A response to the Backing Indigenous Ability Discussion Paper

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This paper has been prepared by three members of the ICT & Remote Capacity Building research program at Charles Darwin University. (Please visit www.cdu.edu.au/inc) This program supports and researches Indigenous uses of ICT for sustainable livelihoods in remote communities, so is fundamentally interested in the government initiatives towards Backing Indigenous Ability.

We have briefly addressed some of the key questions from the BIA paper in notes below. The fundamental points which we wish to make are:

1. *Telecommunications are fundamental to the sustainability of livelihoods in remote places. We assume that it is in the nation's interest to have both Indigenous and nonIndigenous people in remote and very remote contexts, living on, knowing, caring for, sharing, and keeping alive the knowledge about their land.*
2. *The success of government interventions like BIA will depend upon a successfully negotiated congruence between the vision of Indigenous people to keep their families, land and cultures healthy into the future, and the quality/type of telecommunications infrastructure and support provided.*
3. *Indigenous and nonIndigenous people currently are in wide agreement about the need for a move from welfare dependency (including CDEP) to more productive lifestyles (which will inevitably involve 'hybrid economies' where both local/traditional and national/global resources are produced and exchanged). Telecommunications initiatives will be best supported when they are tailored specifically towards the development of sustainable culture, education and microbusiness.*
4. *A major obstacle to the development of useful collaborations between governments (and industry) and Indigenous people is the failure to understand or negotiate the scale at which responsibilities and accountabilities are agreed. There is a problem with the unexamined notion of communities. Indigenous communities (like global communities) transcend geographical and bureaucratic boundaries, and we need a complex definition of community which allows us to negotiate with Indigenous people. The engagement of telecommunications 'champions' will succeed if they are set up to represent small constituencies which do not necessarily reflect scales at work in Local Government*

3.1 Identified needs

Q2 How can the design and delivery of Backing Indigenous Ability be optimised to achieve long term sustainable quality telecommunications solutions for Indigenous communities?

1. *By looking more closely at the politics of scale in Aboriginal life. Communities are too often defined at the Local Government level, rather than the clan, family, or traditional interest group level. We need to find ways of negotiating appropriate scales for the delivery and accountabilities over telecommunications. This is a crucial issue.*

2. *By supporting the initiatives which are already happening on the ground in Indigenous communities (eg the use of telecommunications to support the move from welfare to sustainable livelihoods, the use of telecommunications to keep the remote tracts of land healthy and protected, and the use of telecommunications to keep alive traditional knowledge, religious and cultural practices). See initiatives: www.cdu.edu.au/inc*

3.3.1 Shared community phones

Q3 Should the installation of community phones into Indigenous communities be regarded as a priority under Backing Indigenous Ability?

Yes, phones and internet connectivity.

Q4 Is it appropriate to use regional agents and ICCs to identify communities in need of community phones and to assist them in an application process? How else could priority communities in need of community phones be identified?

Smaller communities (including homeland centres) and the complex traditional alliances which make them workable often don't in practice have representation through OIPC and regional agents, such as Resource Centres and Community Councils. Unless they are contacted directly, using appropriate intermediaries they remain outside of the loop.

Q5 Is it appropriate to use an application process to identify a need for a community phone? If so, what should be the key elements of the application process? What are the alternatives to using an application process?

No, this would assume knowledge of how these processes work and application process skills which some small communities may not have. Again, appropriate intermediaries may be needed reflecting traditional governance structures. Application processes would be appropriate if systems were set up for groups at small and large scales of traditional organizations to understand and take advantage of the application process, and to make claim to and be recognised as valid constituencies.

3.3.2 Public Internet access

Q7 Are hub communities the appropriate location for implementing public access Internet facilities? If so, how best can hub communities be prioritised as appropriate locations for new Internet access?

There is crucial research work to be done finding ways to match the optimum (cost effective) ways of delivering telecommunications infrastructure with the optimum ways of Indigenous social organization being given access and accountability for their use.

Our research has shown that community-level access is not the most productive way of organising knowledge management or the development of sustainable livelihoods in remote places using telecommunications. People want to determine their own scales of access and maintain technology at the family level.

Public access in hub communities may be an appropriate place to start, but ultimately Indigenous people will only make best use of telecommunications if they are enabled to make telecommunications decisions which are at levels which reflect traditional rather than governmental scales. See: http://www.arnhemweavers.com.au/mapuru.htm

Q8 Should ICCs, regional agents or other assistance be used to identify communities with a need for Internet facilities and assist them in an application process? How else could priority sites for Internet facilities be identified?
See Q4

Q9 Is it appropriate to use an application process for communities to identify a need for Internet facilities? If so, what should be the key elements of the application process? What alternative process could be used?
See Q5

Q10 Once implemented in a community, how best can the use of the facilities be encouraged? What arrangements such as Shared Responsibility Agreements or other local or regional agreements should be used for communities to support the installation and maintenance of Internet services?
This is a research question. It should not be assumed that the answers are out there just to be gleaned. Research components need to be included in any funded programs.

Q11 Are there more innovative models of delivering Internet access to Indigenous communities?
A CDU PhD research project in Ramingining will be exploring and supporting emerging Indigenous models for delivery and support of telecommunications. This project will document both problems and potential solutions.

3.3.3 Videoconferencing
Q12 Are PC-based webcam videoconferencing facilities appropriate for Indigenous community needs? What parameters should be set for deciding when dedicated videoconferencing facilities need to be implemented into sites? What size of community is appropriate to receive videoconferencing facilities in the context of sustainability?
Our research has pointed to the usefulness of videoconferencing in tele-interpreting, education (both teaching about Indigenous languages and culture and e-learning), and in negotiations over resources (water, access to land, mining etc). Web-based communication appears to be cheap and workable, and Apple computers more user-friendly and robust.

Rather than community size per se, the most functional unit is any group who have already identified needs for the technology. This could be individuals currently employed as, for example, interpreters and family groups developing microbusinesses.

Q13 What factors are contributing to the low use of videoconferencing facilities in many communities?
- *Lack of access and awareness of support for maintenance.*
- *Huge lack of awareness of videoconferencing per se.*

The availability of computers for web-based videoconferencing at the family and small group level would greatly increase the use of this technology.
Some of the uses which are being trialled in our work have been
- *teaching traditional language and culture on line for university courses*

- *tele-interpreting for medical, legal and police work.*
- *cultural awareness training (for government bodies, mining companies etc)*
- *remote participation in negotiations with government (mining companies etc) over resources*

Q14 Should ICCs, regional agents or other assistance be used to identify communities with a need for videoconferencing facilities? How else could priority locations for videoconferencing facilities be identified?
No, not only regional agencies. Videoconferencing capabilities should be supported at the level of the home computer. The cultural and economic applications of these technologies need to be negotiated in the context of collaborations to ensure sustainable livelihoods in remote communities.

They should also be set up in the health clinics, police stations and community councils.

Q15 What can be done to ensure that videoconferencing facilities introduced into a community are widely used? For example, how should the appropriate location of videoconferencing sites be decided?
Technology in public spaces in Indigenous communities often become appropriated, along with the spaces, by one or two local families, to the exclusion of others. Community-level Knowledge Centres are a good example or this tendency. Family-level governance is much stronger and more representative than community-level, therefore cheaper more portable systems operated at the more local level would be preferable. This would also enable much smaller homeland communities to benefit from the technology.

Q16 Is it appropriate to use an application process for communities to identify a need for videoconferencing facilities? If so, what should be the key elements of the application process? Should communities need to establish a certain level of demand for the facilities as part of the application process?
Individuals, families and small groups should be encouraged to apply for assistance in establishing web-based telecommunications capability. The applications should be carefully negotiated by people (champions?) who are familiar with both the technical and the socio-cultural-political contingencies.

3.3.4 Training and skills development
Q18 How best can skill gaps be identified? Is it appropriate to use the ICCs, community champions and regional agents to identify priority areas for training and skills development in the area of telecommunications? How else could training and skills development needs of communities be identified?
Skills development and training are best identified when groups of Indigenous people, wherever they are, are invited to form their own alliances to work together to articulate and implement their own vision for a sustainable future. This vision, in our research experience involves Indigenous peoples' ambition to:

- *access, live on and care for traditional land and the religious and cultural practices which ensure them*
- *move from welfare (CDEP etc) to sustainable livelihoods*

- *become accountable for their lives and resources at the level of the extended family rather than the whole community.*

Q19 What types of training and skills development sessions on telecommunications are appropriate and how should these be implemented? Are different approaches required for different age groups? What flexible or innovative approaches could be undertaken to identify and deliver training and development sessions?
Long-term in situ programs supervised by traditional governance structures properly negotiated with governmental and industry partners. We have had success with training workshops which combine learning to use the technology with developing microbusiness models and talking about the sustainability of traditional knowledge, language and culture.

Q20 Is a grants program an appropriate way to fund communities to deliver training and skills development sessions within accountability guidelines?
Yes, provided you can carefully negotiate a definition of community with each interest group.

Q21 How could communities support appropriate training and skills development programs?
By making sure that the training is fully in accordance with aspirations for sustainable livelihoods. The level at which the Indigenous groups develop their strategies for sustainability will be the best level for them to support the delivery of training and skills development. This of course requires strenuous negotiation.

Q22 What obstacles exist for the successful delivery of training and skills development?
Too often skills are delivered for their own sake, or for the sake of delivering VET courses rather than for particular purposes (eg business, communication) already identified by groups who would be much more receptive to training. Research has shown that training in the context of work is much more likely to succeed.

3.3.5 Community Champions

Q23 Are community champions an appropriate way to engage the community and assist them in using telecommunications technology? For what size of community would a community champion be appropriate? Would every Indigenous community with a phone, Internet or videoconferencing facility need access to a local champion?
Our work has seen the emergence of the new role of 'champions' in a number of contexts. Our experience would suggest that the identification and support of champions succeeds insofar as

- *the champions are already truly able to speak on behalf of an identified interest group*
- *have already shown an interest in critically examining the potentials of telecommunications technology for that groups.*
- *have some experience in negotiating with outsiders on behalf of their constituency.*

Q24 What roles could community champions play within communities?
Within the complex constituencies they represent, champions should:

1. *be trained to some level of proficiency in the operation of the telephones and hardware and software upon which the community depends.*

2. *be a notified contact point for any negations between government and the constituency they represent*
3. *conduct ongoing negotiations within the community, particularly with community elders, to evaluate and anticipate and report on telecommunications and negotiate accountabilities*
4. *be supported to take on other roles (as paid consultants) such as helping people in the community set up family-level microbusiness, e-learning and teaching etc.*
5. *negotiate skills development and training with RTOs and others.*

Q25 How could community champions be identified within regions and communities?
As already indicated Champions need to represent functional groups that reflect Indigenous political structures, and these groups need to identify their champions. It seldom works in reverse.

Q26 What would be the best way to engage and compensate community champions for their role and how could their performance be monitored and assessed?
See Q24

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

Q27 What models of delivering increased culturally appropriate content to the Internet could be introduced under Backing Indigenous Ability?
The key is to focus upon delivering culturally appropriate capabilities, rather than content. Culturally significant content which is produced by any active knowledge community should take priority over content which is accessed from outside. The content which is made available by BIA should be selected by the participants, rather than delivered by the outside organization. Processes should be set up which enable this.

Q28 How could a grant or funding model to encourage development of culturally appropriate content be structured? What are the benefits and risks of the models?
The model should support collaborative approaches to funding applications with governance and accountabilities negotiated with particular Indigenous and other groups.

Q29 Will the ability to digitally record and archive culturally significant material encourage usage of Internet services?
Yes, if the ability to do so is tied to the ongoing sustainability of Indigenous livelihoods in often very remote places. This largely involves peoples' ability to use the archived material actively in communicating through the Internet, both within and beyond their own cultural groupings.

3.3.7 Demand aggregation

Q30 What funding approaches could be adopted to encourage the recording and archiving of culturally significant material under Backing Indigenous Ability?
In each community, putting the technology into the hands of people who are already exploring the use of telecommunications is the starting point. They will naturally form and

reproduce traditional networks through which some of the material they produce is available to the outside world, and some is of use in keeping strong traditional cultures, languages, and knowledge about the environment. Once people have control over digital resources at their own scale of governance, they will be able to make good use of them.

3.5 Innovation and flexibility

Q35 What are some innovative means of service delivery to provide telecommunications improvements to Indigenous communities?
See Q42 below.

3.6 Funding
Q37 How should funding be provided under Backing Indigenous Ability?
Our experience suggests that the best value for money is through collaborative ventures engaging Indigenous people who want to achieve a particular goal to work with researchers into capacity building, technology, and knowledge and skill transmission. These ventures are useful if they

- *result in permanent and publicly observable changes to the capacities and sustainability of the communities which they engage*
- *produce useful (generalisable, transferable) research outcomes*

Q38 What type(s) of funding provision best suit each program element?
Small, wide-spread, properly negotiated, publicly and collaboratively evaluated.

4.1 Culturally appropriate delivery of services
Q41 Ability in a culturally appropriate manner, what should be done to enable acceptance and ownership of telecommunications technology to aid sustainability within Indigenous communities?
The main method is to work with a variety of constituencies, and find people with the background and authority to be champions for their group. Examples of this process in action include

- *Mapuru weaving, see: http://www.arnhemweavers.com.au*
- *Mapuru Cooperative, see: http://www.arnhemweavers.com.au/mapuru.htm*

Q42 What are some best practices in engaging communities in the planning, development and implementation stages of introducing or improving telecommunications technology?

- *Negotiating and working directly with family and clan groups as defined by those groups, not outside structures, eg projects outlined at www.cdu.edu.au/inc.*

- *Participatory Research conducted by researchers with long-term relationships with such groups. eg a current PhD project at CDU (2006-2009) will be exploring and supporting emerging Indigenous models for delivery and support of telecommunications in Ramingining. This project will document both problems and potential solutions.*

4.2 Industry

Q43 How can telecommunications services delivered to Indigenous communities become operationally and financially sustainable and remain sustainable beyond the life of the package?

By providing those individuals and family groups already engaging with microbusiness with access to reliable IT and support services.

Q45 How could telecommunications industry participants be encouraged to form partnerships with Indigenous communities? What form might these arrangements take?

One strategy should include allowing Indigenous access to already existing programs such as teleinterpreting - a service currently only available in nonIndigenous languages.

5.2 Using existing infrastructure

Q50 How can existing infrastructure and services in communities be used to provide access to a wider range of uses and users from the community?

The suggested cooperation with schools is appropriate and important.