



INTERNATIONAL DECADE OF  
INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES  
2022–2032



SUBMISSION TO THE  
**Next National Cultural Policy**

*Public Consultation | April 2026*

**“Language is living Country. It holds our law, our stories, our kinship and our way of being.”**

*IDIL Australia — National Body for Australia’s participation in the UN International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022–2032*

*Logo artwork: ‘Resurgence’ — Rachael Sarra (Goreng Goreng) & David Williams (Wakka Wakka) / Gilimbaa*

## 1. About IDIL Australia

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IDIL Australia is the national body guiding Australia's response to the United Nations International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022–2032). Operating under the guidance of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages Directions Group — comprised of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language champions — IDIL Australia exists to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are protected, celebrated and spoken now and for generations to come.

Our mission is grounded in the understanding that language is inseparable from culture, Country, law, identity, and wellbeing. The suppression of First Nations languages through colonisation has caused profound and ongoing intergenerational harm. IDIL Australia works to reverse these harms through advocacy, coordination, and community-led action across the full arc of the International Decade.

Australia's participation in the International Decade is guided by Voices of Country — Australia's Action Plan for the International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022–2032. IDIL Australia plays a central role in implementing and monitoring progress against this Action Plan.

We make this submission as an organisation committed to First Nations self-determination in language and cultural governance, and as a strong advocate for the alignment of Australia's cultural policy with international human rights frameworks, including the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

## 2. Overview

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IDIL Australia welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of the next National Cultural Policy. We write with a clear focus: First Nations language must be placed at the heart of Australia's cultural identity and policy framework — not as a symbolic commitment, but as a catalyst.

Language is not merely a subset of cultural activity. It is the original and continuing cultural infrastructure of this continent, and it is upstream of virtually every outcome that cultural, social, economic and justice policy is trying to achieve. The next National Cultural Policy has an opportunity to recognise this and to be the framework that gives that recognition structural form.

The evidence is unambiguous. Where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are strong and spoken, communities are healthier, children learn better, people participate more in economic life, and interactions with government systems are safer and more effective. Where languages are lost or suppressed, those pathways close. Language is not a 'cultural add-on' to these outcomes — it is core social infrastructure.

This submission identifies the reframing that must underpin the next National Cultural Policy, engages with the five pillars of Revive through that lens, and sets out the principles that should guide a legislative framework capable of securing language's role as a national policy lever — consistent with UNDRIP, Closing the Gap Target 16, and the practice of comparable nations.

## 3. Language as Catalyst

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Within government, and within the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, language has largely been treated as a stand-alone cultural target. Responsibility sits inside the arts portfolio. It is largely absent from health, education, justice, employment and social and



emotional wellbeing planning. The dominant framing is one of heritage, identity and recognition — accurate, but profoundly incomplete.

The evidence does not support that framing, and the outcomes reflect it. Targets 10, 11, 12 and 14 are off track and getting worse. The Productivity Commission's 2024 review attributes much of this failure to non-implementation of the Priority Reforms. IDIL Australia's position is that language is a missing link in that analysis — and that reframing it as a catalyst investment changes it from a symbolic commitment into a policy lever that opens progress across the whole National Agreement.

*"It's not just about language. It's about teaching our kids to be cultural beings, starting with language."*

**Clayton Cruse, Directions Group member**

## Language is upstream of every outcome

At any point that the system meets the person, language is operative:

- In health: language quality determines whether informed consent is obtained, diagnoses are understood, medication is taken, antenatal care is engaged, and mental health crises are responded to safely.
- In education: the match between home and school language is consistently shown to lead to better engagement, attendance, completion and post-education pathways.
- In social and emotional wellbeing: language carries identity, cultural continuity and community cohesion — the foundations of SEWB and suicide prevention.
- In justice: language quality determines bail outcomes, comprehension of charges, evidentiary integrity, sentencing context, custodial conditions and parole.
- In economic participation: the language sector is itself a significant industry — and language is a productive input to ranger, interpreter, cultural industries, screen and digital sectors where speakers hold a genuine comparative advantage.

## Language runs through all four Priority Reforms

The Priority Reforms under the National Agreement all engage language directly. This is not incidental — it is structural:

- Priority Reform 1 (Partnership and shared decision-making) requires that decisions are made together. Decisions made together require language access at the table.
- Priority Reform 2 (Community-controlled sector) treats ACCOs as the preferred service-delivery vehicle. Language centres are ACCOs. ACCHOs, ALSs, FVPLS and ACCO early-years and child-protection services rely on bilingual capacity to operate effectively.
- Priority Reform 3 (Transforming mainstream institutions) requires institutions to become culturally safe. Cultural safety without linguistic competence is incomplete — the operational core of cultural safety is communication.
- Priority Reform 4 (Data sovereignty) requires that data are governed in partnership. Language-use data and the language pathways to outcomes are precisely the data that need First Nations governance.



Treating language as a catalyst makes these connections explicit and actionable. Treating it as a stand-alone cultural target makes them invisible. The next National Cultural Policy can be the instrument that makes the reframing official.

## How language connects across the National Agreement

Target / Reform	Current treatment	Catalyst contribution
<b>Target 1 — Life expectancy</b>	Interpreter access framed as service-delivery detail, not policy	Reduces miscommunication-driven preventable mortality through bilingual workforce, in-language health communication
<b>Targets 2–3 — Birthweight &amp; early childhood health</b>	Linked to Birthing on Country but not to Target 16	In-language antenatal care; bilingual maternal and child health workforce
<b>Targets 4–5 — Developmental milestones &amp; preschool</b>	Implicit through SNAICC early-years policy; not framed as language investment	Language-nest and bilingual early learning; Elders and speakers recognised as educators
<b>Target 6 — Year 12 attainment</b>	Bilingual schooling treated as contested local issue, not national policy	Stable bilingual and first-language schooling; First Nations teacher pipelines; on-Country pathways
<b>Targets 7–9 — Employment &amp; economic participation</b>	Mostly absent	Direct language-sector employment; cultural industries; interpreter workforce; ranger and IPA programs
<b>Targets 10–12 — Justice</b>	Procedural treatment; ALRC recommendations largely unimplemented	Universal interpreter access; in-language legal information; Justice Reinvestment with language and culture as core elements
<b>Target 13 — Family violence</b>	FVPLS workforce unevenly funded	In-language disclosure, safety planning, FVPLS expansion, language-aware specialist responses
<b>Target 14 — SEWB &amp; suicide</b>	Language not an explicit funded element	Language as SEWB infrastructure; cultural continuity; on-Country programs integrated with ACCHO SEWB services
<b>Target 16 — Languages &amp; culture</b>	Siloed in arts portfolio; short-term grant cycles	Requires structural legislative reform — the foundational investment that makes all other connections possible
<b>Target 17 — Digital inclusion</b>	First Nations-controlled language technology underfunded	First Nations-led language tech, AI safeguards, in-language digital content as part of digital inclusion
<b>Priority Reform 1 — Partnership</b>	Language sector under-represented in policy partnerships	Language sector formally represented; First Languages Policy Partnership escalated
<b>Priority Reform 2 — Community-controlled sector</b>	Language centres treated as cultural-sector ACCOs only	Language centres recognised across health, education, justice and SEWB sector strengthening
<b>Priority Reform 3 — Transforming mainstream institutions</b>	Cultural safety framed without linguistic content	Linguistic competence requirements for police, courts, child protection, hospitals and schools



Priority Reform 4 — Data sovereignty	Embedded but uneven	Language-use data governed under IDS principles; language-investment outcomes tracked cross-portfolio
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## 4. Our Perspectives on the Five Pillars

IDIL Australia engages with all five pillars of Revive through the catalyst lens set out above. In each case, we identify how the next policy can deepen its commitment to language as both a cultural and a structural priority.

### 4.1 First Nations First

This pillar is foundational. IDIL Australia strongly supports its centrality and urges a significant deepening of commitment grounded in the catalyst framing.

Language carries knowledges held, shared and continually adapted — including song, ceremony, story, law, and connection to Country. Without language, culture is diminished in ways that no other cultural form can fully compensate for. But the next policy must go further than cultural recognition: it must explicitly acknowledge that First Nations language revitalisation is a structural investment with consequences across health, education, justice, wellbeing and economic participation — not an ancillary cultural consideration.

Current policy settings continue to treat First Nations languages primarily as a heritage matter rather than as a living policy lever. This framing must shift. The principle that “First Nations arts and culture are First Nations led” must be operationalised through governance mechanisms that place decision-making power firmly with First Nations communities and language bodies — moving beyond consultation toward genuine devolution of authority.

#### UNDRIP Alignment

*The Joint Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (2023) recommended that the Commonwealth Government ensure its approach to policy on matters relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people be consistent with UNDRIP. Articles 13 and 14 affirm the rights of Indigenous peoples to revitalise, use, develop and transmit to future generations their languages, oral traditions and cultural expressions — and require States to take effective measures to support this across all life domains. The next National Cultural Policy must be UNDRIP-consistent in both design and implementation.*

### 4.2 A Place for Every Story

Australia is home to more than 250 distinct First Nations language groups — one of the world’s richest concentrations of linguistic diversity. Yet most Australians have little or no exposure to the languages of the Country on which they live. This is both a cultural impoverishment and a missed policy opportunity.

The next policy should support initiatives that bring First Nations language into public and cultural life — through signage, place names, broadcasting, and arts programming — so that language is understood as part of the story of every Australian. This visibility also has a catalyst function: normalising First Nations language in public life reduces the cultural and linguistic distance that undermines service effectiveness across health, justice and education.

Any such initiatives must be developed and led by the relevant language communities and custodians. Access and participation must never compromise cultural authority and ownership.

### 4.3 Centrality of the Artist

Language workers — linguists, teachers, recorders, transcribers, songwriters, storytellers, interpreters and translators — are cultural workers. The next National Cultural Policy must explicitly recognise them as such, and ensure that arts sector career structures, fair remuneration frameworks and vocational pathways extend to encompass language work.

Many of Australia's most celebrated First Nations artists work in and through their languages. Supporting language revitalisation is supporting the conditions for First Nations artistic excellence. It is also building the interpreter and translator workforce on which courts, hospitals, schools and government agencies depend — another expression of language's catalyst role.

### 4.4 Strong Cultural Infrastructure

First Nations language centres are among the most important and most undervalued pieces of cultural infrastructure in this country. They hold irreplaceable recordings, documents and living knowledge, and they are the hub around which language revitalisation activities are organised. They are also, in the catalyst framing, a form of community-controlled service infrastructure — ACCOs that sit at the intersection of cultural, health, education and SEWB systems.

The next policy must commit to a sustained increase in recurrent support for language centres — operational funding that enables them to maintain staff, facilities, archives and programs across years and decades, not just to deliver short-term projects. Digital infrastructure is equally critical: documenting, storing and making languages accessible requires investment in archiving, metadata standards developed with communities, and accessible learning platforms, with clear protocols governing community ownership and access.

### 4.5 Engaging the Audience

Language revitalisation depends on audiences — people who hear, learn, sing, speak and celebrate First Nations languages. The next policy should support broadcasting and media in First Nations languages, language programs in schools and early childhood settings, and integration of language into major cultural events and institutions. The ABC, SBS and NITV have important obligations in this space that the next policy should reinforce.

Global engagement matters too. Australia's participation in the International Decade positions us within a worldwide movement for Indigenous language rights. The next policy should support cultural diplomacy that showcases First Nations languages as a source of national pride and international standing — led by and benefiting the relevant communities.

## 5. Recommendation: A Legislative Framework Grounded in Rights Principles

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The catalyst framing demands a structural response. Reframing language as a cross-portfolio policy lever is only meaningful if it is backed by a legal and governance architecture that is stable, adequately supported and First Nations-led. Australia's current policy settings — competitive grant rounds, short funding cycles, arts-portfolio siloing — are wholly inadequate to this task.



For over forty years the language sector has called for legislation. IDIL Australia does not prescribe the precise form. What we call for is a framework grounded in the principles of UNDRIP, consistent with Australia's commitment under Closing the Gap Target 16, and in line with the approach already taken by comparable nations.

### The UNDRIP Standard and Closing the Gap Target 16

*Articles 13 and 14 of UNDRIP affirm that Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalise, use, develop and transmit their languages across all life domains, and that States must take effective measures to support this — including in education, public services, and legal and administrative settings. Although Australia endorsed UNDRIP in 2009, these rights remain absent from domestic law. Target 16 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap commits all Australian governments to ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and cultures are “strong, supported and flourishing.” It is the only Closing the Gap target specifically focused on language and culture, and it recognises that language strength cuts across health, education, justice, employment and economic participation. Progress against Target 16 is directly contingent on the structural legislative reform IDIL Australia is calling for. The next National Cultural Policy must begin the process of closing the gap between Australia's stated obligations and the domestic legal reality that communities face.*

### What the Principles Require

Drawing on UNDRIP, the Closing the Gap framework and the practice of comparable nations, IDIL Australia identifies five core principles that any legislative framework must honour:

1. Recognition of inherent rights: legislation must formally acknowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples hold inherent — not granted — rights to their languages. These rights exist independently of government policy and the State is obliged to uphold them.
2. Rights in public life: the right to use First Nations languages in public services — including schools, courts, health services and government agencies — must be guaranteed and resourced, not merely permitted. This is the operational expression of the catalyst argument: language rights in institutions are the mechanism through which language generates better outcomes across every portfolio.
3. First Nations-led governance: strategic leadership, grant funding and policy decision-making must rest with an independent, community-controlled body — not with a government department. This is directly required by Priority Reform 2 and consistent with the UNDRIP architecture.
4. Stable, long-term commitment: any framework must embed a commitment insulated from short political cycles and calibrated to the multi-decade horizon that revitalisation genuinely requires. Language revitalisation cannot be delivered through 1–3 year grant rounds.
5. Self-determination in design: any legislative model must be developed through comprehensive community consultation and led by First Nations peoples and language bodies. This is the foundational expression of Priority Reform 1.

### International Precedent: What Comparable Nations Have Done

Australia is not without models. A growing number of comparable nations have enacted language rights legislation that embeds these principles in law. Their experience demonstrates what is possible — and the cost of delay.



Country	Legislative / Policy Approach
<b>Aotearoa New Zealand</b>	Te Ture mō te Reo Māori 2016 establishes Māori as an official language, creates an independent Māori Language Commission, and enshrines the right of Māori people to use their language in dealings with government. Per-capita investment in revitalisation significantly exceeds Australia's.
<b>Canada</b>	The Indigenous Languages Act 2019 (Bill C-91) formally recognises and affirms the rights of Indigenous peoples to reclaim, revitalise, maintain and strengthen their languages. It established the Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages as an independent body, committing the federal government to “adequate, sustainable and long-term funding.” The Act was developed through extensive consultation with First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities.
<b>Norway &amp; Sweden</b>	The Sámi Language Act (Norway, 1992) grants Sámi people the right to use their language in dealings with public authorities. Sweden's Language Act (2009) recognises Sámi as a protected national minority language. Both countries fund language centres and bilingual education at a level far exceeding Australian investment.
<b>Wales (UK)</b>	The Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011 established the Welsh Language Commissioner as an independent statutory body, imposes duties on public sector organisations to provide Welsh-language services, and requires Welsh Language Standards across hundreds of organisations. Welsh-medium education is publicly funded at all levels.
<b>Bolivia &amp; Ecuador</b>	Constitutional protections in both countries recognise Indigenous languages as official national languages alongside Spanish. Bolivia's 2009 constitution recognises 36 official languages; Ecuador's constitution affirms the right to intercultural bilingual education.

Australia is conspicuously absent from this list. Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Mexico, Canada, Norway, Sweden, Finland, New Zealand and South Africa all have legal or constitutional protections for Indigenous languages. Australia — home to one of the world's most linguistically diverse continents — does not. The next National Cultural Policy must begin to remedy this.

## 6. Conclusion

Language is both a cultural inheritance and a catalyst. It is upstream of health, education, justice, wellbeing and economic participation. It runs through every Priority Reform. It is the only Closing the Gap target that, if properly invested in, creates the conditions for progress across the majority of the others.

The next National Cultural Policy must reflect this reality. It must move language from its current position — a symbolic cultural commitment, siloed in the arts portfolio — to its proper position as a cross-portfolio policy lever and a national priority. That requires a legislative framework grounded in the five principles set out in this submission: inherent rights recognition, rights in public life, First Nations-led governance, long-term stability, and self-determination in design.

The Productivity Commission has identified non-implementation of Priority Reforms as a central driver of stalled progress under the National Agreement. Language investment —



structural, sustained, and First Nations-led — is one of the most direct ways to begin implementing those Reforms in practice. The next National Cultural Policy should say so.

IDIL Australia is available to discuss this submission further and to contribute to the development of the next policy. We also draw the Government’s attention to our 2026–27 Pre-Budget Submission, which sets out the detailed structural and governance proposals that would operationalise this reframing.



**Contact**

**IDIL Australia**

 | [idil-australia.au](http://idil-australia.au)

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*Logo artwork: 'Resurgence' — Rachael Sarra (Goreng Goreng) & David Williams (Wakka Wakka) / Gilimbaa*