

**Indigenous Remote Communications Association (IRCA) Submission to  
Senate Inquiry into language learning in Indigenous communities**

*“The world loses a language every two weeks”*

- Wade Davis

*“When I speak language, it makes me feel home”*

- Roger Hart, elder and Cape York Guugu Yimithirr speaker

*“If our languages were like animals under threat of extinction there would be  
global outcry”*

- Associate Professor Lester Irabinna Rigney

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## **Background on IRCA**

Indigenous Remote Communications Association Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Corporation (IRCA) was established in 2001 and is the peak body for eight Remote Indigenous Media Organisations (RIMOs) as well as other remote media organisations and practitioners. The eight RIMOs support 103 remote Indigenous Broadcasting Service (RIBS, formerly BRACS) communities across Australia who produce, broadcast and receive radio and television plus 44 retransmission-only sites. The RIMOs are:

- Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (PY) Media
- Ngaanyatjarra (Ng) Media
- Pintubi Anmatjere Warlpiri (PAW) Media & Communications
- Pilbara and Kimberley Aboriginal Media (PAKAM)
- Queensland Remote Aboriginal Media (QRAM)
- Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA)
- Torres Strait Islander Media Association (TSIMA)
- Top End Aboriginal Bush Broadcasting Association (TEABBA)

IRCA was formed in 2001 to represent RIMOs and RIBS communities that were struggling to be heard at the national level due to a number of factors such as geographical isolation, difficult work conditions and limited funding. IRCA plays an important role in advocating on behalf of remote communities, whose needs are unique compared with urban and rural Indigenous communities. IRCA supports the sustainability of the remote Indigenous media and communications sector and has input at a national level on policy and funding issues and on the strategic development of the remote media sector.

In the nine years since its formation IRCA has developed a key role liaising with government and promoting the media specific needs of remote Indigenous communities. IRCA has achieved some key milestones since its formation, including:

- Playing an instrumental role in establishing the Indigenous Community Television Service (ICTV) which broadcast over Imparja's narrowcast channel 31 from 2001-7;
- Supporting the annual National Remote Media Festival with the host RIMO;
- Lobbying for the RIBS television transmitter rollout in 2005-06;
- Playing a key role in the establishment of the Australian Indigenous Communications Association of Australia in 2004, and the National Indigenous Television Service (NITV) in 2006;
- Supporting TEABBA during the ATSIC organisational review;
- Supporting the re-establishment of QRAMAC as the RIMO for north Queensland;
- Representing the concerns of the remote media sector in its response to the Indigenous Broadcasting Program review;

- Organising the IRCA / ICTV Summit in Alice Springs, March 2007, to develop an agreement with NITV;
- Effectively lobbying for the establishment of the Indigenous Remote Radio Rollout (IRRR) 2008;
- Creating the Indigitube website in collaboration with ICTV;
- Facilitating the Remote Digital Technical Forum in Alice Springs, July 2010.

IRCA is unique in its a national focus on the media needs of the remote region and has played a critical role in building pride, strength and cohesion in the remote Indigenous media and communications sector.

### **Background on indigenous languages**

In the early 1800's there were an estimated 300 distinct Indigenous languages in Australia. Over half of these are no longer in daily use and are considered to be extinct or, as some prefer to say, "sleeping". Many of the remaining languages are known to only a handful of Elders, and face extinction without urgent steps being taken to record them.

In the last 218 years Australia has suffered the largest and most rapid loss of languages in the world. Of the 145 indigenous languages still spoken in Australia, 110 are critically endangered. All of Australia's indigenous languages face an uncertain future if immediate action and care are not taken.

### **Link between remote indigenous media and language maintenance**

IRCA sees an intrinsic link between remote indigenous media production and language maintenance. This link goes beyond the obvious fact that much of the content produced in remote communities is produced in local languages. IRCA sees massive growth opportunities in the digital economy for remote media practitioners to be creating content that can be used in school curriculum, language documentation for academic/linguistic study, production of TVCs and education campaigns in local languages, etcetera.

Languages contain complex understandings of a person's culture, their identity and their connection with their land. Language enables the transference of culture and cultural knowledge across generations. Languages are a source of pride and strength.

Supporting languages can have flow on benefits into broader educational, employment and health outcomes. Languages are a key to unlocking indigenous disadvantage and crucial in the journey of reconciliation.

### **Some key reasons to support languages**

**Culture** - Language maintains the strength of a person's culture and identity. When a person has a strong connection to their own culture and language, it provides an additional channel for communication with that person and their community about issues such as education, health and employment.

**Health, Education, Employment** - By accessing communities and particularly the younger generations through culturally and linguistically appropriate approaches you will have greater success in getting the communities involvement and hopefully better outcomes in areas such as youth literacy, unemployment and the associated problems of crime and substance abuse. Indigenous language programs in schools have shown to have a positive impact on school attendance rates and community involvement in schools. More generally, learning a second language has proven improvements in cognitive development and in the literacy of both languages.

**Reconciliation** - Supporting the reclamation and maintenance of Australia's Indigenous languages is an essential element of genuine reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. Efforts to date represent real and meaningful attempts to overcome more than two centuries of dispossession. The results of this work are not only symbolically powerful but are crucial elements in improving the wellbeing, cultural and economic situation for Indigenous Australians.

**Science and sustainability** - Australian indigenous languages carry with them an intimate understanding of the ecological systems and the land from which they came. Losing these languages results in a loss of knowledge of species, behaviours, habitats, climatic patterns and sustainability practices that could lend support to tackling the increasing environmental challenges we face in Australia.

There are also potential macro and micro economic benefits from research into the ecological knowledge of Indigenous Australians, particularly looking into pharmaceutical properties and the ecologically sustainable agricultural development of Indigenous plant and animal species.

**Economics** - Languages can play a vital role in improving the economic prospects of Indigenous individuals and communities. Bilingual education has improved the numeracy and literacy of indigenous students. Strong languages can result in more opportunities for employment in areas such as education and training, translation and interpreting, and underdeveloped areas of cultural tourism.

**Heritage** - Australia's unique indigenous languages are a vital and vibrant part of Australian culture heritage. They represent a connection for many Indigenous communities to their pasts, an understanding of their cultures today, and provide a window for non-Indigenous Australians to appreciate the diversity, history and strength of the many cultures in their country.

### **Response to Terms of Reference**

- **The benefits of giving attention and recognition to Indigenous languages**

IRCA believes that attention and recognition of indigenous languages will have widespread positive benefits in many ways. Further that the positive impacts of language learning have flow on effects for all areas of indigenous policy including health and wellbeing, education and employment outcomes and health and well being.

This includes;

- Positive impact on movement towards reconciliation in Australia
  - Greater understanding of and appreciation for indigenous history and culture in broader Australian society
  - Flow on effects of employment opportunities in media, education, tourism, land management and academic sectors.
  - Health and wellbeing outcomes for indigenous people through cultural maintenance and the ability to archive and pass on this knowledge to future generations
  - A greater sense of dignity and pride in indigenous people due to wider recognition of the value of their language and culture
- **The contribution of Indigenous languages to Closing the Gap and strengthening Indigenous identity and culture**

Languages can contribute to Closing the Gap via;

- Indigenous Economic Development Strategy; the preservation and promotion of Indigenous languages has huge potential to support outcomes in areas of tourism, travel, entertainment, education and publishing.
- Indigenous Visual Arts. Language is inherent in the telling of the stories that art encompasses. A people can't have their stories without their language.

To quote from the introduction to Closing the Gap; *“The Apology created momentum and a sense of hope. This historic event provides a context for our initiatives — initiatives directed at overcoming disadvantage while respecting Indigenous culture and acknowledging Indigenous people’s unique position within Australia.”*

It continues *“all Indigenous people can have access to the same choices and opportunities as other Australians.”* – which includes the right to speak the language of your native country, a right that is respected for people from ethnic backgrounds coming to Australia.

In terms of addressing specific target of Closing the Gap language can contribute via:

- Contributing to improved health and therefore improved life expectancy and reduced child mortality via relevant in language health education.

- Improved health service delivery through both stronger interpreter services and improved English literacy amongst remote indigenous people.
- Greater retention of school students and stronger culture of school attendance due to relevance of first language curriculum; contributing to better early childhood education and halving the gap in reading, writing and numerous achievement of children.
- Increased retention of students through to attainment of year 12.
- Increased employment opportunities in language material production, translation and interpreter roles and services and due to increase in English competency.

Supporting indigenous languages across portfolios plays a fundamental role in a sustained commitment to the seven “action areas” or “building blocks” identified by COAG.

*The building blocks endorsed by COAG are:*

- *Early Childhood*
- *Schooling*
- *Health*
- *Economic Participation*
- *Healthy Homes*
- *Safe Communities*
- *Governance and Leadership.*

These building blocks are linked – achieving the Closing the Gap targets requires progress in each of these areas. Strategies aimed at achieving improvements in any one area will not work in isolation. Language maintenance, language media production and language curriculum development are obvious links across these targets that will result in improvements across these action areas.

IRCA sees maintenance and support for indigenous languages as fundamental to strengthening Indigenous identity and culture.

Strengthening indigenous identity and culture is clearly interconnected with languages. Languages are embedded with knowledge and information about culture, place, history, spiritual beliefs, kin systems and they frame people’s ways of seeing and understanding the world.

Australia was home to over 300 languages and was home to the longest continuous human community on the planet. Languages in Australia are highly endangered and it is estimated that we only have the next 50 years to ensure their survival. Whilst indigenous people clearly maintain their identity and culture even in cases where languages have not been transmitted between generations, languages are clearly a rich library and archive of cultural knowledge. Languages contain information about places and practices that are not always able to be translated in to another language ie English.

- **The potential benefits of including Indigenous languages in early education**

IRCA sees a strong correlation between supporting remote indigenous media to produce content and the use of this content as relevant curriculum for remote community schools.

Locally relevant content in early childhood education is proven to be highly engaging for young people whose first language is not English. Entering a school environment that has familiar language is a strong stepping stone to English learning.

- **Measures to improve education outcomes in those Indigenous communities where English is a second language**

There is much internationally reviewed evidence that demonstrates that students have more chance of honing their skills in English when they become literate in their first language first.

Worldwide, starting children's formal education by teaching in their mother tongue, if properly implemented, has been shown to be an effective route to the dominant language and education more generally. Indeed, it has been endorsed by UNESCO as the most effective educational strategy for all children.

Language education and promotion is proving vital to the establishment of positive identity for Indigenous youth. This in turn relates to education and employment, and results in improved social dividends, as well as health and wellbeing outcomes.

- **The educational and vocational benefits of ensuring English language competency amongst Indigenous communities**

There are clear educational and vocational benefits of ensuring English language competency amongst Indigenous communities. However it must be made clear that English language competency and first language competency are not mutually exclusive. In fact support for first language literacy can strengthen indigenous people's ability to gain competency in English.

- **Measures to improve Indigenous language interpreting and translating services**

Indigenous language interpreter and translating services are fundamentally important to health, education and justice service delivery. Furthermore this is a key employment area for indigenous people provided they are provided with the training required to be able to work as an interpreter or translator.

- **The effectiveness of current maintenance and revitalisation programs for Indigenous languages**



There are a diverse range of maintenance and revitalisations projects taking place across Australia. Often these are driven by passionate language speakers, linguists and community and receive little recognition and inadequate resources. These projects across Australia are doing a sterling effort to support languages but they need more support.

IRCA believes that these projects would be dramatically improved if the benefits of supporting indigenous languages were understood across department, portfolios of Ministers and therefore received increased funding.

IRCA supports both the revitalisation of “sleeping” languages and the maintenance of languages still being actively spoken.

IRCA is particularly excited by language projects that take advantage of new technologies such as NT Library Knowledge Centres, Ara Irititja and Miromaa. IRCA is aware of more and more digital language projects and sees this as an enormous growth area for language production and archival.

To this end IRCA believes that indigenous languages in remote Australia should be supported by the national broadband network and should be provided with comparable bandwidth as major towns and cities.

- **The effectiveness of the Commonwealth Government Indigenous languages policy in delivering its objectives and relevant policies of other Australian governments.**

Whilst IRCA welcomes the development of a National Indigenous Languages policy we believe that this policy needs greater muscle behind it to be truly effective. The announcement made in 2009 is a good start that must be built on. This policy needs to be attached to actions across departments including Education, Health, FAHCSIA, Media, NBN, Regional Affairs. The policy should enable increased flow of resources to drive projects which simultaneously create employment opportunities and support indigenous languages such as language curriculum development, cultural tourism project and language music programs.

Language policy often gets passed from department to department in every post election reshuffle, depending on where heritage sits. Language is connected to health, education, wellbeing and employment. IRAC recommend a cross-departmental language taskforce be established tasked with the urgent role of ensuring that indigenous languages are supported and Australia does not lose this rich living archive.

Furthermore any policy needs to be consolidated by a solid funding pool. IRCA recommends that the Maintenance of Indigenous Languages and Records Fund be expanded to include additional funding from other departments and that Board of Studies and Education develop more curriculums in languages.

Language maintenance has such profound flow on effects that it can become a positive self-perpetuating cycle. I.e. people given training and employment in multi-media to produce content in language which can be used in schools curriculum which in turns sees greater retention of young people and improved English skills, who may then go on to gain greater employment and training and stay more strongly connected to language and culture resulting in improved health, well being and community cohesion.

Languages are not something separate to be tagged on to the end of indigenous policy; they should be made a central consideration to all indigenous policy in urban centres and in remote Australia. Through language, culture can be kept strong, communities maintain dignity and pride and the broader Australian community can engage and support our rich indigenous history.

## **APPENDICES.**

### **United Nations Declaration on Rights of Indigenous People re Languages:**

#### **Article 13**

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.
2. States shall take effective measures to ensure that this right is protected and also to ensure that indigenous peoples can understand and be understood in political, legal and administrative proceedings, where necessary through the provision of interpretation or by other appropriate means.

#### **Article 14**

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.
2. Indigenous individuals, particularly children, have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State without discrimination.
3. States shall, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language.

#### **Article 15**

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to the dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations that shall be appropriately reflected in education and public information.
2. States shall take effective measures, in consultation and cooperation with the indigenous peoples concerned, to combat prejudice and eliminate discrimination and to promote tolerance, understanding and good relations among indigenous peoples and all other segments of society.

#### **Article 16**

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to establish their own media in their own languages and to have access to all forms of non-indigenous media without discrimination.
2. States shall take effective measures to ensure that State-owned media duly reflect indigenous cultural diversity. States, without prejudice to ensuring full freedom of expression, should encourage privately owned media to adequately reflect indigenous cultural diversity.

### **Key Recommendations and signature documents which support Indigenous Languages:**

#### The Labor Party Constitution:

“Labor will make the protection, preservation and revitalisation of Indigenous languages a major priority. The urgency of this is underscored by the probability that 90 per cent of Indigenous languages will disappear over the next generation.”

(Principle 105 of Chapter 13 of the Australian Labor Party National Platform and Constitution, 2007)

The chapter on 'Respecting Human Rights and a Fair Go for All', states, among other things, that the Australian Labor Party will:

- value "Indigenous decision making in education and promote community leadership on the importance of education";
- support "quality teaching environments and institutions that are culturally inclusive and will encourage Indigenous knowledge and perspectives in education curriculum"; and
- support "bi-lingual and bi-cultural education and [that it] believes they have value for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians."

#### 2005 National Indigenous Languages Survey, Key Recommendations

**1. Language Nests** A pilot program of Language Nests, which are Indigenous language programs for early childhood, should be established following consultation and a scoping report. The nests should be run in communities for all language categories (strong, endangered, and no longer spoken).

**2. Community Language Teams** Community Language Teams should be established to assist the running of Language Nests and other projects, including the documentation of languages.

**3. Regional Indigenous Language Centres** Regional Indigenous Language Centres should operate in all areas of need to provide infrastructure and technical support to Community Language Teams. Existing centres should continue to operate but should be evaluated and new centres should be considered for some regions which have no current coverage.

**4. National Indigenous Languages Centre** A feasibility study should be undertaken to evaluate the merits of establishing a National Indigenous Languages Centre.

HREOC *Bringing them Home Report 1997* – Refers to the social dysfunction caused by decline in use of own language and recommends:

#### *Language, culture and history centres*

12a. That the Commonwealth expand the funding of Indigenous language, culture and history centres to ensure national coverage at regional level.

12b. That where the Indigenous community so determines, the regional language, culture and history centre be funded to record and maintain local Indigenous languages and to teach those languages, especially to people whose forcible removal deprived them of opportunities to learn and maintain their language and to their descendants.

Taskforce for the Education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA). (1995) recognises

- the importance of teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies, cultures and languages to all Indigenous and non-Indigenous students
- the importance of the use by teachers of culturally inclusive methodologies and the provision of education which will strengthen Indigenous students' identity and cultural values

Taskforce for the Education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA). (2000) states that schooling should acknowledge the

“capacity of all young Indigenous people to learn by expecting all Indigenous children to be fluent in Standard Australian English and at the same time being inclusive of the student's home language”  
(MCEETYA 2000, p.20)

Little Children Are Sacred Report

34. That the government invest in the recruitment and training of Aboriginal Interpreters – a proportion of whom must be trained and supported to enable them to work in the areas of child protection and criminal investigations of abuse.

54. That DEET urgently implements the outcomes of the *Indigenous Languages and Culture Report*.

National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy strategy (2000),

Recognises the value of Australia's Aboriginal language diversity and its importance in education. It states that indigenous students acquiring Standard Australian English literacy and numeracy

“should not be at the expense of Indigenous communities' desires to use their own languages, or to revitalise or regain languages that may have been threatened.” (DEST 2000, p.3)

DEEWR National Goals for Indigenous Education

2. To increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people employed as educational administrators, teachers, curriculum advisers, teachers assistants, home-school liaison officers and other education workers, including community people engaged in teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, history and con-temporary society, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages.

17. To develop programs to support the maintenance and continued use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages.

[http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/indigenous\\_education/policy\\_issues\\_reviews/national\\_goals\\_for\\_indigenous\\_education.htm](http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/indigenous_education/policy_issues_reviews/national_goals_for_indigenous_education.htm) accessed 7/05/2009)

#### Additional Declarations:

Australia is also a signatory to human rights declarations that specifically address the children's right to education in their first language. These declarations include: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (article 27), the Universal Declaration Cultural Diversity (articles 5 and 6), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (articles 26 and 27) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (article 13).

#### **Quotations**

*"...if our languages were like animals under threat of extinction there would be global outcry"*

Lester Irabinna Rigney, Assoc. Professor, writing on Indigenous languages (FATSIL Newsletter, March 2002, p. 9).

"Australians are proud to showcase Indigenous culture at important times during the social and political history in this country, like the Olympic games ... but fail to deal with the promotion and protection and investing and underwriting in the cultures, and more particularly the languages of Indigenous peoples in this country."

- Senator Aiden Ridgeway 2002

"These languages are valuable in their own right as extraordinary and unique linguistic systems but equally for the distinctive knowledge, values and social relationships they embody and to which they give access. Once lost to individuals and social groups, recovery is at best very difficult and generally impossible. When Indigenous languages and their speakers are given a valued place in the school, as in mother-tongue medium programs, the chances for survival of the languages is much greater. Conversely, if educational programs relegate these languages to the periphery, the message to children and their families is clear and strong: your language is peripheral, optional, merely decorative, and not worth your or anyone else's real attention or effort." - Applied Linguistics Association of Australia ALAA 2009.

"Language is at the core of identity for all people. It provides a continuing bond, built up over time between people, their families, their land and culture."

"It's through the recording of songs, legends, poetry and lore, that language holds the key to our people's history. It opens the way to cultural and spiritual understanding."

FATSIL Overview 2000

"What position does language hold in relation to the whole area of cultural heritage?"

It's quite simple. If the colonizers accepted that language was the first link that had to be cut to separate a people from their culture, how can it be denied now that it is the starting point to allow reconnection. This is the responsibility that must be faced up to."

Louise Mandell QC. Canada. United Nations Indigenous Peoples and Racism Conference. Sydney. 2001.

"Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalise, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons."

United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Article 14. 1993.

### References and Further Reading

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*Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Persons*, International Working Group for Indigenous Affairs, Accessed at: <<http://www.iwgia.org/sw248.asp>>

Victorian Aboriginal Centre for Languages, homepage accessed at <[www.vaclang.org.au](http://www.vaclang.org.au)> April 2007