



ARDS Inc

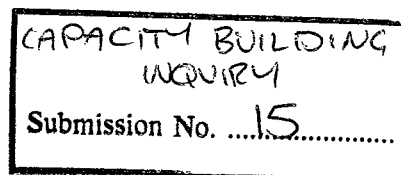
ABORIGINAL RESOURCE & DEVELOPMENT SERVICES INC

ABN 24 609 472 742

"Education & Communication Services"
www.ards.com.au

27 August 2002

The Committee Secretary
House of Representatives
Standing Committee on Aboriginal
and Torres Strait Islander Affairs
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600



RE: CAPACITY BUILDING IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Aboriginal Resource and Development Services Inc. (ARDS) is a non-profit organisation committed to serving the Aboriginal people of Australia. We aim to benefit their lives by providing culturally appropriate education, empowering them to engage in the world to their full capacity. This means we are committed to effective communication, which requires the use of the people's own language wherever possible, and an understanding of their existing knowledge base within their world view. We work at the grass roots as well as a regional, territory and national level. The ARDS Executive Body and staff are committed to standing with the people in their struggle and development; to search for answers to the questions the people have about many subjects and to provide knowledge and information that enables them to take charge of their own destiny.

As an educator with ARDS, I have spent much time with Yolngu elders and members of Yolngu communities and homeland centre villages. ARDS works to help the people understand our laws, government structure and systems, and our staff spend many hours learning about Yolngu language, culture and world-view, specifically in relation to health, law and the legal system, economics and business. During the last thirty years, ARDS staff have learnt that there are two essential keys to human capacity building: *purpose* and *communication*.

This submission suggests the strategies that we believe have proven most effective in truly empowering Aboriginal people and building the capacity of those living in Indigenous communities. We believe that if these strategies are applied by government agencies, stronger relationships will be forged between government employees and Indigenous people, therefore improving individual and community outcomes for the people (Term of Reference C). Once this is achieved, community members will be more informed and better equipped to implement their own strategies to support their families and organisations and representative councils within their own communities (Term of Reference A). Flowing on from these two outcomes, Indigenous organisations will be better able to build their own enterprises and industries, therefore delivering and influencing the delivery of services more effectively, efficiently and accountably (Term of Reference B). Our strategies are written specifically relating to the Yolngu people of north-east Arnhem Land, however our experience shows that the principles and methodologies outlined can be transferred to any Indigenous group of people.

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NRCC



UCA

Effective Communication

Without good communication, clear purpose is but a faint and distant hope. Without clear purpose, human endeavour stops. Human capacity building cannot happen without good communication. Good communication happens when information is provided in a way that allows it to be understood. This can only happen in the people's own language, which is the medium they use to communicate, think and construct knowledge. I believe that communication via language is the key to the three terms of reference that your Inquiry attempts to address.

As stated in the enclosed book entitled *Why Warriors lie down and die* ("WW"), written by myself and published by ARDS, poor communication stops people receiving almost all news or knowledge from outside their language and cultural domain. This includes day-to-day news and general information. It also includes what may well be life-saving information from health professionals. It stops them knowing what they are giving consent for, how to comply with medical instructions and how to intervene in their own health problems. In this way, poor communication directly impacts on high mortality rates.

Similarly, poor communication ensures that advice from legal professionals is misunderstood or is just not heard, negating Yolngu hopes of a 'fair go'. It destroys Yolngu attempts to acquire meaningful education and training, thereby preventing them from gaining control of their future. Even worse, it gives them a distorted view of themselves and the world. The comparative absence of much meaningful information from the outside world leaves the Yolngu people marginalised to a point where they lose control of their communities, homeland estates and resources.

A lack of communication stops Yolngu being in control of the very organisations and programs that have been initiated to give them more control. In the end, even policies like self-determination fail because of it. I believe this communication gap is the main reason underlying the people's continual loss of control over their lives. This communication gap is cemented into the system so deeply that it is not even noticed by the dominant culture.

Without language and without an understanding of the worldview of the people, it is impossible to truly hear the people, or expect them to hear you. This will only be possible if you can communicate intellectually with them in their own language.

Communication Mores

Communication mores – or behaviours associated with communicating – are learned from birth and are fundamental to how we communicate throughout life. When two parties operate according to vastly different communication mores, serious breakdown in the communication process occurs, inevitably resulting in unsatisfactory outcomes. There are many differences in communication mores between the dominant Australian culture and Yolngu. These include differences in eye contact; speaking, listening, thinking times, response times, and body language. Examples of these differences can be found at pages 78 – 81 of WW.

One of the main communication differences that creates the most difficulty between English speaking people and Yolngu is silence. When Yolngu people are conversing with each other, especially when discussing difficult or complicated topics, it is not unusual for response times to be as long as 3 to 25 seconds. This is a stark contrast to English speaking people, who generally respond within ½ to 1 second, and even if the response time is longer, we will usually umm and ah whilst we are thinking of a response to let the other person know that we have heard them and we are in the process of formulating a response. This difference alone causes great problems for Yolngu conversing with English-speaking people, because they are

often left looking and feeling stupid because they are not given an adequate opportunity to develop and deliver their response.

Getting Information to the People

There are many misconceptions that exist about the best way to get contemporary information surrounding various subjects to the people. The two main misconceptions are:

1. Teach the children first and they will teach the adults
2. Teach some elders and they will convince their people.

These misconceptions are detailed, with examples, in WW on pages 204-207. If the new knowledge is forced on the group through a method that is not acknowledged by them as valid, the new information will most likely be rejected outright. For new information to be accepted by any group, the *process* is more important than the *content*.

Self-Learning Tools

English-speaking Australians have access to a whole range of educational/learning opportunities, including schools and universities. All these use English as a medium to teach a massive range of subjects. These active educational experiences are backed up by a large number of self-learning media that can deliver almost any information English speakers want, in their first language. This includes:

- books;
- encyclopaedias;
- dictionaries;
- dictionaries from English to other languages;
- newspapers, both local and national;
- magazines on a vast array of subjects;
- manuals on technical and complex subjects;
- pamphlets;
- billboards;
- information sheets;
- distance education material;
- audiotapes;
- videotapes;
- radio stations;
- television channels;
- the Internet, locally, nationally and internationally; and
- lawyers, doctors and other professionals that speak their language.

Most of this media could be classed as self-learning media, where an individual can access information when they want to, usually from their own home. Much of this self-learning media is even translated into other languages for European- and Asian-Australians. Yet for Yolngu, and others like them, no contemporary self-learning media exists.

An Effective Media Service

ARDS recently completed a feasibility study that researched the need and possibility of introducing a radio service for the Yolngu people in north-east Arnhem Land, in their own language. Whilst conducting this feasibility study, we recognised that capacity building for indigenous people would be greatly facilitated by implementing an effective media service that the people can use to access information on a daily basis in their own language. The enclosed dossier, which reports the findings of our feasibility study, points out that there are currently no self-learning mediums for indigenous people. Capacity building in any sense is a non-event until an effective media service exists that the people can use as a self-learning medium to gain information.

Dictionary Development

An effective media service, such as ARDS proposed Community Development Radio Service, is only the first step in lessening the gaps of information that the people have compared to members of the dominant culture. Indigenous capacity building would be further enhanced if we were able to deliver systems or self-learning mediums such as quality dictionaries in the people's own language.

For Yolngu, there are no good dictionaries that work from English to their language, so it is impossible for Yolngu to self-learn English or understand the real meaning of the many English words they are confronted with every day – on the news or in the letters they receive from governments and other service providers. Even everyday conversations leave so many questions in their minds. It is almost impossible to understand instructions on bottles of medicine or food packaging. Manuals and operating instructions for motor vehicles and other equipment are meaningless. It is almost terrifying when they have to try to understand legal situations in courtrooms or instructions from a solicitor. A trip to the hospital can be so frightening and humiliating that many adult Yolngu, especially older people, would rather die than repeat the experience. Discussion with doctors and sisters can lead to high levels of frustration because Yolngu are left unsure whether they are being treated, tricked or experimented on. Even Asian and European migrants to this country have a self-learning media advantage over Yolngu because at least they have English-to-their-language or bilingual dictionaries, books and newspapers in their own language – not to mention some radio and television services.

Train Government Personnel

Many people that are placed to work with Indigenous people are not adequately trained to work in a cross-cultural/cross-language situation. If these people are going to do their work well, they need special training on at least three levels:

1. General Orientation – involving cultural awareness, history of the area, and some understanding of language dynamics. This will work towards creating a friendlier working environment for Indigenous people and those working with them.
2. Special training for educators and trainers – involving special cross-cultural and cross-language educational training. This training should be delivered to those with a basic understanding of Yolngu Matha. This training explains in detail the world-view of

Indigenous Australians, and their cultural knowledge base. These people should be trained in the same way as those going to another country.

3. Communication facilitators/educators – involving a high level of training for those who would be working with Yolngu people on special projects in areas such as health and economics.

Many people scoff at the concept training dominant culture personnel, saying that it is too expensive, or that we should only be training Yolngu. These objections are dealt with in WW, on pages 232-234.

Stop Welfare Dependency

Rev. Dr Djininyi Gondarra firmly believes that dependency is the biggest disease that is killing Yolngu today. This is evident in many Indigenous communities throughout Australia, and indeed throughout the world.

For the past 30 years, Yolngu have been encouraged to accept Government benefits. They were entitled to these under Australian law, it was said. Once Yolngu were economically strong and self-sufficient. They had many products that they traded nationally with other Indigenous clans and internationally with the Macassans from Indonesia. However, this was stopped by the dominant culture and now dominant culture companies dominate these industries. Consequently, virtually the only economic activity that Yolngu have left is welfare.

Welfare is no longer an auxiliary to the ongoing economic life of the people. It has become almost their total economic existence. Yolngu have become hopelessly dependent on the dominant culture and its welfare system. This dependency has led to learned helplessness that leads to loss of roles, loss of mastery, drug abuse and violence. This is addressed in detail in chapter 10 of WW.

Replace Existing Programs with Programs that Truly Empower the People

For Yolngu to regain control of their lives, all present programs need assessing to see if they are part of the answer or part of the problem. Where programs do not return responsibility and control to Yolngu and their communities they must be modified or replaced with programs that do. This change should be done in a sensitive and constructive way. ARDS has many examples of programs that we have implemented that have truly empowered the people. One example is the Galiwin'ku Melioidosis program that was run in 1996. This program was highly successful and proved Indigenous people can learn effectively if:

- dominant culture experts are correctly trained;
- the education process is theoretically sound; and
- all the people are taught as a cultural group, empowering them all, not just an elite few.

We can provide many other examples of effective programs that ARDS has delivered that have empowered, and aided in capacity building of, the Yolngu people.

Partnerships with Indigenous Communities

We also need to train dominant culture personnel in construction and delivery of services in partnerships with indigenous communities.

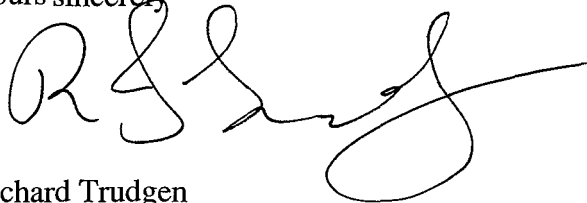
Indigenous Australians want to stand tall, shoulder-to-shoulder with other Australian citizens, as true equals in developing this great nation.

Financially, the changes outlined in this letter, and detailed further in the enclosed book should cost the nation no more than it is spending now. In fact, they should cost less in the future as the new programs empower Yolngu, allowing them to create interventions that work around 'Yolngu-friendly' environments where they are able to resume mastery over their own living environment.

However, Yolngu and other Indigenous Australians must be empowered before they can take control of their own destiny. This will only happen if the dominant culture sees things in a totally new way. All Australian citizens, governments, professionals and most importantly, policymakers, must accept the responsibility that comes from being part of the dominant culture. It is time to implement strategies that will truly work to facilitate capacity building for all Indigenous communities so that all Indigenous Australians will feel empowered.

Although this is only a brief outline of some of the strategies ARDS believes are necessary to move towards capacity building in Indigenous communities, I am happy to discuss any of the issues raised here in more detail. If you require any further information, I can be contacted by telephone at our Nhulunbuy office on (08) 8987 3910 or by email on trudgen@ards.com.au.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R Trudgen', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Richard Trudgen
Business Manager