Needs of Urban Dwelling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples – Commonwealth Parliamentary Enquiry

Broome Aboriginal Media Association

The following contribution to the Parliamentary enquiry into the needs of the urban dwelling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples is provided by Broome Aboriginal Media Association as a member of the Pilbara and Kimberley Aboriginal Media Network (PAKAM). The approach taken to the enquiry is to provide a perspective on the issues from an informational aspect – which is particularly pertinent given the involvement of the Outback Digital Network (ODN)—as a strategic partner in PAKNET (the Pilbara and Kimberley Digital Network) and other initiatives involved in capacity building of communities in the area of information and communications technology and its use. The needs of urban dwelling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from an information infrastructure are critical elements from PAKNET's perspective to the future capacity and needs of urban dwelling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. As members of numerous communities—the creation of information infrastructure which allows for urban based Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to access their traditional communities. At the same time allowing access to the opportunities and services which come through information and communications technology and infrastructure are crucial to avoiding individuals and communities being marginalised further as the information divide (i.e., that between information have and have-nots) becomes a factor.

At present there are serious issues which are structurally bound to the nature of indigenous populations relationships to State and Commonwealth governance and administration. Particularly in the Kimberley there have been historical precedents that have resulted in the creation of urban aboriginal populations who do not have the same levels of informational independence, or the literacy and numeracy skills to fully participate in the emerging knowledge economy. This major gap in the approach which has been undertaken by organisations in the past – where information and knowledge were controlled by external agencies (as opposed to empowering local communities to look after themselves) – has resulted in a fragmentation and marginalisation of urban communities from both their traditional community roots as well as the communities to which they dwell on the fringe of.

At present there are limited programs and services available to urban dwelling indigenous Australians which allow, let alone encourage them to take an active role in the informational processes which result from active service delivery. Be this from a demand perspective – where communities are actively engaged in the feedback process, or from a supply perspective – where individual community members skills are enhanced to encourage and extend roles within services and programs delivered to communities for their own people.

Perhaps the best way to consider more effective delivery of services is to consider the way in which communities actively engage in the informational process – from both a traditional and contemporary perspective. Creating systems which undertake to transfer certain informational systems to diaspora communities (within urban centres) from their traditional communities - extending the communication lines from traditional communities to those members of communities who are outside of their family and other community groupings. This can be perceived as a 'special need' however the recognition from government is perhaps more closely aligned to an understanding of the dynamics of different Aboriginal community groupings and the relationships that exist within the context of culture within separate groups. The mistake made in the past as today to an extent is to classify all Aboriginals into the one 'special needs' group by way of their supposed biological predisposition. By undertaking to understand the complexity that exists once one creates 'artificial' hubs for different groups from different areas (i.e., desert people, saltwater people) can be the first step in finding appropriate ways to circumvent some of the problems which are indicative of the current systems. At the same time, there is a need to service communities in different ways, given their own experiences. Some individuals and families are more closely tied to traditional communities, while others may have grown up in urban

based environments – the problem again is to not assume a 'blanket classification' of peoples within either their 'Aboriginality' or their 'Urban-ness'.

To extend involvement of urban Indigenous peoples in decision making affecting their local communities a far greater involvement and funding of information and knowledge based technology and skills are essential. Allowing urban Indigenous people access to decision making is partially linked to creating environments where Indigenous people feel they are on an equal platform and have some 'say' or involvement in the decision making process. This of course is linked closely to the way in which communities in both urban and rural areas relate to different arms of government in terms of both information and communication.

Developing appropriate systems which can enhance the participation of Urban Aboriginal Communities within the framework of governance is a very important part of developing further informational independence within communities. By fostering partnership governance arrangements which focus on integration of urban communities for purposes of greater participation at local, state and federal levels is paramount to future development of these communities. Creating effective information feedback systems within the governance approach, while encouraging open and transparent systems of information exchange can create a more trusting and open relationship amongst Urban Aboriginal populations.

Within the youth population of urban communities serious issues are emerging in terms of the gap between non-Indigenous and Indigenous which mirrors information have and have-nots within the larger Australian community in terms of both access to technology as well as education. It is very important that programs of all level government address the growing disparity amongst the populations in a very real way. As part of the reconciliation process – creating equitable distribution of information and communications technology (in ways which account for social, economic and cultural issues within aboriginal communities) are fundamental to stopping further divisions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth. As Australians – Indigenous youth must be encouraged to participate with the technology in ways which will provide them and those organisations which provide services to them to move effectively into knowledge-based systems and relationships with both their societies and the institutions with which they have contact.

With regard to health, education, employment and homelessness- engaging smart systems which collate information while at the same time providing services to urban youth and communities can allow both Indigenous and non-Indigenous organisations and individuals to serve their communities in ways which are both informed and effective. The gap exists within urban and rural Indigenous communities which allow them as communities to effectively manage their information and knowledge in both the physical and intangible aspects of their existence. Of course questions do emerge as to the appropriateness of western forms of informationally based management systems for society. The case is such that it is of prime importance that communities are given control of their information and knowledge management – while at the same time providing the scope to building capacity within communities to both use and implement information systems for future capacity-building in areas such as public health, education – employment and homelessness. For the Indigenous youth in urban communities being given the opportunity to work and develop skills in areas which can serve their communities (if knowledge transfer is achieved in an effective way) can be an important way in which they as youth can offer contributions to their communities in a very tangible way – while providing a building up of capacity within communities to manage their own affairs. For Indigenous urban communities – it is very important that they are able to work within this paradigm while at the same time still maintain a healthy and constructive relationship with their traditional systems of knowledge.

Maintenance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait culture in urban areas is enhanced by the current technology. The nature of ICT is such that it is complimentary to traditional systems of information exchange. Developing appropriate applications and systems for maintaining culture in urban areas is part of what groups like BAMA and the ODN are looking to in terms of their strategy for technology within communities. Encouraging maintenance of these essentially 'informational' systems requires communities to take on the responsibility of maintaining language and cultural links with their traditional communities (which the technology does allow for). There are challenges however which must be addressed in terms of pure infrastructure for these systems to build effectively in the future. Governments at all levels must be willing to put the necessary investment into building out both infrastructure and information infrastructure for these communities to build capacity in future.

It is very clear that the future for economic independence for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations in Australia and around the world, lies in the ability to work with the information based systems of the future. Without access to such systems a further marginalisation and division between the Urban Indigenous communities and their non-Indigenous counterparts is inevitable.

Housing needs in urban areas are intrinsically linked to particular problems within these communities. The ability to escape the poverty and access the necessary opportunities which the 'new economy' offers will not occur while the fundamental problems with urban housing exist for Indigenous communities. The ability for communities to find employment in their traditional communities (as opposed to moving into urban areas) through information based employment (using technology) is a clear possibility to avoiding some of the problems we currently associate with Urban housing within Indigenous communities.

Overall this paper has focussed on information and knowledge within communities as the key to future strategies for sustaining and building up the capacity of Indigenous urban communities to take full advantage of the information revolution. This however must be matched with policy strategy and spending to relieve the clear imbalance between Indigenous youth and communities and those of the rest of Australia. Until we are able to address these issues in a mature and focused manner – we run the risk of missing yet another generation of kids, lost in the void which the clash of our different knowledge and information systems have created.