

Report on the review of the Indigenous Broadcasting Program

**Department of Communications,
Information Technology and the Arts**

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Introduction

The Australian Government's Indigenous Broadcasting Program (IBP) has supported broadcasting activities in urban, regional and remote Indigenous communities since 1987. During this period, Indigenous broadcasting has grown into a vibrant sector and the program now supports over 100 Indigenous community broadcasting services. The IBP allocated \$13.6 million in 2006–07 and \$14.0 million for 2007–08.

The Government also funds Indigenous broadcasting through the Community Broadcasting Foundation (CBF), with \$778 000 provided in 2006–07 for Indigenous program, equipment and special project grants.

In addition, the Government supports Indigenous broadcasting through projects under the Backing Indigenous Ability (BIA) initiative. The Government is providing \$3.3 million over three years from 2006–07 for the restoration of ageing radio infrastructure in remote Indigenous communities. It is also providing \$50 million over four years from 2006–07 to establish an Indigenous television service. This will facilitate the development and broadcast, through contracted service providers, of Indigenous television content such as news, children's and drama programs that reflect the diversity of Australia's Indigenous communities.

In April 2006 the Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, Senator the Hon. Helen Coonan, initiated a review of the IBP by releasing a discussion paper on the program. The review sought to canvass a national perspective of the program.

This report summarises the issues identified in the discussion paper and the consultation process, along with the proposed way forward in relation to each.

Part one: The consultation process

The Minister, Senator Coonan, initiated the review of the IBP with the release of a discussion paper on the program on 18 April 2006.

The Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (DCITA) hosted a public forum on the issues in the discussion paper in Canberra on 27 April 2006. It was attended by 57 representatives from Indigenous radio broadcasting organisations around Australia—including broadcasters, Remote Indigenous Media Organisations (RIMOS), peak bodies and associated industry bodies.

The review received 18 submissions by the closing date of 30 June 2006. This included a submission from the Australian Indigenous Communications Association (AICA) and 11 submissions from Indigenous broadcasting organisations, which mainly gave support to the AICA submission as well as providing their own perspectives. Five submissions were from individuals and one submission was received from the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS).

A list of submissions is set out in Appendix A of this report.

The discussion paper and the submissions received are available online at www.dcita.gov.au/indig/indigenous_broadcasting

Part two: The issues

Key issues canvassed in the review included:

- a set of principles for governing the administration of the IBP;
- proposals for a more equitable funding model for broadcasting services;
- a new operating model for RIMOs; and
- the elimination of overlaps between the CBF and the IBP.

Other issues included staffing and training in Indigenous broadcasting services, the role of peak bodies, Shared Responsibility Agreements (SRAs) and digital services.

The following sections provide a summary of the issues identified in the discussion paper and consultation process and the Government's proposed future direction to progress each issue.

2.1 Proposed governing principles for administering the IBP

Issue

The review proposed a set of governing principles to guide the administration of the IBP from a national perspective. These cover the scope of the IBP, concepts of equity and accountability in funding allocations and the need for sound administration in organisations receiving funding.

Overall, the submissions clearly supported the continuation of the program and gave general acceptance to the principles proposed in the paper.

Specific comments on the proposed principles are included in the context in which they were made. For example, comments on the question of the appropriate scope of the IBP are discussed in detail in section 2.14 below and are reflected in principle (a) below.

With regard to the principles covering funding and management arrangements, there was overall agreement on the need for greater equity in funding distribution within the IBP, but concerns were expressed about the details of the proposed process to achieve equity. These are discussed further in section 2.2 below.

Future direction

The principles proposed in the review received general acceptance. Some suggestions on improvements were adopted and incorporated in the revised principles, set out below, to form the future basis of the IBP.

Principles for administering the IBP

- (a) The program will assist broadcasting activity only. Non-broadcasting activity should be funded from sources other than the IBP.
- (b) Funding selections will be merit-based, within the guidelines and funding constraints of the IBP.
- (c) Funds are to be allocated fairly, having regard to national equity.
- (d) Where changes to the program result in altered funding to organisations, transitional arrangements will help manage impacts on those organisations.
- (e) The program will fund only organisations that are run on sound financial principles with appropriate governance practices in place.
- (f) The program will, as far as practicable, promote the provision of broadcasting services that meet the needs of all Indigenous people in the transmission area.
- (g) New services will be considered on a needs basis.

2.2 The funding model, including triennial funding

Distribution of funding

Issue

Indigenous broadcasting organisations work under different circumstances and in a range of different communities. However, the discussion paper noted a history of disparities in funding even for similar organisations and activities within the IBP. These inconsistencies have arisen as a result of different emphases and priorities given to broadcasting by various regional decision-makers.

The discussion paper argued that it is not equitable to continue with funding determinations that entrench historical disparities. It therefore proposed to shift the IBP to a more equitable and accountable funding model that achieves more equitable outcomes according to the number of Indigenous people receiving services.

The lack of a funding rationale and the resultant disparities was recognised by many respondents. For example, the Brisbane Indigenous Media Association (BIMA) stated that ‘radio stations cost a similar amount to operate regardless of audience size’ and that ‘the proposed funding model, by focussing on projections of Indigenous market size, does not take into account broadcast reach’.

PY Media argued that geographical differences, particularly remoteness and local health, economic and political circumstances, may result in different funding requirements.

Many submissions argued against the use of audience population, an option raised in the discussion paper, as a basis for determining appropriate funding levels. However, no viable alternatives were offered in submissions or by forum participants to achieve appropriate funding levels and minimise disparities.

Future direction

As no consensus on a specific model for more equitable funding emerged from the review, the Government will consult with the sector to develop a refocused IBP funding framework. The program guidelines issued in December 2007 will indicate the revised funding model to take effect from 2008–09. In the meantime, the process of some moderate rebalancing of funding will continue for 2007–08.

Development of a new, more equitable framework will include research into the costs of providing Indigenous broadcasting services in the areas in which they currently operate. Apart from taking into account a range of broadcasting-related costs, a new funding model could also reflect the level of services provided by recipient organisations—that is, IBP funding would be proportional to the range of activities undertaken.

It is recognised that these changes may affect the future levels of funding made available to some organisations. Any such changes will be phased in over a transitional period to reduce impacts and to allow organisations time to adapt.

Funding support

Issue

Most submissions argued for an increase in the overall IBP appropriation.

For instance, AICA argued in its submission that the IBP currently offers insufficient funding to adequately address Indigenous needs. AICA stated that ‘while we accept that the Indigenous sector is unlikely to achieve the same level of funding granted to SBS, AICA anticipates that the results of this review will demonstrate the massive funding deficiencies’ along with the need for ‘increased funding levels to achieve a degree of relativity’ with the SBS to meet the real demands of the Indigenous-broadcasting sector.

In another submission, Mr Jim Remedio proposed an ABC-like model to introduce a true network structure for Indigenous broadcasting.

Future direction

Currently, indexation is applied each year to IBP funding. In 2006–07 IBP funding amounted to \$13.6 million with \$14.0 million allocated for 2007–08.

The Government also provides some funds for Indigenous broadcasting through the Community Broadcasting Foundation (CBF). In 2006–07, funding to the CBF to support Indigenous program grants, equipment grants and special project grants amounted to \$670 722. IBP funding to the CBF for Indigenous broadcasting (which is

directed to the National Indigenous Radio Service (NIRS)¹) totalled \$107 150 in 2006–07.

As part of the BIA initiative the Government will support the National Indigenous Television Service (NITV)² with \$50 million over four years from 1 July 2006 to produce and broadcast diverse programming such as news, children's and drama programs that reflect the breadth of Indigenous communities.

A further \$3.3 million is allocated under BIA over three years from 2006–07 for the restoration of ageing radio infrastructure in remote Indigenous communities.

Other funding for the sector is provided through Australian Government programs such as the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme administered by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR).³

The Government notes the call from the sector for greater funding. The issue needs consideration in the overall budget context, as well as in the context of total Government funding for the Indigenous broadcasting sector and Government support for other community broadcasting activities throughout Australia.

Triennial funding

Issue

The need for multi-year funding was mentioned in a number of submissions as an approach that would enable Indigenous broadcasting organisations to commit to longer-term projects. It was argued that single-year planning leaves organisations in a state of uncertainty.

PY Media stated that as the funding body seeks three year strategic plans from its applicants then 'funding should match the planning'.

The Aboriginal Resource and Development Service (ARDS) noted that 'while ARDS understands the reason for not providing multi-year funding, it would be beneficial to new broadcasters to have an initial period of say three years where such funding would be guaranteed so that the goal of establishing the station and getting it running smoothly could be the main focus rather than to have to constantly search for funds'.

Future direction

The Government recognises that the opportunity for multi-year funding existed when the IBP was administered by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) and later by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services (ATSIS) and so will give further consideration to this matter.

¹ See section 2.11, p. 18

² See section 2.13, p. 20

³ See section 2.7, p. 15

Foundation funding

Issue

A proposal for an Indigenous Broadcasting Foundation was recommended by AICA and supported by Ng Media. Specifically, AICA recommended that the Government support the establishment of such a body ‘to fund, manage and administer the Indigenous Broadcasting and Communications industry.’

Future direction

The IBP is administered by DCITA through its central office in Canberra and its regional staff located in Indigenous Coordination Centres around Australia. It is expected that this administrative structure will continue as the Government implements the outcomes of the IBP review and promotes whole of government consistency with other Indigenous programs.

In addition, the Government’s policy is to support the CBF, which was established with the specific responsibility to solicit and distribute funds for the maintenance and development of community broadcasting in Australia. This includes specialist services for Indigenous, ethnic and Radio for the Print Handicapped broadcasters. The CBF grant advisory committees for special interest groups are informed by the views of relevant key stakeholders, communicated through sector representative organisations such as AICA.

By having a multipurpose and independent non-profit funding agency to cater for all community broadcasting, the CBF is able to achieve economies of scale that minimise administrative overheads and promote a consistency of approach across different elements of the sector. The Government therefore supports continuing the current arrangement of a single foundation catering for all of the community broadcasting sector.

2.3 RIMO / RIBS model

Issue

Currently, RIMOs undertake a range of operations—including providing operational and maintenance services for Remote Indigenous Broadcasting Services (RIBS) and retransmission facilities in their area. Services provided by RIMOs also include training, production of content and support for local video production, provision of radio services and paying of CDEP top-up wages. At present, there are six RIMOs funded under the IBP with a seventh being established.

RIBS are Indigenous broadcasters licensed under the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* to provide community broadcasting services in remote communities, enabling communities to have access to broadcasting services similar to those available to Australian citizens generally. Currently, there are 63 mainland RIBS, with 16 Torres Strait RIBS funded from sources other than the IBP.

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