policy that would force new Australians to spend at least five years’ tenure in the North, helping to kick-start the population boom that is both needed and inevitable.

While some focus on traditional sources of development in mining and agriculture, others have argued for utilizing renewable energy technology to create a super-grid that feeds energy to regional neighbours, a technology about ten years’ off. Another important theme has been the need for more diversified network connections, whether in water, transport or cities themselves. In terms of water, we can capture a great deal more in the North using diversion technology rather than dams. In terms of transport, the obvious first start is to actually link up roads and rail, with added strengthening of rail.

Major General John Hartley, chair of one of the five working groups, his focused on agriculture, noted that some among the delegates were perhaps too resistant in recognizing that Australians are living in a rapidly changing world.

“I had my doubts at the start of the Summit but I’m now even more convinced now that we can’t rely on becoming the food-bowl of Asia – we’re a high-cost producer that only accounts for 4% of regional production.”

That doesn’t stop us from adding value up the chain, he says.

This resonates with the broad theme supported by Sandra Harding, Vice Chancellor of James Cook University, among others that we need to take advantage of our growing leadership in tropical education, ecology and disease management. Sandra says the North of Australia sits at the nexus of two massive areas of development – the tropical zone and the SE Asian zone.

Chair of the governance workgroup, The Hon Paul Henderson called for the harmonization of the regulatory environment across Northern Australia. While Admiral Chris Barrie and his infrastructure group argues for one or more tropical megacities, Prof Geoff Raby, chair of the regional group, says that tourism must differentiate itself both from the Southern States and SE Asia.

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“Even in the region, the lure of Australia’s diverse northern landscapes are globally unique,” said international guest and ecological education expert Mr John Liu, Director of the Environmental Education Media Project at Berkeley, California

“Most functional landscapes are also the most productive,” said Mr Liu. “Taking an inclusive, long-term view of Northern Australian Development will most likely provide the most sustainable and most resilient outcomes.”

In one of the final sessions with CEO of the Northern Land Council Joe Morrison, The Hon Fred Chaney AO made an impassioned plea to make sure Indigenous Australians are fully recognized as equal stakeholders, not mendicants, as they were forced to be in Ord River Stage 1 in Kununurra.

“We must not repeat the tragic mistakes of the past”, he said. “Even now, the way we work with Native Title is adversarial, too legalistic, elaborate and costly, all at odds with the stated aim of integrating Indigenous people. It probably runs into the billions of dollars the amount spent in allowing lawyers to put Indigenous Australians in legalistic strait jackets.

“We can make Australia an even better country if we can include Indigenous Australians as equal partners in this grand project of Northern Development.”

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ADC Forum is an independent not-for-profit organisation delivering high-level strategic leadership forums including the annual Australian Leadership Retreat on Hayman Island and the annual Future Summit.

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