

## CLOSING THE GAP REFRESH



### Response of the Indigenous Remote Communications Association



IRCA acknowledges the traditional custodians of the lands on which we work. We pay respect to Elders past and present.

**April 2018**

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This submission is made by the Indigenous Remote Communications Association (IRCA) following sector consultation. It is expected that some radio services, RIBS and RIMOs will make individual submissions in which case the IRCA Submission should not be taken to displace those submissions.

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### **About the Indigenous Remote Communications Association**

The Indigenous Remote Communications Association (IRCA) is the peak body for Indigenous media and communications. It was founded in 2001 as the peak body for remote Indigenous media and communications. In late 2016 it transitioned to the national peak body for First Nations broadcasting, media and communications.

Up to 105 Remote Indigenous Broadcasting Services (RIBS), 33 additional licensed retransmission sites across Australia, 8 Remote Indigenous Media Organisations (RIMOs) and 28 urban and regional First Nations radio services are eligible for representation by IRCA.

### **About the First Nations broadcasting and media sector**

First Nations broadcasters are not-for-profit community organisations providing a primary and essential service to their communities. They reach nearly 50% of the Australian Aboriginal

and Torres Strait Islander population, but are prevented from providing a primary radio service to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples due to a lack of funding.

First Nations broadcasters and media producers also connect non-Indigenous communities with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and culture, developing greater understanding and building stronger relationships.

The sector:

- Comprises:
  - Radio services able to reach around 320,000 First Nations people, including around 100,000 very hard to reach people in remote Indigenous

communities, or approximately 47% of the First Nations population.

- A wide range of First Nations news and current affairs services including:
  - National Indigenous Radio Service (NIRS) and its National Indigenous News and Weekly News-in-Review
  - Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association's news service, including its Strong Voices program.
  - Koori Radio's news and current affairs programming
  - NITV News and Living Black
  - Print media including Koori Mail, National Indigenous Times, Land Rights News
- A regional satellite TV service reaching 240,000 remote households and a free to air national TV service.
- Over 230 radio broadcast sites across Australia.
- Is a multimillion dollar industry with over 35 First Nations community owned and managed not-for-profit media organisations.
- Holds the capacity to be a preferred supplier for all government messaging to our communities.
- Is the most relevant and appropriate service with the highest listenership, community engagement and local ownership of all media services.
- Is delivered in the first language of many remote peoples.
- In remote communities, is the most reliable and ubiquitous radio and media services.

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## IRCA Recommendations

The Indigenous Remote Communications Association (IRCA) commends the Australian Government on undertaking this much needed review and refresh of the Closing the Gap framework. IRCA asserts that an adequately resourced First Nations Media industry can play a critical communications & awareness raising role to help close the gap on Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander disadvantage. Additionally, there is a need for Indigenous Digital Inclusion as a critical enabler to address many of the other Closing the Gap targets.

In response to the review questions, IRCA makes the following key recommendations:

1. Governments need to Close the Gap in funding of First Nations led-solutions.
2. Government needs to Close the Gap in engagement of Governments with First Nations peoples through properly funding representative national peaks, representative bodies, and government/sector forums.
3. Government needs to Close the Gap in the inclusion of First Nations leaders in decision making by establishing a First Nations Policy government authority led by First Nations policy makers.
4. Government messaging to be channeled through First Nations broadcasters with local customization of content specific to local needs and issues.
5. First Nations groups be positioned as the key designers, deliverers and evaluators of targets and measures for reduction of systemic barriers to the social inclusion of First Nations peoples.
6. Place based programs should be encouraged; First Nations community organisations, such as First Nations broadcasters to be supported to design and deliver services that strengthen communities across a range of social inclusion measures.
7. Indigenous Digital Inclusion needs to be included in Closing the Gap initiatives.
8. The Australian Government, State and Territory Governments recognise First Nations groups as the best placed, in terms of cultural understanding and engagement, to design, deliver, coordinate and evaluate Closing the Gap initiatives.
9. First Nations broadcasters and media organisations be recognised as key partners in designing and delivering Closing the Gap communications and community engagement.
10. Employment opportunities in First Nations broadcasters and media organisations be expanded through increased funding for positions and training.



## Response

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### 1. Overarching comments

The situation of many First Nations people in terms of health, education, wellbeing, and social and economic well-being remains at unacceptable levels of deprivation. The Indigenous Remote Communications Association (IRCA) welcomes the move therefore to review the Closing the Gap program and its targets in light of outcomes that show only three in seven targets is on track.

The statistics behind the targets present a disturbing contemporary picture of the situation of First Nations picture in Australia:

*“Despite making up 3% of the population, First Peoples comprise 27% of the nation’s prison population, making Australia’s Indigenous incarceration rates the worst in the world.*

*Imprisonment rates are even worse for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, who represent 50 per cent of the youth prison population.*

*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women make up 33 percent of the female prison population in Australia. Of these, 90% of have been victims of violence or sexual assault, and 80% are mothers. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are 32 times more likely to be hospitalized due to family violence than their non-Indigenous counterparts.*

*The most recent statistics on life expectancy reveal the gap between First Peoples and non-Indigenous Australians is at 10.6 years for males and 9.5 years for females.*

*The national rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out of home care is 9.8 times the national average. 50% of our people have a disability. Despite widespread criticism, the paternalistic Northern Territory Intervention is continuing under the guise of the Stronger Futures policy. It has led to over-policing in our communities, quarantining of 50% of welfare, the forced participation in work for the dole schemes which pay individuals far less than an average award rate, and the perpetuation of stigma against us.”<sup>1</sup>*

It is time to not only ask questions about why the Closing the Gap targets are proving so difficult to achieve, but also to ask questions about how Governments works with First Nations people and communities.

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<sup>1</sup> National Congress Intervention at the United Nations. Address by Jackie Huggins. Media Release 24 April 2018. National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples.

Whilst health, education and employment programs and their associated targets are important for many First Nations people to move out of poverty, policy implementation must not be assimilationist policy in disguise.

“In fact, we have fallen back, lacking clarity in current policy objectives — are they for assimilation or for recognition of Aboriginal people having the right to cultural difference and preservation? This matters. As a senior Aboriginal leader put it to me, some Aboriginal parents resist education because they don’t want their children to stop being blackfellas. The implied assimilationist tone of much policy debate is a barrier to achieving the educational and employment objectives we all, Aboriginals included, have.” *Productivity Commission 2012*<sup>2</sup>

It is critical that systemic barriers to participation and engagement of First Nations people with education, health and employment are removed. One step to this is the proper and long term funding of First Nations health providers, revisioning of an educational sector to become genuinely inclusive of First Nations children, and a strong and effective social program that addresses structural racism within the health, education and employment sectors.

It is welcome therefore to read in the Closing the Gap Discussion Paper that:

“Australian governments acknowledge they need to work differently with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.”<sup>3</sup>

What is not welcome, is the continued implication that it is government that is solely responsible for the *design* and *delivery* of health, education and social programs. First Nations people are positioned simply to *identify priorities*:

“To that end, Australian governments have committed to work in genuine partnership with Indigenous leaders, organisations and communities, to identify the priorities that will inform how governments can better design and deliver programs and services, to close the gap.”<sup>4</sup>

This is not genuine partnership. First Nations people must be fully engaged in all aspects of design and delivery, as well as evaluation, for there to be a genuine partnership.

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<sup>2</sup> Productivity Commission 2013, Better Indigenous Policies: The Role of Evaluation, Roundtable Proceedings, Productivity Commission, Canberra

<sup>3</sup> <https://closingthegaprefresh.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/resources/ctg-next-phase-discussion-paper.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

At the very same time that Governments have given focus to Closing the Gap targets to increase the engagement of First Nations people, the reshaping of Indigenous funding into the Indigenous Advancement Strategy failed to engage in any real sense with First Nations service delivery organisations and communities.

“The Indigenous Advancement Strategy offered the rhetoric of working with Indigenous communities but failed, from the onset, to engage Indigenous communities and organizations operating at the coalface of service delivery. There wasn't a consultation process that offered Indigenous people the opportunity to participate in the development of the new reforms in Indigenous policy.” (Inala Wangarra. Submission to the Senate Select Committee on Commonwealth Indigenous Advancement Strategy Tendering Processes.)<sup>5</sup>

In the first round of funding, First Nations organisations comprised only 45% of the funded organisations. Many Aboriginal-owned organisations were forced to close down as a result of no longer being funded through this transition. Recommendation 3.114 of the Senate Select Committee’s recommendations addressed this issue noting that First Nations organisations provide wider benefits than just the direct services they provide:

“The committee recommends that future selection criteria and funding guidelines should give weighting to the contribution and effectiveness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations to provide to their community beyond the service they are directly contracted to provide.”

This is supported by the Social Return on Investment study of First Nations broadcasting conducted in late 2017<sup>6</sup>. Key findings of that study demonstrating the benefit of funding First Nations owned community organisations, including:

- Indigenous Broadcasting Services provide much more than radio – they are community assets that contribute to strengthening culture, community development and the local economy.
- The activities Indigenous Broadcasting Services undertake are tailored to the specific needs of the community which helps build trust amongst the community.
- Indigenous Broadcasting Services are achieving a range of social returns on investment, heavily informed by their context, and value flows to a variety of stakeholder groups.
- Indigenous Broadcasting Services are contributing towards more of the Government’s priorities than is currently realised.

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[https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Senate/Finance\\_and\\_Public\\_Administration/Commonwealth\\_Indigenous/Report](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Finance_and_Public_Administration/Commonwealth_Indigenous/Report)

<sup>6</sup> <https://pmc.gov.au/resource-centre/indigenous-affairs/more-radio-community-asset-social-return-investment-analyses-indigenous-broadcasting-services>



Overall the study found that for every dollar invested in First Nations broadcasting and media, \$2.87 of cultural, social and economic value is returned.

It is important that Governments genuinely take on board the effectiveness of First Nations organisations as both designers and deliverers of services.

We will expand on these comments in our specific responses that now follow.

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## **2 How can governments, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, and businesses work more effectively together? What is needed to change the relationship between government and community?**

### **2.1 Policy actions: decision making reform**

Governments need to work genuinely and congruently with First Nations representative bodies to:

- Identify the ways in which social inclusion<sup>7</sup> for First Nations peoples can be best achieved.
- Identify the systemic barriers to participation in education and employment, and engagement with health providers.
- Co-design social inclusion programs.
- Prioritise program delivery by suitably experienced and capable First Nations organisations.
- Fully fund programs at least on a five-year period, and preferably over longer periods (using formative evaluation methods throughout the program duration).
- Use First Nations researchers in a co-design and co-implementation model to evaluate program delivery.
- Support capacity and governance development in First Nations organisations.

Targets need to be set for government itself as part of Closing the Gap to change the way in which Governments works with First Nations organisations and communities. We need to Close the Gap between Government and First Nations peoples and communities in their understanding of each other in a genuine way.

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<sup>7</sup> We take social inclusion as being the “multidimensional aspects of people’s wellbeing, including all the capabilities that make a life worth living — health, education, housing, security, labour conditions, self-respect, role in decision-making, income etc - and the interdependence and interaction of these dimensions.” Productivity Commission 2013, Better Indigenous Policies: The Role of Evaluation, Roundtable Proceedings, Productivity Commission, Canberra  
<http://www.pc.gov.au/research/supporting/better-indigenous-policies/better-indigenous-policies.pdf>

Government commitment to refreshing the Closing the Gap program is welcome but other policy commitments are needed at the Government level. Such commitments from Government to proper funding and inclusion of First Nations people in decision-making forums would contribute significantly to resetting the relationship between Government and First Nations peoples. Important policy reform actions<sup>8</sup> would include:

1. Closing the Gap in funding of First Nations led-solutions, by:

- Restoring, over the forward estimates, the \$534 million cut from the Indigenous Affairs portfolio in the 2014 Budget to invest in priority areas outlined in the Redfern Statement; and
- Reforming the Indigenous Advancement Strategy and other Federal funding programs with greater emphasis on service/need mapping (through better engagement) and local First Nations organisations as preferred providers.
- Securing national funding agreements between the Commonwealth and States and Territories (like the former National Partnership Agreements), which emphasise accountability to First Nations peoples and drive the implementation of national strategies

2. Closing the Gap in engagement of Governments with First Nations peoples through their representative national peaks, by:

- Funding key national elected representative bodies including all relevant First Nations peak organisations and forums; and
- Convening regular high level ministerial and departmental meetings and forums with relevant representative bodies, peak organisations and forums.

3. Closing the Gap in inclusion of First Nations leaders in decision making by establishing a First Nations Policy government authority (or like) that:

- Is managed and run by senior First Nations public servants;

*“The relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and governments is strained. The goodwill, forgiveness and openness generated by the Apology to the Stolen Generations and the Close the Gap commitments have been undermined by the Indigenous Advancement Strategy and its associated funding cuts, the defunding of the Congress, and the lack of genuine partnership and listening to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, highlighted through the dismissal of the Uluru Statement.”*  
National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation  
<http://www.naccho.org.au/close-the-gap-reflections/>

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<sup>8</sup> These are informed by the Redfern Statement. [https://nationalcongress.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/The-Redfern-Statement-9-June-\\_Final.pdf](https://nationalcongress.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/The-Redfern-Statement-9-June-_Final.pdf)

- Brings together the policy and service delivery components of First Nations affairs and ensures a central unit of expertise.
- Strengthens the engagement for governments and the broader public service with First Nations people in the management of their own services.

### Recommendations

1. Governments need to Close the Gap in funding of First Nations led-solutions.
2. Governments need to Close the Gap in engagement of Governments with First Nations peoples through properly funding representative national peaks, representative bodies, and government/sector forums.
3. Governments need to Close the Gap in the inclusion of First Nations leaders in decision making by establishing a First Nations Policy government authority led by First Nations policy makers.

## 2.2 Policy actions: First Nations media as key partners in positive messaging & engagement.

The First Nations broadcasting and media sector is well positioned to communicate government messaging in effective forms, in language where appropriate, and in ways that better connect with First Nations peoples. It is also an effective means of engagement for hearing First Nations perspectives and suggestions/solutions for addressing local issues. First Nations broadcasters reach nearly 50% of First Nations peoples in Australia. They are highly trusted and are a preferred channel for receiving government information. In remote communities local First Nations radio rates highly as shown through the 2016 Remote Indigenous Media and Communications Survey<sup>9</sup>.

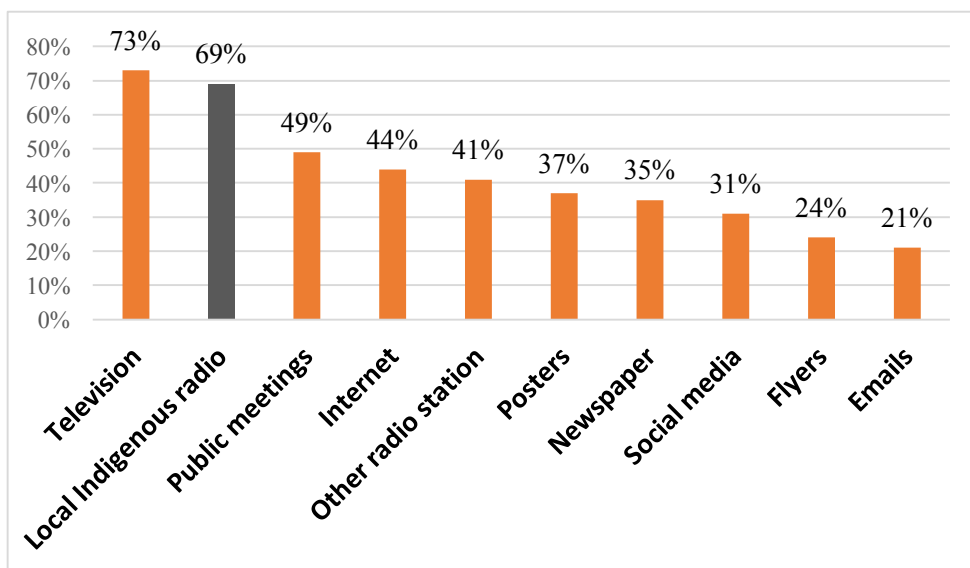


Figure 1 Sources of government information in remote Indigenous communities

<sup>9</sup> <https://irca.net.au/projects/indigenous-communications-and-media-survey-2016>

## 2.3 Localisation as a success factor in positive government messaging

First Nations broadcasters and media producers are not just conduits for centralised government messaging, but have been proven to be most effective when involved in the development and production of locally targeted messaging.

The National Indigenous Ear Health Campaign of 2011-2013 is a case in point. The evaluation<sup>10</sup> of the program noted the following:

“The development and implementation of media partnerships as part of the National Indigenous Ear Health Campaign [was] a unique approach which enabled community media organisations, including Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander broadcasters and media producers, to build effective partnerships with local communities and health services in order to develop and deliver highly effective ear health social marketing strategies to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities.”<sup>11</sup>

The evaluation studied the effectiveness of the program in taken up of health services, identifying a range of positive outcomes for ear health including parental initiative in seeking health services:

“Those exposed [to the Campaign] were more likely to take their child to have their ears checked when they did not have symptoms compared to those not exposed to the campaign. Specifically, 70.4% of those exposed to the campaign said they had taken their child to have their ears checked in the last 12 months when they did not have any signs or symptoms, compared to only 43.7% of those not exposed.”<sup>12</sup>

Relevant factors contributing to the success of the program, as noted in the evaluation<sup>13</sup>, were:

- Community media organisations have the trust and confidence of the community
- The approach led to the development of local, culturally appropriate solutions
- Success was based on developing effective local partnerships
- A comprehensive approach to health promotion was provided
- Capacity-building of media organisations was evident
- The partnerships provided access to a national distribution network of Indigenous radio stations and local community media organisations

Remote broadcasters were also active producers of positive messaging in the Remote Schools Attendance Program of 2015<sup>14</sup>. Radio content included getting to school on time

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<sup>10</sup> Cultural and Indigenous Research Centre Australia. (Evaluation of the National Indigenous Ear Health Campaign: Final Report. Sydney. 2013)

<sup>11</sup> *ibid* p64

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.* p84

<sup>13</sup> *ibid* p64-65

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.irca.net.au/projects/remote-schools-attendance-radio-project>

messages in language, shout outs to schools, jingles, schools shows and outdoor broadcast (OBs). Content was themed under:

- Be ready for school
- Communities Support School
- Kids Love Reading
- Kids Love School

Further information about the program and content from the program can be found at <https://www.irca.net.au/projects/remote-schools-attendance-radio-project>

### **Recommendation**

4. Government messaging to be channeled through First Nations broadcasters with local customisation of content specific to local needs and issues.

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## **3. How could the Closing the Gap targets better measure what is working and what is not?**

### **3.1 General remarks**

Whilst the SMART (Specific, Measureable, Achievable, Relevant, Time Bound) may provide a useful framework to support measurement, the key issue in improving measurement is the involvement of First Nations organisations in leading the design of relevant measurement and evaluation tools.

The Closing the Gap targets are framed in the terms of the deficits many First Nations people experience due to the impact of colonisation, dispossession and intergenerational trauma. The statistics behind the targets are disturbing and the situation must be improved urgently.

Nevertheless, the targets mask the issues arising from the systemic racism embedded in much of Australian society. These issues cannot be addressed without a broader attitudinal change across our society. For example, a young man gaining a Year 12 qualification may be unable to gain employment due to the negative stereotypes about First Nations people that infuse Australian society. So one target may be achieved but the purpose for achieving that outcome is undermined by social barriers. In another example, a young mother may want her child to attend school every day, but the child is shamed due to not having a uniform as a result of poverty, and further bullied for his/her Aboriginality. School attendance falls off, and the achievement of a Year 12 qualification

is compromised. Another young woman may gain a job and use her first pay to buy up a week's supply of food. The next day she comes home from work to find all the food taken because she hasn't been able to secure her home. She stops going to work and returns to welfare.

The Closing the Gap targets are so difficult to meet because the issues of dispossession, intergenerational trauma and poverty that lead to deficits in health, wealth and education, are "wicked problems". Wicked problems are complex and multifaceted problems, that are by their nature resistant to linear problem – solution - remediation approaches. Gaining an understanding of the wider factors in the perpetuation of First Nations disadvantage is the primary work needed to identify holistic responses and identify appropriate measures.

Improvements in Year 12 achievement, gaining employment, moving out of poverty, engaging in early childhood education, etc will not happen to the extent needed without a multidimensional approach to setting targets and the measuring of program outcomes. Positively framed messaging that values Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities are needed to change societal attitudes.

It is a credit to the many non-Indigenous and First Nations people who have delivered programs that have led to the improvements that have been made. To take improvements further the leadership of First Nations people as designers, deliverers and evaluators is needed to overcome the systemic barriers to achieving better outcomes for First Nations people.

### **Recommendation**

5. First Nations groups, be recognised as the key designers, deliverers and evaluators of targets and measures for reduction of systemic barriers to the social inclusion of First Nations peoples.

## **3.2 First Nations broadcasting**

First Nations broadcasting has recently been studied through a Social Return in Investment (SROI)<sup>15</sup> lens. This approach identifies values and strengths rather than deficits and creates a positive framing for the work of community organisations.

The approach also analyses the connectedness of services to wider social inclusion outcomes and in this case analysing the place-based outcomes of the three studied

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.irca.net.au/about/social-value-study-2017>

organisations.

For example, Umeewarra Media in Port Augusta provides a radio service and meets its targets of the number of hours of broadcasting and production. However, the SROI was able to identify a significant return on investment (4.3:1) through it being an Aboriginal organisation that responds to the needs of the community within the bounds of its core business. The SROI identified<sup>16</sup> that Umeewarra is “an essential service that strengthens community:

- By providing a trusted communication platform, Umeewarra keeps the Aboriginal community of Port Augusta and surrounding towns connected and informed about issues that matter to them.
- Its activities not only serve community communication needs but also strengthens their connectivity and resilience and are highly valued by stakeholders.
- Umeewarra cultivates a culturally safe space, both on air and at their studios, where the Aboriginal community feel they belong. This enables them to support the community to connect to one another, to those they’ve lost touch with and to social services, as well as to support them through grief and into employment.
- Umeewarra has built the community’s trust through more than 30 years of operation, which allows it to have the impact it does for the community.
- That trust is enabled by Umeewarra being an Aboriginal owned and operated organisation, and being an active member of, and responsive to, the needs of the community”.

The SROI indicates the value of place-based analysis, yielding a multi-faceted view of what is working and how it works.

First Nations broadcasters are place based and well placed to work with local communities to enhance employment, training and social inclusion opportunities. They are highly valued by their communities as shown in the 2016 Remote Indigenous Communications and Media Survey.

1	For positive Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stories 77%
2	Hearing about own people and community 67%
3	For the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander focus in programs and news 56%
4	Hearing people talk in own language 56%
5	Supports local employment 51%
6	Feel proud when listening 51%

*Table 1: Reasons for First Nations people listening to remote First Nations radio*

<sup>16</sup> <https://irca.net.au/sites/default/files/files/ibs-umeewarra-media-sroi-summary.pdf>

Measuring outcomes at national and State/Territory levels is obviously useful for gaining a big picture view of progress in addressing deficits. However, measuring local outcomes arising from funding and other program implementations is equally important. Such measurements can yield information at a multi-dimensional level, demonstrating a range of positive outcomes, and revealing important information about what is working and why.

The First Nations broadcasting SROI measurement of social value identified that place based, responsive First Nations broadcasting organisations:

### **Strengthen communities**

First Nations broadcasting and media provide a voice for their communities. They are uniquely placed to hear and share communities' strengths, priorities and concerns. In providing news and information to a community, they provide the community with the information they need.

### **Strengthen culture**

First Nations broadcasting and media are keeping culture alive and preserving it for future generations through their broadcasts, archiving and film productions. They are benefitting their First Nations listeners, their communities and the Australian public at large.

### **Strengthen employment**

First Nations broadcasters and media offer flexible working arrangements in culturally safe environments. They create work opportunities that are aligned with the interests of individuals. Individuals are proud to be working for these organisations.

## **Recommendation**

6. Place based programs should be encouraged; First Nations community organisations, such as First Nations broadcasters to be supported to design and deliver services that strengthen communities across a range of social inclusion measures.



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## 4. What indicators should governments focus on to best support the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples? Should governments focus on indicators such as prosperity, wellbeing or other areas?

### 4.1 General comments

The IRCA response above indicates our position that social inclusion targets measures should be included, as well as targets and measures in the wider Australian society aimed at reduction of systemic barriers to enhancing social inclusion and addressing the high levels of poverty experienced by many First Nations people.

### 4.2 Indigenous Digital Inclusion

IRCA has previously corresponded with the Australian Government as well as State and Territory Premiers and Chief Ministers on the matter of Indigenous Digital Inclusion. Our position is that Indigenous Digital Inclusion be adopted by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) as a key performance measure within the Closing the Gap framework. Digital Inclusion is a critical enabler for building agency, accessing online services, and addressing other CTG targets in education, health, employment.

The *2015 Dropping off the Edge*<sup>17</sup> report notes that low family income is a central factor in shaping individual and family life opportunities, with research evidence indicating that family income is interwoven with the influence of other forms of disadvantage (p.6). The report includes lack of Internet access as one of 22 forms of disadvantage (pp.7-8). However there is currently no effective measurement in Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander communities to determine the full extent of the digital divide.

A research report published in *Family Matters* (2013: 33)<sup>18</sup> notes that:

*Early childhood is a particularly sensitive period in which economic deprivation may compromise children's health and employment opportunities. ... In the case of welfare policies, imposing sanctions and other regulations that deny benefits to families with very young children would appear to be particularly harmful. Not only do young children appear to be most vulnerable to the consequences of deep poverty, but mothers with very young children are also least able to support themselves through employment in the labour market.*

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<sup>17</sup> Vinson, T and Rawsthorne, M (2015). Dropping off the Edge: persistent communal disadvantage in Australia. Jesuit Social Services/Catholic Social Services Australia. Viewed at [http://k46cs13u1432b9asz49wnhcx-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/0001\\_dote\\_2015.pdf](http://k46cs13u1432b9asz49wnhcx-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/0001_dote_2015.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> Duncan, G, Kalil, A, Ziol-Guest, K (2013). Early childhood poverty and adult achievement, employment and health. *Family matters*, no. 93, 27-35. Viewed at <https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/fm93c.pdf>.

Consequently, *Indigenous Digital Inclusion* needs to be part of any approach aimed at reducing disadvantage with a specific practical aim of preventing loss of welfare benefits through reporting breaches, as occasioned by lack of access to MyGov. This practical aim is about maintaining the minimum financial resources critical for engagement in education, as well as health services access and adequate housing arrangements.

With many essential services now moving online, the proposal also addresses the need for affordable connectivity and digital skills to access other services such as telehealth, weather, video-judicial hearings/compliance and emergency information as well as online education, employment, banking, shopping and library services.

Digital literacy is becoming a day to day need for all citizens. This is of particular importance for people living in remote Indigenous communities. Digital inclusion is increasingly being described as a human right.

### **Recommendation**

7. Indigenous Digital Inclusion needs to be included in Closing the Gap initiatives.

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## **5. Should Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture be incorporated in the Closing the Gap framework? How?**

This question seems to miss the point that any improvement in First Nations social inclusion outcomes must be based in culture and identity. We have already noted above the need for First Nations people and organisations to be the lead designers, deliverers and evaluators of Closing the Gap actions. Culture is held within that very approach.

Culture is not an add on, nor is it static, nor is it the same across Australia. Culture is everyday life, knowledges and skills. It is a means of giving people a sense of identity and purpose.

Without the recognition that culture is indivisible from how programs and services are designed, delivered and evaluated at local levels, progress will continue to disappoint.

### **Recommendation**

8. The Australian Government, State and Territory Governments to recognise First Nations people are best placed, in terms of cultural understanding and engagement, to design, deliver, coordinate and evaluate Closing the Gap initiatives.

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## **6. What do you think are the key targets or commitments that should be measured in a refreshed Closing the Gap agenda?**

IRCA encourages Australian Governments to work at local/regional levels to support the development of First Nations led management plans. Targets are also needed to reduce systemic barriers to social inclusion.

Improved life expectancy, health and education outcomes will necessarily be part of such plans, but there needs to be other targets that address the multidimensional factors that are either enablers or barriers to progress. These targets will vary from place to place, and a national approach – a one size fits all approach – will not work.

In moving forward on the Closing the Gap Refresh, IRCA encourages the Government to commit to:

- Properly funding First Nations peak and representative bodies in relevant areas, including broadcasting and media bodies, and to bring them to the table as leaders in the development of Closing the Gap regional plans and measures.
- Recognition of First Nations people and community organisations as the primary designers, deliverers and evaluators of Closing the Gap initiatives.

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## **7. The role of First Nations broadcasting and media in supporting Closing the Gap initiatives**

First Nations broadcasters and media producers have a vital role in communication of educational, informative and civic content. First Nations broadcasters and media producers are local. They customise and contextualise content for the cultural, linguistic and social needs of listeners and viewers. They are a unique, powerful and trusted primary service, owned and managed by First Nations organisations.

As such they are able to:

- Provide trustworthy content that provides positive messaging around enhancing the economic, health and social situation of First Nations people.
- Provide content in diverse media forms – radio, video/TV, print and online.

They have:

- Strong connections with government through funding under the Indigenous Advancement Strategy and preceding funding programs.
- Have a strong track record in delivering on government programs such as the STI Awareness Program, Indigenous Ear Health Program, and the Remote Schools Attendance Program.

They provide significant employment and training opportunities in local areas, with employment building on cultural knowledge and skills in a meaningful way.

They deliver significant outcomes to community and Government, as demonstrated in the 2017 Social Return on Investment Study<sup>19</sup> and are already, according to the study, “... contributing towards more of the Government’s priorities than is currently realised”.

### **Recommendation**

9. First Nations broadcasters and media organisations be recognised as key partners in designing and delivering Closing the Gap communications and community engagement.
10. Employment opportunities in First Nations broadcasters and media organisations be expanded through increased funding for positions and training.

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## **8. Conclusion**

IRCA recognises the commitment of Australian Governments to address First Nations disadvantage and commends it for seeking pause to review and recommit to a Closing the Gap Refresh in the light of experience. We commend the Australian Government for seeking wide feedback through the Discussion Paper.

IRCA welcomes this opportunity to respond to the Closing the Gap Refresh Discussion Paper. We are keen to be part of discussions that provide an opportunity for consideration of the useful and important role that First Nations broadcasting and media have in strengthening First Nations communities and addressing disadvantage.

We thank you for your consideration of this submission.

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.irca.net.au/about/social-value-study-2017>