



# ARDS

Aboriginal Resource and Development Services Inc.

## Are We Heading in the Right Direction?

### “Closing the Gap” or “Making it Bigger”?

#### By Richard Trudgen

Are the Government’s present strategies heading in the right direction? If not, the chances are we will make the gap bigger.

The ‘gap’ I refer to includes:

- higher levels of ill health
  - higher levels of unemployment
  - higher imprisonment rates
  - lower education attainment, and
  - shorter life expectancy
- experienced by Indigenous people relative to the rest of the Australian population.

The Productivity Commission’s report “Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage” clearly outlines this gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. In response to this, both State and Federal Governments have implemented policies, badged as “Closing the Gap”.<sup>1</sup>

### Are we really heading in the right direction?

To help us answer the question, let us have a brief look at some important areas of government policy which have been impacting Yolŋu people’s lives over this past year.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [www.closesthegap.com.au](http://www.closesthegap.com.au)    [www.pc.gov.au/gsp/indigenous](http://www.pc.gov.au/gsp/indigenous)

[www.budget.gov.au/2008-09/content/ministerial\\_statements/html/indigenous-06.htm](http://www.budget.gov.au/2008-09/content/ministerial_statements/html/indigenous-06.htm)

<sup>2</sup> The membership of ARDS is derived mainly from the Yolŋu people in north-east Arnhem Land. One of the key roles of ARDS for their membership is to advocate members’ concerns. Therefore it is the intention of this discussion paper to be representative of our membership’s point of view.

## The Intervention

Some communities outside of north-east Arnhem Land have found great relief from the intervention, as drunkenness and abuse have dissipated and a form of normal life has returned. Also, in many cases those in authority no longer turn a blind eye.

For many Yolŋu people the situation has been different. The high level of drunkenness, in general, was not there in the first place, except around the mining town of Nhulunbuy where little has changed.

For the Yolŋu of Arnhem Land, the Intervention has put great strain on the people - further compounding their feeling of confusion and hopelessness. In some cases the army arrived in landing barges degorging equipment onto the beach with little forewarning. Many thought it was World War III, and the Army was there to steal their children.

The Federal Government also imposed 5 year leases over private community lands, some homelands and some sacred sites in order to take control of so-called "public assets". The people's faith in the Australian law as a civilised system of law, that might also protect them as Aboriginal people, evaporated.

Next, Yolŋu communities had income management forced on them. Government Business Managers and a whole range of government workers now have a large degree of control over their daily lives and the running of Yolŋu communities.

Significant problems arise when these dominant culture government workers, whether they are in Canberra, Darwin, or in an Aboriginal Community, have little to no understanding of the socio-cultural, economic, legal<sup>3</sup>, linguistic and historical reality of the people that they are now strongly influencing. This means these communities are effectively being administered and ruled by foreigners. The same old mistakes of previous generations are being made all over again. Instead of building on the capacity of community members, the community becomes more fragmented, disempowered and dependent. It is as though the old welfare/mission days have returned.

Where peace and order was promised through the intervention, people now feel more vulnerable and threatened as police officers have been placed in their communities permanently. You have to wonder how people in Darwin or Canberra would feel if Yolŋu police with powers to arrest according to Yolŋu law started driving around their streets carrying guns, capsicum spray and tazers.

It's not that all these intervention responses are bad. But the speed of change has been horrific with a timetable set to foreign dominant - culture agendas rather than one set through effective dialogue and consultation with the people in a language that they can understand.

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<sup>3</sup> The economic, legal systems I refer to here are the people's traditional economic, legal systems.

Aboriginal people who are English Second Language speakers are the most information-marginalised people in Australia today. This is possibly the single largest factor underpinning "The Gap". The communication gulf which exists as a result of the language barrier further exacerbates the problem. Sadly, almost no recognition of this massive communication breakdown is evident in any government policy or action.

The Federal and NT Governments are rolling out more mainstream services, but how can people access these them if they can neither understand or communicate with the service providers?

In general, for Yolŋu the intervention has brought more confusion, powerlessness and dependency, with little hope of a brighter future.

### **Are we really heading in the right direction?**

Justice is failing

#### **Abuse against children**

It is clear that violence against children anywhere must not be tolerated. But where did this violence, now evident in some Aboriginal Communities, start? Any understanding of the history of colonisation in this country will see that abuse against Aboriginal women and children started over two hundred years ago. The abusers came mainly from the dominant culture. They have massacred and raped Aboriginal women and unwittingly plundered private and clan assets. Even during the "Little Children are Sacred" inquiry, it was reported to the committee that the abuse in north-east Arnhem Land was mainly at the hands of dominant culture miners.

#### **Abuse of elders, women and children is illegal under traditional Aboriginal law.**

It is Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal men that suffered, and continue to suffer, the stigma of this abuse. It needs to be stated that it is European culture that was the abusive culture in the first place.

It also needs to be stated that the abuse modelled by dominant European culture seems to have acted as an unspoken permission to some lawless Aboriginal individuals to create a subculture of lawlessness and abuse in some Aboriginal communities<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> It is common history knowledge that many Aboriginal people were encouraged to turn on their own people, mass slaughter and rape as in the case of the Native Police across this country. Aboriginal people were terrorized, mutilated, raped and exterminated for protecting themselves, their estates and live stock. This dominant culture sponsored horror and violence had a lasting effect on the subculture psyche of Aboriginal people today. The inter-generational transfer of trauma can not be discounted in debates like this. [www.prov.vic.gov.au/nativepolice/home.html](http://www.prov.vic.gov.au/nativepolice/home.html) Jonathan Richards, The Secret War: A True History of Queensland's Native Police, University of Queensland Press.

This subculture then gained approval and succour in the dominant culture naive understanding of Traditional Aboriginal Law. Most legal personnel and courts do not know or accept that it is illegal according to Traditional Aboriginal Law to abuse elders, women and children. Instead they insist on believing in the dominant culture stereotype view of Traditional Law; that it provides no protection for Aboriginal women and children.

Of course most of this violence evident today in some Aboriginal communities is fuelled by the European culture's need for open access to alcohol. Add alcohol to the repressive violent dominant culture history, plus unemployment, racism and the feeling of hopelessness that many Aboriginal people now experience, and a dash of liberal welfare, and you have the formula for unfettered violence of all forms. The abuse now evident in some Aboriginal communities is grog culture **not** Aboriginal culture.

It is interesting to note that the Aboriginal communities who had the greatest violence against Aboriginal women in north-east Arnhem Land are the communities around Nhulunbuy where alcohol is still freely available. The Aboriginal community in Arnhem Land that had the highest levels of sexual abuse against minors is the one community in Arnhem Land that has had NT police presence in its midst for the last 30 years.

Communities which had no police presence had almost no levels of sexual abuse against minors. Why? Abuse of minors is illegal at traditional Aboriginal law and the traditional police are still active in these communities to enforce this law.<sup>5</sup>

So what will happen with NT police, now permanently in most of the major Aboriginal communities, while there is still no real resolution between Australian law and traditional law? How are they to interact? It seems it is only a matter of time before traditional Yolŋu police and/ or NT police cross the jurisdictional responsibility of the other while each genuinely trying to carry out their sworn responsibilities.

In the meantime Yolŋu people remain confused in a legal 'no mans land'. Having learnt and assented to their own law, through a ceremonial process, and having no formal instruction or process to assent to Australian law they are left confused and lost. Not being able to comply with the law they know and have assented to but having to obey a law they neither know nor have assented to. This 'no mans land' creates an environment that greatly increases lawlessness and violence.

The dominant culture is not dealing with these issues in a respectful or intelligent way. Sadly the results are clear: more Yolŋu people will continue to be imprisoned in NT jails.

### **Are we really heading in the right direction?**

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<sup>5</sup> Some people will say that this is due to the low level of reporting. Having lived in one of these communities for eleven years I know this is not so. During that time I became deeply involved in all levels of Yolŋu life, never once did I see or hear of violence against a Yolŋu child. Acts of violence against children was unheard of, and a sexual act against children was an unthinkable thought. Sexual abuse against children is a western culture disease.

## Health care is failing

Yolŋu people are still suffering from a very high death rate and a disease level which seems to be rising. North-east Arnhem Land now has the highest levels of Rheumatic Heart Disease in the world and a virulent strain of TB has returned to central Arnhem Land. Hospitalisation continues to be a frightening and sometimes lethal experience for Yolŋu. Most of this goes unreported because Yolŋu are unaware of the legal processes available to them as Australian citizens; language and good intercultural communication again being the main barrier.<sup>6</sup>

Tens of millions of dollars are being wasted, Indigenous families are being traumatised and many lives needlessly lost. Since the intervention an extra six million dollars has been spent on primary health care in north-east Arnhem Land. However, hardly a dollar has gone towards **language-based** primary health education and communication services. Money seems to continue to go to the same old dysfunctional system.

## **Are we really heading in the right direction?**

### Education is failing

Education is also failing the Yolŋu people badly. The National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) tests in May 2008<sup>7</sup> is the last of a long list of tragic report cards for the NT Education Department, yet nothing seems to change.

On the ground, Yolŋu teenagers are being set up to fail. They are told if they get their Year 12 Certificate they will get a job. However, most who receive their NTCE Certificates do so at such low grade levels that they cannot even fill out an employment information form when requested at their first job interview.<sup>8</sup>

Their failed attempt to gain the promised employment leaves them broken, disillusioned and angry - usually ending up at the first place where they can find something to drink, smoke or sniff. Many are now turning back to sniffing petrol despite knowing it is brain damaging.

Of course many will say that it is the parents' and teenagers' faults, because the students did not come to school enough throughout their whole schooling life.

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<sup>6</sup> It is evident from the very, very small number of litigation trials brought against the Health Department of the NT by Aboriginal people that Aboriginal people do not have free and fair access to processes of law that other Australians do. Aboriginal people make up more than 60% of hospitalization population in the NT but less than 1% of cases brought to trial, yet they are clearly the most disadvantaged due to major communications problems that Government does not seem to want to do anything about.

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.curriculum.edu.au/ccsite/default.asp?id=19875>

<sup>8</sup> Almost none of these students receive a Tertiary Entrance Ranking (TER) meaning they have no hope of going on to university. It seems year twelve certificates in NT Aboriginal school has more to do with giving the government positive numbers to put on display than to empower Aboriginal people.

Why should Yolŋu and other Aboriginal children be so unfairly disadvantaged in a schooling system where the teachers are mostly short term, cannot speak the students' language and have little or no understanding of the students' proper and polite cultural etiquette and mores?

These teachers also have little or no real understanding of the rich social, legal, economic, biological, zoological, philosophical, religious, and the linguistic and academic history of their students. The sad fact being most of the dominant culture teachers may unknowingly see their students, according to the dominant culture's stereo type demeaning naming of Aboriginal people, as primitive, hunter- gatherer, nomads with little or no chance of any academic success. And because the teachers can not interact intellectually in language with their students, the die is cast for failure all round.

Communication between students and teachers in any school is central to the learning process<sup>9</sup>. Yet communication in Yolŋu schools between Yolŋu students and dominant culture teachers is so bad, the only possible result is dumbed down education.

Tens of millions of dollars and many Indigenous lives are being wasted.

### **Are we really heading in the right direction?**

#### First the Intervention and then came the Super Shires

Yolŋu people are saying that they have totally lost faith in all levels of the dominant culture government. This loss of faith started with the Intervention and then only grew with the implementation of the new Local Government Shire arrangements.

The new Shire was forced on the people by the NT Government. Again without any real meaningful consultation: that is consultation in language and through a process meaningful to the people. Where the people once had small community councils running their separate communities, they now have a mega shire based in Nhulunbuy with only a few people across the region representing them.

The other big shock about the Shire was the realisation that Balanda could also become Shire council members. The great fear being that, if in future the township of Nhulunbuy receives local government status, Balanda will fully control the whole of north-east Arnhem Land at the local government level – totally removing any influence of traditional political leaders.

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<sup>9</sup> See: *School Effectiveness for Language Minority Students*, WP Thomas, and Virginia Collier: Dec 1997. George Mason University. Language development in Papua New Guinea. Paper, Ukarumpa, PNG, Summer Institute of Linguistics (in UNDSIL, 1997, pp 12- 13). Best Evidence: Research Foundations of the Bilingual Education Act. <http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/pubs/reports/bestevidence/>

Many hard-won community assets have been stripped and handed over to this foreign/strange new government body.<sup>10</sup> Where else in Australia are private assets stripped from Australian citizens through legislation without “just terms?”

For example, all housing from the “prescribed Aboriginal communities” across the NT has been transferred to NT Housing. Now public servants who know very little about real life on these communities will control the “public” housing stock. Many Yolŋu are in shock saying, “How could a Labour Government do this to us?” And, “We can no longer have faith in the dominant culture government (from either side of politics) or white fella law to protect our rights as human beings.” Others are saying, “Is there any law left in Australia to protect us?” And, “We have been lied to and tricked.”

Many people are in desperate shock and feeling powerless in the face of these government policies. Some adult Yolŋu have just given up not caring if their children sniff or not because there seems to be little hope for them as a people.

### **Are we really heading in the right direction?**

#### The “Gap” Factors

Many people say that the “Gap” is caused by a range of factors from lack of services to some innate problem with the people’s own culture. However, in 1948 when the American and Australian scientific expedition did extensive research in Arnhem Land they did not see the high levels of disease and sickness that are evident today and people then were living to an old age. During the 1960s and 70s Yolŋu people attended school and learnt to read and write with many of them gaining trade certificates. They built their own homes, ran community administration offices and carried out civil works contracts. Many were also trained as health workers and teachers. During this period, imprisonment rates were also low. Dominant culture services however were very scarce and Yolŋu people were living in what was considered very isolated communities. Given this success, clearly there must be another factor that leads Aboriginal people to give up on life and develop destructive social behavior and experience the consequent “Gap” in key quality of life indicators.

### **Are we really heading in the right direction?**

#### The “Gap” genesis: failed communication

The “Gap” is a direct product of failed communication. That is, the dominant culture’s very poor attempts to communicate with the Yolŋu people leaving the Yolŋu stranded in isolated islands of limited understanding. This, of course, is due to the core issue of language. The dominant culture, through governments, has the

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<sup>10</sup> Assets on land owned by the Aboriginal land owners on each community. Instead of negotiating with the land owners about assets that were built on their land for “public purpose” the Australian government has treated Aboriginal people with less rights than other Australians, and passed legislation to steal these assets off private land. No where else in Australia would this be tolerated.

resources, but neither the true understanding of the depth of communication problems caused by language nor the will to deal with it.

"Loss of purpose and destructive social conditions emerge when people become confused and do not have enough information to take control of their own lives and develop their own future. Without good communication, clear purpose is but a faint distant hope". "Without clear purpose, human endeavour stops and destructive social conditions reign".

People living in information-deprived communities become very confused about the world around them. This confusion leads to loss of control over their individual and corporate lives, resulting in a loss of purpose where destructive social conditions emerge. Destructive social conditions and hence the "Gap" are a direct product of confusion, loss of control and loss of purpose due to consistently failing and flawed dominant culture communication with Aboriginal people.

When communication fails, everything around you becomes hopelessly confused. Failed communication causes havoc at all levels of human existence from within the family to life in the community around us. For Indigenous people like Yolŋu and other Aboriginal people who speak English as a second, fifth or even sixth language confusion is an everyday nightmare that the dominant culture does not understand. **To overcome this confusion and close the "Gap", people require access to dominant culture information and knowledge in a language they can understand.**

### **Are we really heading in the right direction?**

#### Closing the Gap

The present government policies to "close the gap" with more police, teachers, welfare, and other service providers who that have little or no real understanding of the people whom they must work with, cannot be successful.

The true resource to "close the gap" has to be the Aboriginal people themselves.

More of the same dominant culture services that deal with the "problems" will not "close the gap" that Indigenous people suffer from. These services do not build capacity of the people themselves, but just serve a bigger dominant culture Aboriginal industry. The "Gap" can only close when capacity is built in the people themselves so they, as a people, can escape the confusion and drive their own future.

The often repeated saying, "If you give a man a fish, you feed him for one day, if you teach a man to fish, you will feed him and his family for a lifetime", is relevant here.

The present government approaches of building capacity in the dominant culture services, by employing more people who are unable to communicate with the residents of the communities they are trying to work with, cannot build sustainable outcomes for either governments or the people. They can only build more dependent, dysfunctional, frustrated confused and hopeless people - therefore widening the gap that already exists.

## **Are we really heading in the right direction?**

### Building capacity of the Indigenous people themselves

To close the gap in an effective, efficient and sustainable way means we need to build capacity amongst Aboriginal people themselves. Aboriginal people need to be seen as people who have a living legal, social, linguistic and historical identity.

Governments needs to stop seeing Indigenous people as "problems to be solved" but people, citizens of this land, who need access to good information and knowledge in their own language. To build this capacity in good communication will demand a whole different approach from government, businesses and NGO's alike.

Policies need to be developed and special services resourced to build real capacity within people themselves so they can deal with the issues they face. This capacity building must affect the whole culture linguistic group as a living total entity. This needs to start with the traditional leaders,<sup>11</sup> elders, and adults within the particular linguistic group.

### The present dominant culture approach

Educating the children as young as possible, and teenagers within a particular linguistic group, in isolation to the adults, builds conflict and generates tension in the social group, resulting in social dysfunctional young "educated" people.<sup>12</sup>

The policy initiatives that select individual Aboriginal people or committees for specialised training also sets these people up against other members of their own socio-linguistic community creating a them- and -us syndrome, winners and losers.

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<sup>11</sup> The real traditional leaders of north-east Arnhem Land are called the Dalkarra Djirrkay. They are the political leaders of the people selected by a process of law. No government has ever consulted with these political leaders of the Yolngu people. Instead the government tends to pick pseudo leaders "Uncle Toms" to consult with. These pseudo leaders usually have good English and have had western education but they have not been recognized as political leaders of their own people. Until the Dalkarra Djirrkay are the ones the dominant culture government consults with nothing good could come out of any consultation process.

<sup>12</sup> In the corridors of power in both Canberra and Darwin Aboriginal leaders are spoken of as, "The lost generation" and that, "Attention should now be placed on younger Aboriginal people", "So we, the dominant culture, can create new leaders". Sayings like this are very reminiscent of past mission and welfare days. Do the people who say these things really believe that history will treat them any better then it treated the missions and welfare era for their ethno centric, paternalistic, neo-colonialist attitudes like this.

## **Are we really heading in the right direction?**

You cannot build a cultural group of people without building the whole cultural group together.

### *Close the "Gap", how?*

To "Close the Gap", capacity needs to be built within the people themselves so they have the power and the knowledge to drive their own future. If not, the people will remain marginalised and traumatised by the high levels of dependency, disease, sickness, death and misadventure from service providers they now experience.<sup>13</sup>

## **What can be done?**

To effectively "Close the Gap", two key strategies need to be implemented concurrently.

1. Knowledge empowerment for Indigenous people directed at the whole cultural/ language group, and
2. Increasing capacity within government and the dominant culture to better understand Indigenous people, their struggles and issues.

### **1. Knowledge empowerment for the whole cultural group.**

Knowledge empowerment of the whole cultural group will require:

- providing access to the concept knowledge; the "how" and the "why" of the modern world that has now closed in on the people
- dialogue based communication aimed at the elders and adults within the linguistic group; turning all the adults into teachers of both traditional and contemporary knowledge

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<sup>13</sup> Yolngu people are now only experiencing "Black Plague" type death rates that changed the face of European development. There are two options; one: is to let the people take 300 years to learn about disease and infection as the dominant western culture did or, two; the dominant culture could share, through the people's own language and trained cross culture educators, what the dominant culture has already learnt about this disease and sickness.

- all information in the language of the people and built on the people's world - view, blending both traditional and contemporary knowledge for good cognitive construction
- information covering subject areas including health, economics, law and citizen rights and responsibilities and how to access services
- knowledge being available to the whole linguistic group at the same time
- well resourced team interpreter services
- learning English and other training programs with instructions in language

## **2. Build capacity within government and dominant culture to better understand Indigenous people, their struggles and issues.**

All levels of government need to have a better understanding of the reality of Indigenous life so they can step outside their current failed approaches. For this to happen there needs to be a cultural shift within the dominant culture government and population to increase their understanding of the world from an Indigenous point of view<sup>14</sup>. Among other things, this means that **all government employees working with Indigenous people or in Indigenous policy must be required to do mandatory cultural awareness education. This education needs to be substantial and sustained.**

### **An insult to any culture**

Two and four hour cultural awareness programs are an insult to Aboriginal culture.

Does the dominant culture really believe that Aboriginal culture is so simple and primitive that anything of relevance about a complex culture can be learned and understood in such short time?

Genuine cross-cultural understanding can **only** occur when there is a competent intellectual appreciation of the other.

Public servants also need to be encouraged to learn an Aboriginal language, because as soon as you start learning a people's language you start learning their culture. Only when the government at all levels sees the "problem" in a new way will they be able to think laterally in relation to closing the gap in a real and sustainable manner.

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<sup>14</sup> To understand another group of people means we need to have an appreciation of their different world- view or cultural paradigm. Different cultural groups of people see things from different environment, economical, legal, social, religious and historical context. There is usually no right or wrong in this, they are just different, but we need to know that these differences are there, even if we do not fully understand them.

## Create capacity in different linguistic regions

Capacity needs to be created in different linguistic regions. All levels of government will need to work in a new way to create capacity within these different Indigenous linguistic regions across the NT.<sup>15</sup>

All teachers, police officers, health personnel, administrators, miners and contractors entering Aboriginal lands, should attempt to learn the language of the people, as does the Australian Army before sending soldiers into East Timor, Afghanistan and other non-English speaking places.

The age old neo-colonial approach of producing simple English materials and instructions for all the Aboriginal people across the nation or across the NT for citizens that cannot understand English must stop in an age of true intellectual reasoning. People must have access to the full intellectual and conceptual knowledge upon which this complex modern world is based in order to be able to live and work successfully within it, whether they live in a major population centre or on a community with less than 100 people. Plain English instructions and information are still incomprehensible, and therefore useless, to the intended audience if that audience does not have English as one of their languages. Providing information in their language can achieve both understanding and pride by the people in their language, culture and knowledge.<sup>16</sup>

### How will it be done? Capacity Building Resource Centres

This empowerment process will require the resourcing and development of **Capacity Building Resource Centres** that will include;

- Information and Media Services
- Regional Language Centres

### **Information and Media Services**

The empowerment process will require well-resourced information and media service. This information and media service will equip the whole cultural linguistic group by providing *dominant culture and mainstream information* in the language of the people. This means these services would need to train dominant culture

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<sup>15</sup> Traditionally Aboriginal people of Australia broke up their land into different linguistic regions. For example, the Yolŋu Matha region of north-east Arnhem Land covers the estates and different languages of about 40 different clans. Yet they are all suffixing languages and they understand each other with a few languages acting as the lingua-franca for the whole region. However languages outside that region are all prefixing languages. So the Yolŋu Matha languages act as one region. Unfortunately the Government regionalization of the NT has not in general followed the predetermined boundaries of these regions. To close the gap these language regions need to be recognized and resourced.

<sup>16</sup> The present approach of communicating in English with indigenous people, who have English as a second language, is akin to a form of "community violence" where the dominant English-speaking culture of Australia traumatizes and violates these indigenous people's civil rights on a daily basis. This form of community violence is a major reason why the gap exists and must stop.

professionals in the language of the people, as well as in cross-cultural education methodology.

These information and media services would support functions like a language centre and other information and IT knowledge delivery platforms.

These trained dominant culture professionals would then produce information, in close relationship with Indigenous colleagues, around the subject areas of health, economics, law and many other issues. For example health educators would deliver information in language covering health literacy and germ theory. Plus information around a whole range of diseases delivered through a range of media including face to face education, radio and internet -based health language services.<sup>17</sup> Other dominant culture professionals would facilitate sharing information and knowledge in their particular expertise.

These information and media services would also support and run communication platforms, including radio, e-classrooms, Internet and Intranet service.

## **Regional Language Services**

Regional language services would need to be a central part of the Capacity Building Resource Centres.

Language centres would:

- support research and development for a particular language region
- train and resource team interpreting and mentoring services
- work on charting and recording the Aboriginal languages in a particular region
- develop dictionaries in those languages, and
- develop training materials and programs to train non-Aboriginal people in a particular language.

Properly resourced language centres and trained English first language linguists, professionals, and cross-cultural educators working together with the Aboriginal people of that linguistic region will be able to facilitate communication and produce the materials necessary to build capacity within the whole cultural group of people. Materials once produced will have a hundred year life, making it a very cost effective and time efficient investment.

### Skills training, like numeracy and literacy

Skill training and numeracy and literacy education should only occur after the empowerment process above is well underway with the whole linguistic group. When the dominant culture concept information is understood, the people will demand skill training. That is when the people understand the "how and the why" of the world, they will want the necessary skills to engage with that world.

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<sup>17</sup> See patient educators at: [www.ards.com.au/health\\_medtrans.htm](http://www.ards.com.au/health_medtrans.htm)

Ideally, skill training should first be delivered to the adults within the linguistic group then, in complete concert with these adults, to the children within the whole group.

Finally, with the right combination of a respectful and open approach, two-way learning, sufficient resources and appropriate support structures as I've outlined here, I believe that there is significant hope for Yolngu to "Close the Gap".

This **can** happen. It is now up to both the Territory and Federal Governments to listen, change direction and take the first step towards a language based approach to capacity building.

**We, as a nation, need to invest in developing human capacity to build social cohesion rather than implementing punitive measures that further alienate Indigenous citizens. Surely we can do this in 2008.**