

BACKING INDIGENOUS ABILITY

Submission from the Brisbane Indigenous Media Association
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Background:

During the past twelve years, the Queensland founded Brisbane Indigenous Media Association (BIMA) gained an increasing level of recognition as a major Indigenous communication centre in Australia. BIMA is now recognized locally and nationally by government agencies and Indigenous communities for leadership in developing - both on air and on site - culturally meaningful, interactive communication and learning programs outreaching to national audiences both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. BIMA's 24 hours air time is dedicated to Indigenous communities whether they be urban, regional or remote but also with understanding of the need, and therefore, with intent to build a bridge of communication and cultural learning between the Indigenous and Non-Indigenous people of Australia. This bridge is founded in shared interests in music, culture, sport and news. BIMA engages listeners but offers a forum for dialogue with and between Indigenous communities and with and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.

In this regard, BIMA's position in communication, learning/training and broadcasting in Australia is unique.

From inception, BIMA, founded within Indigenous culture, specifically targeted Indigenous communities in Queensland's seeking viable communications solutions to communication and learning challenges confronted by Indigenous people in urban, regional, remote and very remote communities. In recent years, BIMA worked actively in partnership with state and federal government agencies to deliver communications solutions that meet both the communications and the learning/training needs of remote communities such as Aurukun, Weipa, Napranum, and Kowanyama. Accordingly, at the national, state and community level, BIMA has a unique ability to undertake professional responsibilities as an Indigenous Community Radio Broadcast Company, but also to:

- Ensure formal communications training (through our Registered Training Organisation Triple A Training) that meets the cultural and community needs of Indigenous communities and leads to development of nationally recognised and sustainable skills in remote Indigenous communities
- Conduct both qualitative and quantitative research with local leaders and communities, collecting and interpreting information by way of site visits five or six times annually, and through follow up and continuing interactive broadcast dialogue as well as through the interactive website research link.
- Direct action research through community engagement that identifies community needs and works with Indigenous communities to develop meaningful communications outcomes
- Build/sustain strong partnerships with local Indigenous communities, elders and councils

- Continue partnerships with existing communications professionals working in remote Indigenous communities, including Remote Indigenous Broadcasting Station operators, who are integral members of their communities and a key provider of local information to remote communities
- Deliver hands-on leadership of communications projects confirming practical information on issues such as health and nutrition to remote communities, as well as working with communities to develop cultural heritage projects that preserve local knowledge and stories and share these realities with cultural perception of integrity

The result of this unique combination of community engagement and communications skills confirms BIMA's Queensland position to comment on the communications needs of remote Indigenous communities. Given BIMA's leadership in communication broadcast, production development and training across geo-space borders into New South Wales and across Indigenous and non-Indigenous airwaves of Australia, BIMA is also in a position to provide national insight on the challenges confronting Indigenous communication, the responsibilities to represent Indigenous views with the power of voice, and rights to access public funds to ensure voice and presence of original and continuing Indigenous sense of community in Australia.

BIMA's initial and continuing commitment to ensuring Indigenous voice and cultural dialogue and learning for Indigenous but also bridging to non-Indigenous Australia enabled BIMA to build capacity as architects both of integrated communications systems within these communities and between these communities and the non-Indigenous people and government agencies that support or supply services to and between Indigenous communities.

In the first instance of Indigenous responsibility, BIMA draws on a unique ability to work in partnership with local communities to map their communications needs, provide the communities (urban, regional and remote) with the training and support required to utilise telecommunications infrastructure effectively, and to assist these communities in developing contemporary and culturally relevant communications content and to ensure communities are engaging in local and national dialogue through communications technology applications, systems and infrastructure made possible in contemporary Australia.

Comments on the targeted communications areas of Backing Indigenous Ability:

Telephones

BIMA strongly recommends that organisations such as BIMA be involved in mapping of communications needs in Indigenous communities to determine the need for, proposed usage of, and placement of shared community phones.

Our experience is that individual communities have very individual needs in terms of communications, and the placement of phones must be negotiated with the local community to ensure maximum community usage. Cultural considerations need to be discussed on an individual community basis to ensure that these phones will be used widely, and be available for a range of purposes (including, for example, by women wanting advice on sensitive issues such as domestic violence, or for community members wanting to contact family members in other remote communities about culturally-sensitive issues).

Shared community phones will also need to be publicised and maintained within remote communities. It is suggested that RIBS operators or other recipients of communications training delivered by organisations such as BIMA could fulfil these functions.

Internet and broadband

Currently, user patterns in communities in areas such as Cape York, which have some access to public Internet, confirm extremely low user requirements. The limited use is due to a range of factors, including:

- inappropriate location of computers (in areas that are hard to access or in uncomfortable or culturally inappropriate environments)
- poor promotion of the existence of Internet facilities
- lack of culturally appropriate online content
- lack of computer literacy and appropriate training to address this problem
- charges imposed on community members which, even if they are minimal, are discouraging regular usage

The implications to communications strategy suggests a strong focus needs to be placed first on engagement with local communities to ensure correct placement and management of Internet facilities, as well as development and promotion of culturally appropriate and localised online content. Ongoing training and the development of local community champions who promote and assist with Internet usage is essential to ensure ongoing use of Internet facilities.

Videoconferencing

Similar to the use of Internet, use of videoconferencing facilities will be minimal in the absence of appropriate community engagement, an analysis of community needs, and ongoing promotion and skills development to support use of the facilities.

Training, content and support

It is suggested that organisations such as BIMA are uniquely placed to work with local Indigenous radio broadcasters and key community members around Australia to improve awareness of rights and entitlements to telecommunications initiatives, and to identify and train community champions to support the sustainability and use of telecommunications in Indigenous communities.

Organisations such as BIMA also have a proven ability to work in collaboration with remote Indigenous communities to encourage and support the development and supply of Indigenous prepared and relevant content that contributes to community goals. Without this kind of culturally-appropriate, localised and community-owned content, engagement with communications technology will be minimal in most communities.

It is recommended that organisations such as BIMA, who have a proven track record in training, communicating and developing culturally-appropriate content, be engaged to identify communications needs of remote communities, the work with communities on an ongoing basis to promote use of telecommunications, provide support to ensure high usage in the local community, and assist in local content development.

Comments on the key principles underpinning the Backing Indigenous Ability program

1. *Follow a culturally appropriate approach that integrates effective responses to supply and demand constraints.*

BIMA strongly agrees that identification of community needs and working in a culturally appropriate manner are essential elements of this program. We strongly recommend utilisation of an organisation such as BIMA to ensure the development of appropriate and integrated communications systems in remote Indigenous communities, and to ensure these systems meet local needs and are well-utilised.

2. *Involve and support communities to assist community members to take advantage of the opportunities provided by improved communications to achieve their community goals.*

It is essential that the current members of remote communities who play an essential role in sharing information in the local community (such as RIBS operators) be engaged to promote use of improved communications systems. It is also essential that the local community be engaged actively to ensure that their communications needs are met by the solutions to be put in place.

3. *Build on previously tried successful models and activities while accommodating flexibility and innovation.*

It is suggested that, while some success has been achieved in meeting the communications needs of remote Indigenous communities, individual communications models need to be developed for each community. Implementing a 'one size fits all' approach to telecommunications, or delivering telecommunications solutions without active engagement and ownership of local communities, will result in lack of local use of phones, Internet and videoconferencing, and a lack of sustainability of these facilities.

4. *Encourage communications initiatives to underpin and support communities to better access existing Government and other services.*

BIMA has strong experience in assessing the needs of remote communities in terms of access to government and other services, and supporting communities in improving their access to these services. It is strongly recommended that appropriate Indigenous communications organisations be involved in ensuring telecommunications solutions developed improve access to services in remote communities.

5. *Enable telecommunications initiatives to be used to build capacity within communities.*
6. *Plan for the medium and longer term future of telecommunications within Indigenous communities by implementing the appropriate foundations now*

BIMA agrees that a key feature of this program should be building of capacity in local communities, as well as ensuring the medium and longer term future of

telecommunications within these communities. This should occur through a combination of training, skills development and active engagement of key community members in ensuring ongoing use of, and relevance of, telecommunications systems put in place.

Comments on the key elements of Backing Indigenous Ability

Services

Facilitating access to appropriate services is essential in enabling the use of telecommunication initiatives by identified Indigenous communities.

Services should only be put in place in Indigenous communities once engagement with the local community has occurred, and once there is agreement locally on the communities communications needs and an integrated solution has been developed. Services must be culturally appropriate, and respond to the unique needs of each community. Use of these services must be promoted actively and locally, and community members must receive the support and training they need to use these services on an ongoing basis.

Engagement

Engaging communities to use introduced telecommunications technology will be paramount to achieving the objectives of the program.

Community engagement is essential to the success of this program, and must be conducted by Indigenous organisations with a capability to communicate with remote communities, and understand their communications needs. It is recommended that a large proportion of funding through this program be set aside to ensure appropriate and coordinated engagement with communities, ensuring the development of integrated and effective communications systems that are meaningful to, and utilised by, the local community.

Content development

Providing relevant, culturally appropriate content will assist in engaging members of the community and ensure the sustainability of the program.

The success of BIMA and other like organisations in developing culturally appropriate communications content highlights the need for more funding for content development. Localised and culturally appropriate content development will ensure both the engagement of remote Indigenous community members, and the preservation and sharing of Indigenous language and cultural knowledge.

Training and support

The involvement of Community Champions and Regional Agents will be designed to engage the communities and assist in providing the tools to manage sustainable telecommunications within a community.

It is agreed that local community champions will be essential in promoting ongoing use of telecommunications services. In many cases, RIBS operators or other individuals in communities are already playing key roles as providers of community information and promotions of local services. These individuals need to be identified locally and supported in engaging their local communities to ensure ongoing use of telecommunications services.

Sustainability

Telecommunications delivered to Indigenous communities must be technically and financially sustainable.

Sustainability (and progressability) of telecommunications services in Indigenous communities will only occur as a result of local skills development and engagement of key organisations, councils and community members in developing local communications solutions. Without strong community engagement and ownership, telecommunications services that are 'imposed on' or delivered in an ad hoc fashion to Indigenous communities will be underutilised and poorly treated and maintained, making financial and technical sustainability impossible. Importantly, this program should aim for progressability, with the ability to respond to changing communications needs in communities by implementing flexible, innovative and community-owned communications solutions.

Comments on individual elements of the Backing Indigenous Ability Discussion Paper

3.3.1 Shared community phones

It is strongly recommended that organisations with a proven track record in consulting with Indigenous communities about their communications needs be involved in working at the local level with communities to assist with identifying sites, the application process, training community members in using and maintaining the phone and in liaising with service providers.

This consultation process needs to be integrated with any other communications services suggested for each community, as well as existing communication services in place in some communities. This consultation must result in community ownership of the local phone, rather than an 'arms-length' consultation process that results in installation of a phone that is poorly utilised and poorly treated and maintained.

Organisations such as BIMA possess the community contacts, trust of local communities in areas such as Cape York, and understanding of the communications needs and training needs of local communities. Engagement of organisations such as BIMA would ensure the planning, location, installation and ongoing promotion and maintenance of shared phones would meet local community needs.

3.3.2 Public Internet access

The location, promotion and training associated with Internet facilities will be key elements ensuring the ongoing utilisation by the local community. Currently, the poor placement, management and costs of Internet facilities in many communities in areas such as Cape York are ensuring they are under-utilised. Lack of local promotion of these services and training for community members, as well as lack of appropriate content online, is also adversely affecting Internet uptake.

It is recommended organisations such as BIMA be engaged to determine the Internet usage needs of remote communities, and make recommendations on the location of Internet facilities and hub communities, as well as the training and community education needs of communities.

3.3.3 Videoconferencing

Organisations such as BIMA can play an important role in ensuring videoconferencing facilities are appropriately located, the use of the facilities is actively promoted to local community members, and appropriate training is delivered to ensure ongoing community use of the facility.

Importantly, the three different areas of telecommunications considered above (shared phones, Internet and teleconferencing) should not be considered in isolation. Rather, organisations such as BIMA should work with government and local communities to develop an **integrated communications system** that includes all of these components, as well as addressing issues such as training, promotion and sustainability. Only by developing an integrated approach to communications in regions such as Cape York will facilities be appropriately located and widely utilised within individual communities.

3.3.4 Training and skills development

It is recommended that a targeted approach be taken to skills development and identification of skills gaps and impediments to use of telecommunications in local communities. As part of the development of integrated communications systems for individual communities or clusters of communities, training needs should be a key component and should inform the telecommunications solutions developed for each community.

Developing telecommunications infrastructure, then seeking expressions of interest for training and skills development funding, will not be as effective as working directly with local communities to identify skills gaps at the planning stage. Delivery of training should occur using appropriate Indigenous trainers, with a focus on retention of skills within communities and development of local community capacity.

3.3.5 Community champions

It is agreed that local community champions will be essential in promoting ongoing use of telecommunications services. In many cases, RIBS operators or other individuals in communities are already playing key roles as providers of community information and promotions of local services. These individuals need to be identified locally and supported in engaging their local communities to ensure ongoing use of telecommunications services.

3.3.6 Culturally appropriate content and recording and archiving of culturally significant material

Localised and culturally appropriate content development will ensure both the engagement of remote Indigenous community members, and the preservation and sharing of Indigenous language and cultural knowledge. Once again, it is recommended that development of programs to increase localised and appropriate content is not left until after new infrastructure is established in communities. Rather, this should be a parallel process, where communities can become actively engaged in suggesting funded projects that develop culturally appropriate content, while at the same time addressing other communications needs in their community.

Having programs such as this in place (such as projects that record and archive culturally significant material) will ensure greater community ownership of telecommunications services that are implemented, will complement training and skills development programs that may be put in place, and will ensure greater initial and ongoing use of Internet (as well as videoconferencing services).

3.5 Innovation and flexibility

Communities such as Aurukun, in Cape York, are already developing an effective model that ensures community needs are being met in the area of communications, local information is actively shared, and significant cultural material is being recorded and archived. By co-locating the local library, radio station and Internet facility, a communications 'hub' has been established in close proximity to the local council offices is accessed by a large proportion of the community. In conjunction with BIMA and government agencies, local youth and adults are receiving communications training and working on projects that record local knowledge, as well as address issues such as health and domestic violence.

This integrated and holistic approach to communications within a community works well, as opposed to other communities where Internet and other facilities are under-utilised because of their location, inappropriate management or lack of engagement with, and ownership by, the local community.

It is suggested that Backing Indigenous Ability work with organisations such as BIMA to develop innovative, integrated and whole-of community communications systems that meet community needs, rather than delivering telephone, Internet, and teleconferencing facilities in isolation, and without incorporating training and content development needs of communities into an all-encompassing communications plan that is supported by the local community.

3.6 Funding

It is recommended that a select grants funding approach be used, with the starting point for allocating funding a needs analysis that looks at the development of an integrated communications system for communities, on an individual, cluster or regional level.

For example, BIMA could work with government and a group of communities (such as all Cape York communities) to develop a clearer understanding of their needs in terms of:

- Need for and location of a shared community phone
- Need for and location of Internet and videoconferencing facilities
- Promotion of uptake of these services
- Current impediments (cultural or skills-based) preventing use of any existing telecommunications services
- Training and skills development needed to ensure ongoing use and maintenance of telecommunication services
- Potential programs that could be funded to develop appropriate content

The result of this consultation process would be an integrated communications solution for each community and the region as a whole, which could be used as the basis for a grant-based funding program. In this way, telecommunications services put in place would be:

- Integrated at both a community and regional level
- Responsive to clearly identified community needs
- Best-placed to ensure demand aggregation, engagement with industry and effective utilisation of existing local resources and infrastructure
- Owned and driven by local communities with the support of key community figures and potential 'community champions'
- Supported by identified programs for skills development and training
- Appropriate to each community, and aligned with content development projects that will ensure strong community uptake and ongoing usage

4.1 Culturally appropriate delivery of services

As outlined above, organisations such as BIMA possess the combination of skills, communications knowledge and community linkages to ensure acceptance and ownership of telecommunications technology to aid sustainability within Indigenous communities. By working with government, Indigenous community groups and industry, organisations such as BIMA are best placed to ensure communications systems are developed in a way that actively engages Indigenous communities in the planning, development and implementation stages of introducing or improving telecommunications technology.

By investing strongly in the community engagement and planning phases of this program, the Australia Government will ensure that any funding spent on Indigenous telecommunications through the Backing Indigenous Ability program will:

- Meet the needs of individual communities
- Be accepted and owned by local communities
- Be widely used and sustainable
- Be used to develop greater local community capacity, develop valuable and culturally appropriate content, and benefit Indigenous communities into the future