

## **Concerns over funding for Australian Indigenous languages – Key points**

### **“Closing the Gap” includes languages but no new funding?**

The new National Agreement on Closing the Gap includes support for Australian Indigenous languages, yet no new funding has been committed yet by the Commonwealth government.

### **Why is there so little support for languages compared to other sectors?**

In comparison to other areas, funding allocated to Australian Indigenous languages is remarkably low. Sectors such as sports, arts, foreign aid or the wine industry receive much more substantial support – some of them hundreds of millions of dollars.

### **How would \$20 million per year for 150 languages make a difference?**

The Indigenous Languages and Arts (ILA) program commits to “around \$20 million per annum” for Indigenous languages and this amount supports the operation of a network of Indigenous language centres around the country but also includes provisions for projects undertaken by Indigenous arts organisations. Australia has over 150 Indigenous languages in need of support. Given this, a portion of \$20 million represents an almost negligible amount of funding.

### **No increase in funding for 5-10 years is leading to cuts in services**

ILA funding has not been increased over the past 5 years despite rising costs. Language Centres around the country are struggling to provide urgently needed language support and are on the brink of cutting down on personnel and services.

### **Languages are sidelined in the shadow of Arts**

The \$20 million of ILA funding include support for arts projects around the country despite the arts sector having access to multiple funding sources otherwise. The sidelining of Indigenous languages must be addressed by creating a funding program specifically dedicated to languages.

### **Language is not luxury – it does make a difference in people’s lives**

Language is a crucial part of human identity, which is strongly reflected in research that shows the positive impact of language learning on people. Better mental health, higher school attendance, and lower crime levels are just some of the effects of language learning.

### **Continued underfunding means ignoring an opportunity**

Neglecting these benefits will mean to ignore the enormous potential of Indigenous language use. A stronger commitment of support for Australian Indigenous languages will ultimately result in less spending on social issues and trigger an economic benefit for all.

### **Australia must take its role for the Decade of Indigenous Languages seriously**

The low level of actual support for languages is in contradiction to Australia’s promotion of the 2019 *International Year of Indigenous Languages* and the upcoming 2022-32 *Decade of Indigenous Languages* declared by UNESCO and supported by the Australian Government. It is time to step up and show Australia’s serious commitment to our Indigenous languages.

# Concerns over Australian Government funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages

The new National Agreement on Closing the Gap (also discussed here: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-07-30/closing-the-gap-targets-indigenous-agreement/12421866>) features Outcome 16: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and languages are strong, supported and flourishing. As no new funding appears to have been allocated to the *Closing the Gap* agenda at this point, this article highlights the current situation around the support for our Indigenous languages.

There are three general areas of concern which need to be addressed by the Australian Government:

1. The low proportion of funds made available for Indigenous languages when compared to other Indigenous cultural support programs administered by the Australian Government such as the Indigenous Advancement Strategy and the Indigenous Visual Arts Industry Support program. The low level of funding for Indigenous languages is even more stark when compared to support provided by the Australian Government for Indigenous programs administered in other portfolios and community-based programs more generally.
2. The stagnation of funding levels for Indigenous languages over time, effectively resulting in reduced funding.
3. Dilution of the importance of Indigenous programs delivered through the Office of the Arts as a result of the former Department of Communications and the Arts portfolio relocating to the new Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications.

In addition to these concerns, I will highlight the relevance of Indigenous languages for the Australian economy, meriting their prioritisation not only morally but economically. I will also outline some positive impacts that an increase in funding would have.

## **1. The overall allocation of funds to support Australia's Indigenous languages is negligible in comparison with funds allocated to other areas.**

While \$20 million may seem significant at first glance, this must be put into perspective:

- a) \$20 million is the overall annual budget allocated as grant funding, which includes not only support for Indigenous languages but also Indigenous art forms other than visual arts, such as theatre, music, dance and literature (see Section 3).
- b) Australia has over 150 Indigenous languages in need of support. When funding for the Indigenous art forms is taken into account, this leaves an even smaller proportion of funding available to capture, revitalise and maintain all these languages.
- c) In comparison with funding allocated to other sectors supported by the Australian Government, \$20 million does not represent a major spend (see Table 1). This is especially the case given the immense significance of Indigenous language for employment, education and social wellbeing including health (see Section 4).

This reveals a disturbing lack of prioritisation of Australia's Indigenous languages, particularly with the recent UN International Year of Indigenous Languages (2019) and the impending UN Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-32). This clear lack of funding will have grave consequences for long-term strategies in the area of Indigenous advancement and *Closing the Gap* (see Section 4).

**Table 1: Examples of government spending in various sectors<sup>1</sup>**

Sector/area	Annual spending in million dollars	Source
Foreign Aid	\$4,200m	2
Example: PNG	\$519m	1
Example: Vanuatu	\$42m	1
Arts	\$749m	3
Sports	\$385m	4 / 5
Tourism (2015-16)	\$179m	6
Indigenous Rangers	\$102m	7
MH370 plane search (one-off, not annual)	\$90m	8 / 9
Asylum seeker support	\$52m	10
Wine export (export and regional wine support package)	\$50m	11
COVID-19 ('coronavirus') national communications campaign	\$30m	12
Indigenous Languages and Arts program	\$20m	13

## 2. Funding for Indigenous language capture, revitalisation and maintenance has not increased for half a decade and is set to continue its stagnation

Since the ILA program commenced in 2015-16 there has been an annual average funding cap of \$400,000 allocated to the network of 20 Indigenous Language centres funded under the program. However, minimum and award wages have increased over 20% during the past 5 years, based on recommendations by the Fair Work Commission. As the salaries of largely Indigenous staff are increased, Indigenous Language centres are faced with two alternatives: reduce their staff numbers and the services they provide, or cut down on other expenses. This second option is virtually impossible, due to similar increases in costs in other areas – for instance, insurance premiums have

<sup>1</sup> Please note that these examples do not imply that funding allocated to those causes is unnecessary or inflated. I do not question that there are valid reasons for investing \$30m into developing a communication strategy for COVID-19, nor am I expressing concerns over foreign aid provided to island nations in the Pacific. The purpose of this table is simply to illustrate the scale of funding allocated to specific areas, and therefore to make clear where Indigenous language supports stands in relation to other areas.

The figures stated here have been obtained from various sources available online, and thus in some cases may not be completely up-to-date or accurate. However, they provide an indication of the relative proportions of spending by the Commonwealth government for selected sectors. Where available, figures were based on government websites and all sources have been identified as links below (in addition, excerpts are provided in a separate document).

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/2018-19-australian-aid-budget-summary.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://mobile.abc.net.au/news/2019-12-11/australian-government-arts-policy-arts-funding-dirty-word/11784596>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.sportaus.gov.au/media-centre/news/sport-australia-welcomes-major-boost-in-sport-funding>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ausleisure.com.au/news/federal-budget-includes-385-million-to-implement-sport-2030-plan/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.anao.gov.au/work/performance-audit/strengthening-australias-tourism-industry>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.kimberleyecho.com.au/politics/indigenous-rangers-get-700m-funding-boost-ng-s-1999326>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/10/mh370-malaysia-has-spent-only-a-fraction-of-what-australia-has>

<sup>9</sup> <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/australia-to-spend-84-million-on-malaysia-airlines-flight-370-search/articleshow/35064748.cms?from=mdr>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/federal-budget-summary/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://rdaact.org.au/news/article/?id=australian-government-announces-50-million-regional-wine-export-and-tourism-package>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/24-billion-health-plan-fight-covid-19>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.arts.gov.au/what-we-do/indigenous-arts-and-languages/indigenous-languages-and-arts-program>

risen over 30% in the past 5 years. Ultimately, Indigenous Language centres are forced to reduce their staff and services, even at the same time as “community interest in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural expression through Indigenous languages and arts has significantly increased”.<sup>14</sup> The current ILA program guidelines for the “restricted competitive grant opportunity” limits applications to the same average cap of \$400,000 per annum as in 2015 - for up to the next five years.

It is astounding that any organisation in any sector can be expected to keep expenses at the same level over a period of up to 10 years. Indigenous Language centres have been struggling with this situation for the past five years, and are now expected to work on the same low amount of support for another five. In functionally reducing the already low amount of funding that language programs receive, the Australian Government does not inspire confidence in the community that the capture, revitalisation and maintenance of Indigenous languages, and the benefits this work provides to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, is important. The continuing low priority of Indigenous languages by the Australian Government will have grave long-term consequences in the fields of Indigenous education, health, and wellbeing.

### **3. Language is sidelined under the umbrella of Arts.**

The machinery of government exercised earlier this year to include the previous Department of Communications and the Arts portfolio with the new Department of Infrastructure, Transport, regional Development and Communications (DITRDC) has been met with widespread concern. Amongst them, this merger has seemingly removed the importance of Indigenous languages and arts by not including the Office for the Arts portfolio in the title for the new department.

Table 1 (above) shows that the Arts sector already receives \$749 million in funding through a range of channels, including the Australia Council. With the recent focus on Indigenous languages both nationally and internationally, I question why there isn't a program with dedicated funding solely for the purpose of Indigenous language capture, revitalisation and maintenance. The ILA program extends to Indigenous arts, which dilutes the ability for the program to focus solely on the crucial field of Indigenous languages that continues to deliver the tangible benefits that work in this area brings to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It is not a level playing field for Indigenous languages revival and maintenance, which has no equivalent alternative source of funding when compared with the funding streams available for Indigenous arts

### **4. The importance of supporting Australia's Indigenous languages**

Research commissioned by the Commonwealth government has shown that there are strong links between language use, wellbeing and socio-economic development.<sup>15</sup>

- “Aboriginal people who speak Indigenous languages have markedly better physical and mental health, are more likely to be employed, and are less likely to abuse alcohol or be charged by the police.”

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<sup>14</sup> Source: ILA program update – March 2020 distributed by e-mail

<sup>15</sup> Source: *Our Land Our Languages*, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia (2012).

- “Better outcomes in literacy, English proficiency, learning in all subjects, school attendance, and a reduction in antisocial behaviour. Aboriginal youth in urban and regional areas are more likely to attend school if they speak an Indigenous language.”

These findings would suggest that an investment in Indigenous languages will result in less spending on social issues and ultimately trigger an economic benefit for all. The recently released 2020 National Indigenous Languages Report (NILR) lists further benefits of Indigenous language use in detail, confirming the relevance as well as the social and economic benefit of Australian Indigenous languages. Among other aspects, the report asserts that the health of Indigenous languages and the way to their recovery strongly depends on substantial support.<sup>16</sup>

Data from the 2016 Census shows that Indigenous communities which are supported through the work of an ILA program funded Indigenous Language Centre or language project follow an upward trend in language revival or revitalisation in terms of the number of speakers.<sup>17</sup> This shows that the ILA program has been successful in reviving languages, and thus in contributing to these hugely significant positive impacts for Indigenous people. Yet, as discussed above, the program is currently constrained by the limitation of low, and decreasing, funding.

An e-mail message circulated by the ILA program in March 2020 highlighted the fact that the CEO of AIATSIS and Co-Chair of the UN steering committee IY2019, was recently in Mexico representing Australia at two events: a high-level event ‘Making a Decade of Action for Indigenous Languages’; and the ‘International Congress on Endangered Languages at Risk’. The Australian Government’s in-principle commitment to endangered languages is re-assuring to Indigenous language groups. However, the beneficiaries of the ILA program hope that this commitment is now practically implemented by action, in the form of an increased level of support rather than a decline.

Overall, the Australian Government has made major investments into Indigenous wellbeing and continues to do so. However, the recent update on the *Closing the Gap* strategy revealed that after 10 years of continued support for Indigenous Australians, the improvement of their life situations is still far behind expectations.<sup>18</sup> Given the significant positive impact of language on wellbeing, as stated above, it is inexplicable that much more funding is not diverted to the support of Indigenous languages.

## 5. What could be done with additional funding

As a result of stagnating levels of funding support, Indigenous Language Centres around Australia are operating in survival mode. Additional funding would allow successful language programs to expand while they still have the opportunity. The 2020-21 ILA open competitive grant opportunity addresses the need for expansion to some extent, but it does not cover the shortfall in existing and increasing costs. Furthermore, its limitation to a maximum of \$100k per annum per project does not provide sufficient coverage for larger scale projects.

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.arts.gov.au/what-we-do/indigenous-arts-and-languages/national-indigenous-languages-report>

<sup>17</sup> Knut J. Olawsky (2017). An evaluation of Census data in relation to Australian Indigenous languages. Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring. Article circulated through ILA networks and available upon request.

<sup>18</sup> a) <https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/reports/closing-the-gap-2018/sites/default/files/ctg-report-20183872.pdf?a=1>

b) <https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/reports/closing-the-gap-2018/executive-summary.html>

Recent discussions in the media referred to the \$100 million sports community grant program, which has come under extensive scrutiny.<sup>19</sup> What could Indigenous Language Centres across Australia do with such an amount? Funding at this scale would multiply the available funding by fivefold, securing a substantial expansion of Indigenous language services across the nation. To name Mirima Language Centre in Kununurra as an example, a major increase would have the potential to result in significant growth, involving:

- avoiding cuts to existing services, as funding does not cover current expenses
- employment of several more Indigenous language workers
- substantial training and upskilling activities for Indigenous employees, including an apprenticeship program
- a comprehensive language vitality survey that will capture the status and needs of the language community for future growth
- development of additional bilingual radio programs
- expansion of digital technology for language teaching purposes
- the development of additional learning resources

As a result, the quantity and quality of language learning and subsequent revitalisation would increase significantly. Other language centres may have similar priorities.

## 6. Conclusion

I have shown that:

- The current funding provided to Indigenous language centres in Australia is negligible compared to other Indigenous sectors and programs, and programs across Australian Government portfolios more generally.
- The continued stagnation of funding is unrealistic and debilitating, a trend not observed elsewhere in the Australian economy.
- Lastly, by coupling Indigenous language support with Indigenous arts funding the government is devaluing language and ignoring its importance to Indigenous Australian's culture, health, education and wellbeing.

Australia's languages are in crisis and deserve to receive support through contingency resources. Investment would mean a higher expense over coming years, but would result in major progress with the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* in the long term, to the benefit of Indigenous Australians and Australia as a whole.

Recommendations in brief would include:

- The creation of a grant funding program specific to the capture, revitalisation and maintenance of Indigenous languages.
- An significant increase in available grant funding for Indigenous languages that reflects what is needed to deliver upon the new *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* outcomes, including Outcome number 16 detailed in Table 2 below, as well as aligning with Australia's successful participation in the UN International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2023-32.

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/bridget-mckenzie-defends-biased-100-million-sports-grants>

**Table 2<sup>20</sup>: Outcome 16 listed in the 2020 Closing the Gap agreement**

<p>Outcome 16</p> <p><b>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and languages are strong, supported and flourishing</b></p>
<p><b>Target 16:</b> By 2031, there is a sustained increase in number and strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages being spoken.</p>
<p><b>Indicators:</b></p> <p>Drivers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages categorised as strong</li><li>• Number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages being spoken</li><li>• Number and age profile of the speakers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, including children</li><li>• Proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who speak an Indigenous language</li></ul> <p>Contextual information:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people accessing Commonwealth funded language centres to maintain and preserve languages</li></ul>
<p><b>Disaggregation:</b></p> <p>Languages by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Traditional language and Kriol / Creole language</li><li>• Geographic area (jurisdiction, remoteness where possible)</li><li>• Strength of languages (according to Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) measures) including languages in the process of retrieval/revival</li><li>• Age</li><li>• Gender</li></ul>
<p><b>Data Development:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Measures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages being taught/transmitted/spoken in Aboriginal community settings and organisations, including Language centres</li><li>• Measures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages spoken in Aboriginal community settings, particularly in family life</li><li>• Measures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages being taught in early-learning, primary and secondary schools</li><li>• Other demographic measures of people who speak an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language</li><li>• Other economic opportunities that arise for people who speak an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language</li><li>• Measures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages used in media</li><li>• Alternative indicators that demonstrate growth and strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures</li><li>• Definition and measures of cultural enterprises that are associated with language growth and development Number of people employed as translators for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages</li></ul>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/national-agreement-ctg.pdf> (page 35)

## EPILOGUE<sup>21</sup>

This article was written before the magnitude of the COVID-19 pandemic became evident and I am aware that during these challenging times, Australia as a nation needs to prioritise the immediate wellbeing and survival of its citizens. The Australian Government's unprecedented response to this crisis demonstrates the extent to which support for people in need is possible and it is my hope that the fate of Indigenous language groups be recognised as an emergency, even though on a lesser scale than the imminent threat to our country's population as a whole. While authorities are currently distracted from most other matters for good reason, I pledge with them to treat funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages as a matter of urgency.

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<sup>21</sup> The author Knut J. Olawsky has liaised extensively with the local Indigenous community regarding the concerns raised. Dr Knut Olawsky has been managing the language revitalisation program at Mirima Language Centre in Kununurra since 2005. He has published widely on a range of topics relating to language documentation and revitalisation. Special thanks are extended to senior staff of the ILA program with whom extensive discussions over the contents of this article were held.