Plain-text versions of video and report for Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Information Needs Study

Transcript of *Communique* video excerpt

**Dan Marsden:** After a short break, we’ll hear what Craig Young, Research Officer, had to say about the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander needs study findings.

**Craig Young:** The department has recently conducted a national research study on how to improve communication with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander customers. This study was a joint initiative with the Department of Human Service and Health, and involved 1,000 Indigenous Australians giving their preferences and opinions on the government information they received.

The report recommends that face-to-face contact should be used as much as possible.

The study also found that written communication should be expressed in clear, direct language, as much of the information we’ve produced in the past has been far too complex and bureaucratic.

Information products should also use local images, graphics and colour preferences, and include the involvement of local people in this process.

The department’s Aboriginal and Islander Liaison Officers, or AILOs, also received a big wrap as being one of the most effective ways of providing information to Aboriginal communities.

The department is currently considering ways to carry out the report’s recommendations, and will be selling the report to other departments, as well as interested organisations and individuals.

Excerpt from Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Information Needs Study

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SECURITY & DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES & HEALTH

*“Take the time to talk and listen…”:*

FINAL REPORT

AUGUST 1995

*- Prepared by –*

The Roy Morgan Research Centre Pty. Ltd.,

21 Torrens Street,

Braddon, A.C.T., 2600.

*Each department are going to have to put in the groundwork
to get that relationship with the community,
to establish some trust.
Take the time to talk and listen.*

*When you get out there it has to be bums on the ground.
And when you see those people walking away,
you know it’s not working…
There shouldn’t be fly in, fly out stuff.
I used to get jarred about that…
They appreciate down to earth people,
not leg in, leg out people.*

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Figure 1 Map showing regions where the Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Information Needs Study was conducted

Executive Summary & Recommendations

Introduction

In order to assess and improve the effectiveness of government communication and information strategies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people the Department of Social Security (DSS) and the Department of Human Services and Health (DHSH) determined that during 1994-1995 a major national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Information Needs Study would be conducted.

The study had two main components:

1. face to face interviews with over 900 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in over 70 communities throughout Australia;
2. 150 case studies in the form of in-depth personal interviews or focus group discussions with 'intermediaries' in key organisations and agencies, who deliver health and welfare services to indigenous people.

The range of service providers represented by intermediaries included: Land Councils; indigenous tertiary institutions or support centres; community health and medical councils, centres and services; youth activities, education and childcare services; indigenous media associations and resource production units; housing co-operatives; community and juvenile justice services; indigenous language centres; legal services; community councils; community resource and advisory services; state and territory government departments; and DSS, DHSH, ATSIC and other Commonwealth departmental indigenous liaison and field staff.

A team of 17 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander interviewers was employed to undertake the face to face interviews in communities. The interviewers were generally based in the regions they were asked to work in and were mostly from those areas themselves.

Structured interview schedules were used for the face to face interviews in order to isolate and measure the effect of targeted strategies on the recall, recognition and acceptance of information in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. A representative range of information products was used in the interviews as visual aids and prompts. Interviewers also probed for the preferred ways of receiving that information.

Semi-structured interview schedules were used for the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with intermediaries in order to determine the extent to which current information strategies are effective and appropriate and to ascertain preferences for the future.

During the course of the study, many of the issues raised, either directly or indirectly by interviewers, respondents, research staff or others were related to the concepts of representation and agency. That is, how indigenous people are portrayed and therefore perceived, who represents what to whom, on whose behalf and for what purposes all emerged as important and volatile issues.

This study grew out of the concern by DSS and DHSH to find ways to increase the representation of positive images in government information strategies in order to make those strategies more appropriate and effective in conveying information *to* indigenous people. What emerged through the course of the study highlighted the need for indigenous people to be offered the right to choose their own means of expression and to invent and propagate their own diverse assessments of what needs to be done.

The report considers in detail what these issues mean for indigenous people throughout the country. It presents a challenge to DSS, DHSH and other government departments to find ways to ensure that concerns about representation and agency in the relationship with indigenous people are considered seriously and responded to in appropriate and substantial ways.

The outcomes from the research will be used to assist decision-making about differences in product and media usage to be taken into account when preparing information strategies and will support the development of 'best practices' for disseminating social security, human services and health information to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Main Findings

The findings of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Information Needs Study reveal that the information needs of indigenous people are integrally bound up with much wider issues. These issues are related to overcoming deeply rooted discrimination and disadvantage, maintaining cultural traditions, achieving social justice and exploring the possibilities of being self-determining within the context of the Australian nation-state.

The most obvious challenge this represents for the Commonwealth Departments of Social Security and Human Services and Health is to find ways to increase the extent to which current information strategies reflect regional and local community needs, values, priorities and aspirations.

These findings reveal a widespread concern that not enough co-operation and collaboration occurs between departments, communities and community organisations.

There is a general perception that government information strategies and products are not sufficiently in tune with what is needed. More often than not this is because 'top down' approaches are used rather than approaches which allow for 'grass roots' involvement and participation in the design, development, production and implementation of information strategies and products.

The relationship between the provision of information about benefits and entitlements, program priorities and service delivery, and the realities they point to, has been shown to be problematic. Many respondents expressed concern about the difference between what a department offers in regard to information about services and what they invariably experience when they try to access those benefits or services. In some cases the mismatch is very stark, as for instance when a person has been encouraged to seek assistance at a departmental office and then encounters a harsh, forbidding information counter and departmental staff who relate to them in hostile or impersonal ways.

Most importantly, the findings of the study indicate the need for government departments to reconceptualise how they relate to indigenous people and their communities, not just in terms of information strategies but in the overall provision of programs and services.

Improving the Relationship Between Government Departments and Indigenous People and their Communities

Respondents provided very clear evidence of the need for the two departments to find ways to significantly improve their relationships with indigenous people. Much of the troubled history in the relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians has been mediated by government departments of one kind or another, under the 'protective' gaze and concern of 'welfare paternalism'. Indigenous people therefore tend to have a very deep mistrust of what departments claim to be doing on their behalf, or in support of their 'needs' .

The policy of 'self-determination' was meant to be the antidote to such paternalism, offering the opportunity for indigenous direction and control of the significant processes that impact on their lives. However, to date, examples of successful, self-determining processes are elusive and difficult to find in relation to government initiated or sponsored programs and services.

In this study, respondents repeated what has been said over the years about not being listened to, having lip-service paid to their requests for support, or dealing with imposed solutions, strategies and services which fail to address and meet their real needs and aspirations.

ATSIC, the government department responsible for directly responding to the challenge of supporting indigenous self-determination arguably, and ironically, faces the most bitter criticisms from indigenous people. Respondents stated that it is out of touch with what people really want to see happening, that it is ineffective and under the control of its own bureaucracy and that the money that should be getting to the communities is being used for administration.

If, as some respondents see it, policy development and implementation is the key to making the systems more responsive to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander needs and demands, then ATSIC will need to take a more proactive role in the future.

Other departments, such as Social Security and Human Services and Health, are also seen to be out of step with the realities and priorities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. This is seen as being the result of not listening carefully enough to what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been saying about their needs, interests, priorities and aspirations.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander terms of reference were suggested as being an important way of addressing cultural values and preferences and meeting the real needs of indigenous people. This requires a shift away from bureaucratic, paternalistic, social welfare orientations to embrace more holistic, culturally appropriate and accessible modes of discourse and response.

A different approach to consultation is called for which allows for a thorough exploration of the underlying issues related to service provision for indigenous people. In the view of respondents, this is best done by regional offices of departments working collaboratively with communities and community-based organisations and agencies, with the departments playing more of a support role in this relationship.

Concern was expressed about departments continuing to let indigenous people down, take things for granted, not consult enough with the 'grass roots' in communities, operate in rigid, bureaucratic ways and only consider indigenous inputs as an afterthought or as token participation.

Over one third of people in indigenous communities expressed that they had problems in getting information from government agencies. The reasons for these difficulties were found to align closely with those expressed by intermediaries.

Departmental office environments, especially DSS offices, were criticised for being inhospitable, harsh and alienating. This represents a major obstacle to improving the relationship with indigenous clients and community members. So many people regard these office environments as places they would rather not visit. This in turn has a very direct impact on the acceptability, appropriateness and effectiveness of information strategies and products which emanate from the departments, especially if there is seen to be a contradiction between what is said and what people experience.

Respondents also pointed out that there is an element of bitterness and mistrust felt by many indigenous clients and community members that exists regardless of staff or physical location or surroundings.

The previous issue is compounded in situations where departmental staff have an *"I'm better than thou attitude*". Respondents emphasised that staff need to be conscious of the way their actions affect people. For many, the experience is humiliating and offensive and they can be fearful about being there.

These concerns and issues are experienced by indigenous people in terms of disempowerment. Continuing 'top down' approaches in the broader relationships departments have with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their communities reinforces this disempowerment, despite the stated government commitments to indigenous self-determination.

Respondents overwhelmingly want to be able to have ownership over decision-making processes that influence and shape their everyday lives. There is still a widespread feeling that *''A lot of departments go in with the idea of what's best for people instead of really listening to what people want to say*".

This is often reflected back to departments as hurt, anger, frustration, despair and reluctance to seek advice or assistance. And, in turn, this contributes powerfully to the reproduction of further relationships of dependency.

It was noted with some irony that the policy of self-determination has resulted in the pulling back of some support and assistance, especially in remote area communities. For those who raised this issue the concern was to ensure that continuing appropriate forms of support and assistance be provided to indigenous people.

Self-determination does not have to imply leaving people to get on with things without appropriate support and assistance. What it does require, however, is that departmental staff observe the necessary cultural protocols to allow for meaningful participation and decision-making to be in the hands of indigenous people themselves.

Deep frustration was also expressed about the lack of collaboration and strategic planning between different departments, agencies and organisations, and the associated duplication, waste, inefficiency, inappropriate program responses and ineffective service provisions.

These findings reflect, and provide further support to, the concerns and issues raised by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Mick Dodson, in his Second Report for 1994 (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, **Second Report**: **1994**, AGPS, Canberra, 1995).

Developing More Appropriate and Effective Written Forms of Communication

One of the most difficult information problems faced by clients and community members relates to written forms of communication.

Respondents referred to the inability that most indigenous people have in understanding and interpreting the bureaucratic language typically used in written forms of communication. This is particularly the case for DSS advice relating to changes in benefits and payments.

Letters from departments are very often thrown away unread because they are regarded as "junk mail". This is particularly the case in the more remote areas, where people tend to have an uneasy relationship with bureaucracies and government services and where English may not be the first or preferred language spoken.

Where this is the case, intermediaries often play a critical role in translating and interpreting information and providing advocacy and counselling support. This frequently extends to mediating on behalf of the client or community member, who may feel overwhelmed and incapable of dealing with the situation without support. It was felt that ideally, most of this kind of support should be provided by departmental liaison and field staff. The reality is that even in regions where support arrangements are in place, there are insufficient departmental staff to carry out this important work.

When correspondence has to be sent to clients and community members it needs to be written in clear, direct language supported by face to face explanation as much as possible. Bureaucratic jargon, "big words" and convoluted ways of expression should be avoided as a matter of course.

These are matters which require sensitivity if other forms of dependency and imposition are to be avoided. The difference between appropriate advocacy and support and inappropriate procedures can sometimes be very fine. Careful interpretation of regional and local community attitudes and protocols is an essential starting point for considering how best to address this complex issue.

In the wider context, the use of language in reports, and the various kinds of information bulletins, can either empower indigenous people to participate effectively or it can deny them access to, or lock them out of, critical processes related to either their personal situations or indigenous advancement generally. If the language is abstract, complex or impersonal the chances are that the message will not get through. Reports that are "weighty" and "dense" simply have no relevance for the majority of indigenous people.

This raises an issue that is intimately connected with Aboriginal and Islander community government, politics and administration. A number of respondents made reference to the fact that "*information is power*". By this they meant that often information does not get out into the community, it "*stays in certain circles"*. Consequently "*people in communities are not really aware of what's going on*". As these practices are entrenched, the challenge for departments will be to increase the opportunity for clients and community members to have greater access to information.

Improving the Effectiveness of Indigenous Liaison and Field Staff

One of the most important and direct ways of increasing client and community access to departmental information is through the employment of liaison and field staff, community agents and remote area visiting teams. As well as providing advice and support to people in order for them to make sense of correspondence, they also assist people to understand departmental policies and programs and gain access to services. Most respondents regarded this form of support as being appropriate and vitally necessary.

One to one attention from an indigenous departmental staff member was often referred to as making the difference by making the client or community member feel comfortable, welcome and supported. This is particularly appreciated in office situations, especially when the office environment appears harsh and alien.

It is also important in indigenous community situations where people frequently express frustration and concern in their efforts to achieve satisfactory relationships and outcomes with government departments, agencies and institutions.

The benefits of having liaison and field staff include:

* the ability to monitor whether a system or program is working effectively;
* provision of direct support to clients and community members, especially in the translation and interpretation of correspondence and completion of forms;
* explanation of departmental policies, programs, services and strategies; and
* negotiation of strategic and operational planning based on accurate and informed community-based assessment, research and development processes.

Concern was expressed by some respondents that the current arrangements are inadequate. This means that clients and community members are either not receiving advice and support of this kind or that the limited staff working in these positions are being stretched beyond their capacity to deal with the range and complexity of demands they are presented with. It was reported that this is resulting in high levels of staff frustration and burnout.

Administrative and bureaucratic work regimes can contribute to the frustration experienced by indigenous staff by requiring them spend considerable amounts of time working behind a desk or in meetings. The expressed preference of those who raised this issue was for indigenous staff to have the ability to provide much more direct support to indigenous clients and community members rather than being "*stuck in here day after day and bogged down with administration*".

Working more directly with indigenous clients and community members, however, is by no means straightforward, and indigenous staff are not immune from working in inappropriate, whitefella ways. Indigenous staff can become so focussed on what the departmental requirements are that they can lose sight of how they should best relate with, and respond to, their own people. This is further compounded by clients and community members if they regard indigenous staff as government employees rather than people who can mediate between the community and departments.

It was made very clear by respondents that indigenous communities do not want to see a perpetuation of inappropriate processes and practices that are characterised by departmental staff making flying visits. What is called for is a preparedness to work collaboratively, *"in a cultural manner*" in order to find better ways of addressing indigenous community needs.

Improving the Appropriateness and Effectiveness of Information Products

Information products such as pamphlets, brochures, and posters received a range of both supportive and unsupportive responses.

They were regarded as being effective by intermediaries if they reflected local images, graphics and colour preferences, used direct and simple language, and the local indigenous language where appropriate, and conveyed a sense of local control or involvement in the process.

Positive responses from intermediaries included preferences for:

* information that has a clear, direct relevance;
* posters and t-shirts;
* bold, bright, attractive colours, especially red, black and yellow;
* attractive pictures;
* print that is well spaced and bold; and
* local designs and images.

People within communities were found to be most responsive to information products which:

* were colourful;
* incorporated appropriate graphic images and designs;
* were explicitly targeted toward indigenous audiences;
* used simple language;
* were succinct; and
* reinforced positive messages and images.

Intermediaries and community members emphasised the information being conveyed should be directly relevant to indigenous people's lives and should reflect regional and local needs, values and priorities. Information products generated by people living and working away from regional and local contexts were seen as being largely irrelevant and out of step with leading edge developments in indigenous information strategies.

Use of negative images was generally seen as being inappropriate and counterproductive and at worst was cited as causing distress and anxiety. This was especially the case with explicit images associated with death and dying.

To ensure that inappropriate and offensive information strategies are avoided, respondents highlighted the need for regional and local, rather than national, development of information products. This was seen as being essential to ensure that culturally inappropriate designs are not used and displayed. Local relevance, especially reflected in the appropriate use of local art and culture, is the key to conveying information effectively.

Other intermediaries expressed the point of view that information products were a waste of money and generally failed to convey what they were designed for, which tended to make people ignore them or see them as being irrelevant. However, this response tended to be associated with those who were critical of information products being developed 'elsewhere' and not strongly associated with grass roots people and issues.

When information arrives from elsewhere, without adequate explanation and relevance to local priorities, it can lead indigenous people to feel as if they are being bombarded with information, which then often leads to the information being ignored or thrown away. People need to be briefed properly, and need to feel that they are a meaningful part of the process, or it is very likely that information products will fail to produce a positive and satisfactory outcome.

Some respondents were more cynical and suggested that when information products arrive from elsewhere they created the impression that the government department is well resourced, especially if they are glossy and expensively produced. This is not well received, especially by those working in community-based organisations that are struggling to make ends meet while they provide direct support and assistance. Many of these respondents saw this as a misallocation of resources, especially if there is insufficient money to provide what they regard as real 'grass roots' services.

The critical issue for most intermediaries, and one which they kept revisiting, was that information products should be directly relevant to the lives of people in their local contexts.

Torres Strait Islander respondents argued strongly for the right to be able to develop their own distinctive information products and strategies based on their own unique cultural traditions and political aspirations and demands. It is no longer seen as appropriate that they are appended to strategies and products based on Aboriginal imperatives. They see themselves very differently and want that to be properly recognised and supported.

Appropriateness and Effectiveness of Newspapers and Magazines

Newspapers and magazines were not seen by intermediaries as playing a useful role in departmental information strategies. This was confirmed by the findings from the community interviews, where only half of the population surveyed had read a paper or magazine in the last seven days. Even Koori Mail and Land Rights News, which are distinctively indigenous publications, are read by only a small number of people. Two percent indicated reading the Koori Mail, and less than 1 % indicated read the Land Rights News during the week prior to interview.

The findings of the study show clearly that indigenous people do not favour written forms of communication, especially if they use language which is abstract, academic or technical in style and they are textually dense.

This strongly suggests that the value of using newspapers and magazines in departmental information strategies in the future is minimal, if the target readership is intended to be indigenous people.

Appropriateness and Effectiveness of Radio and Television

Because indigenous people around the country listen to radio and/or watch television regularly, radio and television were widely supported as being effective media for use in departmental information strategies.

The work of indigenous media organisations was especially appreciated. Many respondents expressed the opinion that programs such as 'Blackout' on ABC television should be used as models for developing indigenous programming in the future. Indeed, "Blackout" was one of the more prominent programs regularly watched by people in indigenous communities.

Radio continues to be regarded as being an effective, and in some cases the best, way of getting information across to communities, especially in some of the more remote areas.

Indigenous people, however, appreciate the visual impact of television and increasingly it is seen as the preferred medium as developments in technology and broadcasting extend its use into remote areas.

Programs that reflect local production and content generally have the most appeal for indigenous people because they can identify readily with both the message and the medium. Indigenous media is therefore having a significant impact in Aboriginal and Islander communities.

One of the very significant things about the indigenous media industry is the opportunity to shape and control what is conveyed, from the initial processes of creating the program through to transmission into communities. At the heart of these developments are indigenous concerns about representation and agency.

Indigenous media is a powerful contemporary way of defining and controlling a range of processes that are intimately concerned with the construction and reconstruction of identity, knowledge and the production and reproduction of social and cultural relationships. Indigenous people who are closely involved with the work of indigenous media organisations are acutely aware of these issues.

Respondents emphasised that indigenous media organisations and their staff are uniquely placed to best determine what should be represented, and how it should be conveyed, to indigenous communities. They are sensitive to the regional and local community protocols and politics and have a keen sense of what will work and be well received and what will not.

It was widely felt that not enough use of indigenous media was made by departments in order to convey information and improve information strategies. As well as having a keen appreciation of what are appropriate and acceptable information strategies and production techniques, indigenous media organisations have growing numbers of skilled and experienced Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander broadcasters, journalists and production staff who are eager to advance the interests of their own people.

The Broadcasting for Remote Communities Scheme (BRACS) allows for increased broadcasting range and coverage for remote area communities. Although the scheme is still experiencing some difficulties in establishing itself in some regions, respondents considered that it has the potential to provide communities with appropriate media which they can have some influence and control over.

The struggle to achieve indigenous rights and social justice in Australian society is complex and constantly changing. Indigenous media organisations are well placed to monitor these shifts and play a leading role in assisting constructive forms of dialogue and participation.

Improving the Effectiveness of Intermediaries in Supporting Government Information Strategies

Intermediaries play a critical role in supporting information strategies through the provision of advice and advocacy to clients and community members. Very often the support they provide is more direct and culturally appropriate and acceptable than that provided by departmental staff. Evidence from the community interviews supports the prominent role played by intermediaries in the dissemination and support of both health and welfare information.

It was stated by many intermediaries that indigenous people generally feel more comfortable approaching community-based organisations.

The approach of intermediaries was characterised as being flexible, compassionate and down-to-earth, with a strong link to community values and priorities. This is reflected in the face- to-face, word-of-mouth forms of communication in relaxed, non-confronting settings. Clients and community members are also assured of receiving attention and support without hassles, and where 'grass roots' concerns and interests are genuinely considered.

Concern was expressed by some respondents that departments should be providing more adequate and appropriate support of this kind to indigenous clients and community members themselves. Departmental office environments were frequently mentioned as being unwelcoming, harsh and off-putting. Invariably they are located in formal office buildings and purpose built complexes, whereas community-based organisations tend to operate out of modified buildings and houses close to areas that are frequented by indigenous people.

Many respondents thought it was ironic that despite their general lack of resources and inadequate financial support, community-based organisations and the intermediaries who work in them are approached constantly for advice, support and advocacy. Nevertheless they also made it clear that they saw this as a vitally important service they were providing for people who, for whatever reason, did not feel as comfortable approaching a government department.

Given this important ad hoe role of intermediaries, to respond to whatever comes their way, it is essential that they receive as much support from government departments as possible. Many respondents, however, felt that they were largely ignored by the departments and invariably received information about policies, programs and services in unsatisfactory or informal ways.

Consequently there tends to be a high degree of uncertainty, doubt and confusion in the minds of intermediaries about their actual and potential role in supporting government information strategies. There was therefore a call for a more inclusive approach to their role, with the emphasis shifting to a relationship based on partnership and collaboration and much better channels of communication.

It was stated that for particular information strategies and campaigns, briefing and planning meetings and workshops should be held with intermediaries as a matter of course to ensure that at the regional and local community levels, coordinated strategic approaches are considered and implemented properly. Otherwise the processes, especially if they are being directed and managed from a distance, run the serious risk of being regarded as inappropriate and ineffective.

Improving the Appropriateness and Effectiveness of Special Government Information Campaigns

The effectiveness of special government information campaigns, to raise awareness amongst indigenous people on particular topics, was seen by respondents as being inseparable from many of the wider issues.

In general, however, the qualities that made for successful information campaigns, according to respondents, included several important features.

Campaigns should be developed in close partnership with *''people on the ground*", which involves close consultation and collaboration with indigenous communities and their organisations. For this to be successful, the terms of such relationships have to be established properly. They have to be based on equal partnership, with indigenous people having a clear, determining influence in the development and decision-making processes.

Use of local or well known Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander actors and spokespeople increases the chance of the message getting across. People are more inclined to relate to and identify with them. However, they need to have a credible reputation. Critical reference was made to recent campaigns involving indigenous personalities who were advising people not to smoke or drink, when they were known to do that themselves, or be involved in other kinds of substance abuse. People rightly see this as hypocrisy and it can seriously undermine the value and impact of an otherwise well produced campaign.

The use of appropriate written and spoken language is critical to the success, or otherwise, of information campaigns. This can be a complex matter, requiring skill and experience in determining the best way to convey a particular message. Decisions about this are best made by indigenous people living and working in the different regions, especially in the media organisations and language centres, where there is a keen appreciation of local community issues and preferences.

Showing things happening in environments that people recognise and can relate to plays an important part in making information campaigns appealing and relevant.

The application of cross-cultural, adult education models enhances the potential of a campaign to engage with people and promote positive outcomes. These models emphasise people doing things for themselves, they are concerned with empowerment and use opinion leaders and other credible people with authority to convey information and influence others.

Respondents emphasised the point that indigenous people typically have a highly developed visual literacy and orientation and a preference for learning by observation. This predisposes them to relate more naturally to visual images and graphic designs. Certainly, the visual characteristics and impact of any printed information product appear central to the acceptance, perception and ultimately the success of such products. As one respondent put it "*That was a visual thing and worked well because we were all there and saw things. We remember what we see*". It is important, however, to ensure that culturally inappropriate images and designs are not used.

Information that is being conveyed needs to be relevant, life enhancing and positive. It should be based on real life situations which people have a genuine need to be advised about and be conveyed in culturally appropriate and effective ways.

The use of negative images, slogans and information should be avoided as they can be counterproductive and can also cause distress and anxiety, particularly if the subject relates to death and dying.

Respondents pointed out that indigenous people appreciate humour. Whenever appropriate, campaigns should find ways to employ humour which indigenous people can relate to and identify with.

Critical responses relating to information campaigns that were judged to have failed or been unsuccessful in some way also highlighted a number of issues.

Consultation and collaboration between representatives of departments, communities and other participating agencies and organisations has to be conducted in ways which promote effective communication and lead to positive outcomes.

Top down approaches, tokenism and asymmetrical relationships, which use indigenous participation to endorse goals and priorities that are not generated by community representatives, inevitably create friction and often result in antagonism and conflict.

There needs to be a clear idea of who the target group is and where the information is going to be useful. Otherwise an information campaign will be ineffective and may even cause some distress or offence.

This is especially the case on issues which require different approaches for different cultural, age or gender groups. What is effective and appeals to one group may have very different responses and reactions from others. Regional and local community representatives are very sensitive to these differences and their involvement should be considered when determining the directions campaigns should take.

There is a considerable amount of cynicism and scepticism about government departments being more interested in their own time lines and priorities than in properly addressing the concerns and problems faced by indigenous communities.

*"I don't think any government department has really got it right",* said a respondent. "*We go out and ask people what they want and then go back and try to do it. But it still has to work on government time lines and priorities"*. Indigenous people invariably identify when this is happening and are calling for it to stop.

It can be challenging to find ways to convince people that they are, or might be, at risk. It is a fairly common human trait to deny or not want to face up to the risks involved in an activity that may be associated with pleasure or avoidance behaviour. This can lead to information not being taken seriously and people can develop or maintain an attitude that it won't happen to them. Some respondents felt that issues related to drugs, alcohol and sexuality were in this category, and that no matter how well designed a campaign might be it would not convince enough people to change their preferences, habits or addictions.

Campaigns that do not feature Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were found to be ineffective in conveying the intended message or information, largely because the resultant images were seen as irrelevant. The more a campaign identifies with and features indigenous people in realistic settings, the greater the chance it will be perceived as relevant and be taken notice of.

Care needs to be taken in deciding where to place some types of information products and associated items, such as information on sexual practices and the use of condoms. Inappropriate placement can result in minimal response because people can feel "*shame"* if they think they are being noticed by others. Having pamphlets and condoms readily available on a counter, for instance, may lead a department to feel that it is considering people's needs and addressing a serious social issue.

However, the real test of whether a campaign is being successful requires that people actually take notice of information and follow the prescribed advice.

There is generally a need for more careful, realistic planning of information campaigns. Intermediaries expressed concern that often the information does not get through or make an appreciable difference in terms of influencing significant attitudinal or behavioural change or improving outcomes. This is supported by the findings of the 1994 ABS National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey, which continues to show indigenous people suffering the greatest disadvantages and problems on every social indicator.

Developing More Appropriate and Effective Government Information Strategies

The development of more appropriate and effective government information strategies requires a range of responses, each of which has its own importance and which when taken together represents an integrated, holistic and strategic approach to supporting indigenous people's information needs. The elements of this approach include:

* grass roots involvement in planning, decision-making and implementation;
* developing network relationships between communities, organisations and departments;
* increasing employment opportunities for indigenous staff;
* cross-cultural training and sensitisation for non-indigenous and indigenous staff;
* improving information delivery models and processes;
* using language centres to assist in determining appropriate language(s) to be used;
* increasing the use of information technologies;
* using indigenous media organisations to assist in planning, developing and implementing information strategies; and
* developing more integrated, holistic and strategic approaches to program planning, service delivery and information campaigns.

It needs to be emphasised that there is not a single prescription for considering and responding to the information needs of indigenous people. The proposed approach acknowledges this and allows for regional and local community variation to be taken into account.

Grass Roots Involvement in Planning, Decision-making and Implementation

The most consistent and strongly expressed point made by respondents was that there should be a much more serious effort by departments to listen to and collaborate with indigenous local community and regional organisations and their representatives.

Some respondents felt that departments are more concerned about implementing their own policies and programs, regardless of whether they are culturally appropriate at the different local and regional community levels. As one respondent put it, "*I think departments just go out and explain their current program or grant, without finding out first what the community really wants*".

Impositional and paternalistic processes that deliver the message that departments know what is best for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be avoided as they contribute to feelings of disempowerment, "*It's not about how the government can help us. It's about how we can help ourselves*".

Greater effort therefore needs to be made to find out what people really need or want, rather than making assumptions based on existing policy and program imperatives. And this needs to be done consistently as an on-going process rather than as a one-off event.

Participatory and collaborative models of community research, development and evaluation offer the greatest potential for work of this kind. However such work is carried out, it must be based on a genuine partnership, with indigenous people taking the leading roles and being involved in decision-making in line with the policy of self-determination.

The role of departments in these processes is seen as shifting from one of telling people what is best for them, what they should do about it and what they are entitled to, to a position of providing greater support in order to allow self-determination to take place. Although this shift does not have to imply radical or dramatic change, it is recognised that it will not be straightforward and will require goodwill and sensitivity from all concerned.

What indigenous people do not want to see happen is tokenism or lip-service being paid to their concerns and aspirations. In the view of many respondents this has overwhelmingly been the case up to the present, "*There needs to be real input, not just pay lip-service to the things Aboriginal people say*".

A concerted effort is called for to bring departments, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and their representative organisations together in ways that have not yet been achieved, or perhaps even explored. Indigenous people are desperately seeking results, not *''just shuffling the deck chairs”.*

The determination of regional and local community needs and priorities should involve a range of representatives from communities, community-based organisations and regionally-based service providers. This collaborative relationship also needs to extend into the on-going departmental processes of strategic planning, program development and service delivery and this needs to feed back into the regions and communities in ways that people can understand and relate to.

"*There needs to be a structure for community planning, decision-making and information exchange*", said one respondent. "*Whatever gets developed should come from what people want to do themselves on their own behalf*".

Developing Network Relationships Between Communities, Organisations and Departments

In the development of better and more appropriate relationships between communities, organisations and departments, and to ensure that grass roots interests and concerns are properly addressed, departmental staff need to listen more carefully to what they are being told and respond without imposing too many of their own ideas and values.

This requires that departmental staff put in "*groundwork to get that relationship with the community, to establish some trust*". They need to "*come down off their high horses to see what Aboriginal people need*". This will involve staff at all levels and in different program and service areas.

State and central office staff will need to consider how they can best support and respond to what will emerge from these processes. For some, this will involve a significant challenge as initiatives and developments have typically been driven from the centre rather than the periphery.

A more coordinated approach to policy and program development is needed that will require a greater commitment to developing networks between communities, their representative and community-based organisations and government departments.

Many intermediaries felt that the existing arrangements maintain a generally unsatisfactory situation characterised by lack of co-ordination and inadequate outcomes.

Despite the large amounts of money that have been spent on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs over the years, some respondents expressed despair and frustration at the continuing "*confusion*", "*lack of co-ordination"*, *"duplication*" and "*time wasting*", with "*nothing to show for it*".

The way forward, therefore, lies in greater co-operation and collaboration between all concerned so that the focus of action is appropriately determined and worked through with minimal distortion and imposition from 'outsiders'. Apart from making greater sense and being more likely to meet people's needs than existing arrangements, greater co-operation and collaboration should result in improved outcomes and efficiencies.

The participation of local people and organisations is seen to be the key to developing appropriate and effective network relationships. They "*understand what people want and need*". It was emphasised by respondents that Aboriginal society is regionally and locally based, "*You can't have a national approach because of the issues of language and different cultures*". The diversity of languages, cultures and historical experiences has to be acknowledged and reflected in the regional and local community arrangements that are developed. Departments should, as far as possible, respond to and support community-based initiatives and the production of locally targeted information.

While it was understood that there can be significant obstacles and impediments to an approach of this kind being realisable, it was nevertheless considered essential that such processes be explored in order to find common ground.

The groundwork for addressing these issues has in fact already been done by DHSH. Between August 1993 and January 1994 a Regional Focus Evaluation Team undertook an evaluation of the Department's Regional Focus, which resulted in the report **Working Towards a Regional Focus: Report on the Regional Focus Evaluation in the Commonwealth Department of Human Services and Health** (AGPS, Canberra, 1994).

The objectives for the Regional Focus, which forms part of the Department's *Regional Focus and Cross Program Links Strategy* (RFCPL), include:

* improving communication between the Department and communities;
* better identification of community needs;
* assisting with the development of appropriate service responses to meet those needs;
* improving access to the range of assistance measures provided by the Department; and
* more coordinated and effective service delivery at the regional level.

The evaluation report provides very strong support for the RFCPL strategy and Regional Focus in particular, arguing that *"for Regional Focus to be successfully introduced, the RFCPL strategy needs to be pursued with increased vigour".*

Four key principles are identified *"which should drive the adoption of Regional Focus*":

* regional presence is fundamental;
* that the region should be the primary level for contact for the community and should be complemented by minimising layers within the organisation;
* responsibility and authority should be devolved to the level as close as practicable to the community; and
* programs should remain as the central construct for the organisation.

The report emphasises that “*A regional perspective is attractive because it can balance scale with responsiveness. In particular, activity at the regional level can open up economies of scale, whilst still taking account of local circumstances, needs and diversity*".

In respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community development the report makes the point that "*At present, a community development approach informs the Department's work with some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and this should continue*".

This approach, as well as assisting communities and interest groups to develop service proposals to a fundable stage, includes some of the broader principles associated with empowerment, networking and skills transfer.

All of this is clearly in line with what respondents have called for through this Information Needs Study. The findings of the study, however, indicate that both departments need to be more proactive in pursuing the important objectives of Regional Focus.

In the Torres Strait, these issues are perhaps becoming more clearly focussed, following the creation of the Torres Strait Regional Authority. The Authority's **Corporate Plan 1994-95** states that it is "*a transitional arrangement providing a basis for a progressive negotiated movement towards greater regional autonomy in the delivery of programs and services for the Torres Strait"*.

The basis for this greater regional autonomy are the aspirations of Torres Strait Islanders and Aboriginal people in the Torres Strait area for self determination, that is supported by the Commonwealth Government's policy which ensures control by Torres Strait Islanders and Aboriginal people over policies and programs affecting their lives and on the inherent right of indigenous peoples to self determination.

Increasing Employment Opportunities for Indigenous Staff

The range of issues related to the employment of indigenous staff by departments need to be examined carefully. This is not just seen as an equity issue, although there is concern that more indigenous staff are needed in departments, especially in liaison and field positions, and that they should also be employed in a wide range of positions, including senior management. Respondents overwhelmingly wanted to see indigenous issues being handled at all levels and in all areas by indigenous people whenever possible, *"…everything comes from the whiteman. It's got to stop ... They need to have a lot of input from Aborigines*".

Aboriginal liaison officers and field staff are perceived as important sources of information within indigenous communities. From responses obtained at a community level, indigenous departmental staff have been recognised as having contributed to current levels of awareness of government services and assistance. Demand for more indigenous community based workers and departmental staff was voiced by many through the community interviews.

Some concern was expressed by intermediaries, however, that often indigenous staff are placed in very demanding situations without necessarily having adequate induction, training, support or professional development. Another major concern is that indigenous staff frequently get "*bombarded with information*" and "*bogged down with administration*".

Many indigenous staff respondents put forward the view that they should be able to spend more time on directly working with people in the communities and community-based organisations in order to improve the strategic and operational responsiveness of their work.

There was a call, therefore, for a greater emphasis on recruitment, induction, training and on-going professional development and support for indigenous departmental staff. As much as possible their work should be focussed on improving the collaborative partnership with communities and community-based organisations.

Cross-cultural Training and Sensitisation for Non-Indigenous and Indigenous Staff

Cross-cultural training and sensitisation for both non-indigenous and indigenous staff at all levels, including middle and senior management, was proposed by intermediaries in order to address and improve the current information strategies.

Indigenous staff were included by some respondents in the need for such training and sensitisation because they felt it should not be assumed that indigenous staff necessarily understand or appreciate locally sensitive matters, particularly if they are from another part of the country. "*Even the Aboriginal staff need cross-cultural training*", said one respondent. "*That's the way we've got to go*".

It is essential that departmental staff gain a greater appreciation of the impacts of historical and contemporary processes, especially related to colonisation and neo-colonialism, in indigenous people's lives.

In particular, the nation's 'Black History' has to be acknowledged and confronted if the mistakes of the past are not to be repeated. This involves developing a better understanding of how neo-colonial relationships are formed, maintained and reproduced, and how departmental staff can potentially or actually participate in such relationships.

Consultation and collaboration with indigenous people and their communities and organisations is perhaps the most direct and obvious way that these relationships are played out.

For indigenous people's real needs and interests to be addressed properly, departmental staff need to be very sensitive about the messages that are conveyed to them. They also need to have well developed skills in translating these messages into appropriate action. As one intermediary said, "*We need to be sensitive to what people are about and what's important to them".*

Cross-cultural sensitisation and training processes are therefore an essential component of an overall strategy to improve the communication between departmental staff and indigenous communities. As much as possible these sensitisation and training processes should be regionally and locally based and should be directed and conducted by local indigenous people.

Training packages based on blended or selected ideas and issues were seen to be largely inappropriate, although examples were provided of highly effective and successful models, such as the Study Circle Kit developed by the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation.

Improving Information Delivery Models and Processes

The importance of direct, face to face communication was emphasised by intermediaries. This needs to be done in culturally appropriate ways which emphasise verbal interaction and encourage family or group participation as much as possible.

In contrast to this, paper-based approaches requiring literacy skills, and structured meeting formats, were seen to be highly inappropriate.

Indigenous people need to be able to feel a sense of belonging and have some ability to direct and control activities and processes that have a strong impact on their lives. It was emphasised by one intermediary that "*A lot of those government structured meetings are a waste of time. People like to see something happen. Not just a lot of talk*".

Examples of culturally appropriate information models and processes that have more direct appeal to indigenous people included posters, videos, information booklets with easy to read text and attractive pictures and graphics, information expressed in terms of stories and parables, kits that promote music and dancing and include artefacts, and indigenous media.

The importance of having public information days, where families and friends could gather together, share ideas, celebrate and have some fun, was stressed by one community-based organisation, "*People should be able to enjoy themselves when they 're finding things out, and it should involve people of all ages... They'll go to a concert or a family day and they'll talk about that for a long time"*.

There was also a strong call for increased resources to be made available at the regional and local levels to enable people to achieve a sense of empowerment in their lives and in the development of effective information strategies. In particular, there needs to be careful thought given to *"how the resources get to the community level, and on the processes that tend to disempower people".*

The associated need for effective accountability and monitoring procedures was also raised, *"... we have to look at where the money is going and whether it's being effective*".

An expanded role was suggested for community-based organisations, information centres and advocacy services to provide a more holistic, systematic and better resourced network of support in partnership with government departments. This would build on existing arrangements and bridge the gaps between the different systems and networks so that more focussed advice, assistance and advocacy can be provided to indigenous clients and community members.

Under these arrangements, information strategies would be developed and implemented by people who have a keen appreciation of what works and what doesn't work in their own regions and communities. Language centres and indigenous media organisations would have an important part to play, "*The people with skills in language and media in the regions will be able to develop the best strategies to put the information across".* They would also be more sensitive of the need for different strategies for different age, gender and cultural groups. In particular, the people with skills in graphic arts, desktop publishing and media production would create images and messages that people would be able to relate to and feel a sense of ownership, "*With national strategies each region should have the opportunity to create their own images*", said one respondent. "*When it's locally done, people have a real feeling about it. For a national strategy, you can use the ideas but allow for regions and local communities to have an input. That way we'll own it*".

This would go a long way towards satisfying the concerns that have been raised about representation and agency. Indigenous people want to be able to represent issues in their own distinctive ways based on what they feel is culturally appropriate and effective communication. It was suggested that this sort of approach may even be cheaper than the current arrangements.

The improvement of co-ordination and collaboration between departments, community-based organisations and the communities themselves is generally seen as being critical to the improvement of programs, services and information strategies. Whatever can be done to promote this would receive wide support, as long as the necessary social and cultural protocols were observed and the processes were not seen as being impositional. It is anticipated that the constant linking of efforts and sharing of ideas and resources will result in more effective ways of addressing what are often complex, interrelated problems or difficulties.

Because indigenous people have such "*highly developed visual memories*", the visual appeal of an information product or media campaign was highlighted, as was the use of local graphics and images, video presentations, picture stories and bold, representative colours with cultural connotations.

The suggestion was also made that departmental indigenous staff photographs should be attractively displayed in poster form, so that people could identify them and be aware of the role they are playing in supporting indigenous clients and communities through their work in a particular departmental program area.

Using Language Centres to Assist in Determining Appropriate Language(s) to be Used

In areas where traditional languages are still spoken, the use of those languages in information strategies was regarded as important. The increased involvement of language centres that are supporting the maintenance of those languages, in terms of translation and interpretation, is also seen to be crucial in the development of more effective information strategies.

These centres are considered to be in tune with local community values and priorities, they "*know how people think locally*" and how things should be "*translated for how locally people see things*".

However, the language centres are thought to be under resourced for the important work they are carrying out, especially if they are to play an expanded, more proactive role in supporting the development and implementation of information strategies.

More realistic funding support from departments, especially ATSIC, was therefore called for, *''ATSIC has to give the language centres more resources and a better working environment. What they've done is quite incredible. They should be able to work with the government departments*".

Increasing the Use of Information Technologies

The developments in interactive communication technologies, such as computers and computer networking and two way audio and visual television, were seen as an important development in the way information is conveyed to, used and manipulated by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, especially in the more isolated, rural and remote communities.

Their potential to improve information delivery systems and strategies, especially when linked to satellite systems such as the TANAMI Network and BRACS, was emphasised by a number of intermediaries.

For special presentations, one off information campaigns and the transmission of information about programs, services, benefits and entitlements the direct, visual impact and accessibility has strong appeal, "*Communities are getting more and more used to it. What some departments have done with their health campaigns has shown it can work*".

The recently developed Community Information Network was mentioned as having particular strengths, which would be worth examining for their potential in indigenous community contexts. This system enables clients and community members to access and explore a wide range of information interactively, and could replace or enhance some of the existing forms of contact with departmental staff. However, as the system requires a user to be reasonably proficient in interpreting written language and following computer instructions it also has some limitations and disadvantages.

Using Indigenous Media Organisations to Assist in Planning, Developing and Implementing Information Strategies

Indigenous media organisations received strong support from intermediaries, who considered that they provide appropriate and effective information services to indigenous communities.

Concern was expressed, however, that not enough use was made of the indigenous media industry and their organisations by departments. This often results in tokenistic strategies being developed or the organisations are contacted as an afterthought and are unable to play a significant role in the information planning, production and delivery processes. One respondent said that *"... we never get enough information. You can never give the community enough information*". Another stated, "*TV broadcasts that summarise issues and broadcast them to local communities. That would be an effective way to communicate ... Those people out there are marginalised and information deficient. There's not effective ways at present to disseminate information*".

Increased use of indigenous media by government departments was also seen as an important way to support local indigenous enterprise, especially through the increased work for local indigenous staff and the payment of service fees.

Developing More Integrated, Holistic and Strategic Approaches to Program Planning, Service Delivery and Information Campaigns.

The proposed approach to developing more appropriate and effective information strategies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people requires more integrated, holistic and strategic program planning, service delivery and information campaigns than are currently in place.

Such an approach needs to focus more on what indigenous people actually want and need if they are to overcome the disadvantages in their lives, maintain their cultures and participate effectively and productively in the broader social, cultural and economic systems.

According to one respondent, the current arrangements have led to the oppression of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, "*We've got to change the focus of what's best for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people*". Another respondent emphasised that "*Dignity and pride has to be with the people themselves. They have to be able to do things for themselves. They don't need bandaid, welfare paternalism anymore. It needs coordinated, strategic planning*".

Time frames for arrangements need to take into account cultural values and priorities, and information strategies need to reflect regional and local cultural sensitivities. Consistent with this, communities should have relative autonomy to determine what messages are conveyed and the manner in which they are delivered, "*If they feel they are being dictated to, there is more chance that they will close their ears. So you have to make sure that they are both advised, informed and approached about any message that might come out. That way you will avoid this*".

In essence this requires appropriate consultation and respect for cultural protocols. As much as possible, *"... effort and resources should go into developing things with people at the local level, taking into account local needs and priorities".*

Participatory and collaborative processes should be used to encourage people to work together, network and link the different systems. In this way, broadly-based participation, collaboration and decision-making about program planning, service delivery and information strategies can effectively take place.

One respondent was particularly emphatic about the importance of this, "*Communities have to consider that a strategy is important. It has to work at the local community level. Programs have to be based in the communities to make it work ... People have to be fully informed at the local level. They need to know the options. People need to talk about these things"*.

This would result in a much more focussed approach, with community-based organisations and representatives having a more central role in determining appropriate strategic and operational arrangements. These arrangements would also reflect, necessarily, a more integrated and holistic approach to meeting indigenous peoples needs. In turn, this would lead to the reduction or avoidance of duplication of effort and competition for resources. It should also lead to increasing levels of co-operation and collaboration between communities, community-based organisations and government departments.

One respondent, an Aboriginal senior departmental officer, was emphatic about how this approach should be taken up by departments, "*This research*", he said, should result in "*open participatory reconciliation case mix for all departments to meet. Keating should tell the departments to open up their integration and structuring policies and programs with Aboriginal and Islander people*".

Another respondent put it this way, "*There's no local protocol set up between different departments that could achieve something together. We target the same group and we need some sort of strategies that tie us together. It needs to be done at the Ministers' level and worked out at the local level*".

The DEET Aboriginal Education Strategic Initiatives Program (AESIP) was mentioned by another Aboriginal senior departmental officer as being a successful, effective model that could offer important clues to other departments.

He considered it was "*an excellent way of getting Aboriginal people involved*". In order to do this "*They pulled back funding for an overall strategic plan. It required strategic and operational planning. And these had to be ratified. Agencies were forced to take into account what people wanted. And Aboriginal involvement was central to the decision being made right through*". As many other respondents also pointed out, he argued that "*We've got to tie things down more so that resources and strategies are streamlined and made more responsive and accountable to the people they're intended to serve. I think AESIP is a very good example of how to tie down the departments and ensure the consultation processes are appropriate*".

The effort to improve the provision of services and related information strategies has to involve departmental staff moving out of their office environments and into more dynamic relationships based on partnership and collaboration with other providers and with the communities themselves and their community-based organisations.

Within these arrangements, indigenous people themselves must be given the opportunity to determine their own goals and priorities, with appropriate resources and support to achieve them. In this way, the development of appropriate and effective information strategies will be a natural consequence of developing more integrated, holistic and strategic approaches to program planning and service delivery.

If this is not done with real commitment and purpose the feeling of respondents is that nothing will change and indigenous people will continue to struggle with the effects of marginalisation and disempowerment. Many respondents, therefore, expressed the hope that the findings of this Information Needs Study would be a catalyst for a major reorientation and restructuring of departmental strategies, programs and services.

Consolidated Recommendations

Recommendation 1: DSS and DHSH need to find ways to significantly improve their relationships with indigenous people.

This requires that the departments listen more carefully to what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are saying about their needs, interests, priorities and aspirations.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Terms of Reference should be developed in response to this challenge, in order to address indigenous cultural values and preferences.

There should be a consequent shift away from bureaucratic, paternalistic, social welfare orientations, towards more holistic, culturally appropriate and accessible ways of providing support.

The key principles for achieving this reorientation involve partnership, collaboration, negotiation, and responsiveness within an overall context and framework of indigenous self-determination.

Recommendation 2: Written forms of communication should be expressed in clear, direct language, supported by face to face explanation as much as possible. Inappropriate language should be avoided as a matter of course.

Because the difference between appropriate advocacy and support and inappropriate procedures can be fine, careful interpretation of regional and local community attitudes and protocols is essential in order to find the best ways to address this complex issue.

The styles of language and forms of presentation used in reports and bulletins that are to be disseminated to indigenous people should also reflect these considerations.

The broader challenge for the departments is to increase the opportunity for all indigenous clients and community members to have greater access to information.

Recommendation 3: The employment of indigenous liaison and field staff is one of the most important and direct ways of increasing indigenous client and community access to departmental information. This form of support is both highly appropriate and vitally necessary and should be extended.

Current levels of staffing are generally inadequate and should be increased, particularly for the more isolated rural and remote areas.

Issues relating to indigenous staff work regimes, frustration and burnout should be examined as a matter of priority and more culturally appropriate ways of enabling them to address indigenous community needs should be developed.

Recommendation 4: Information products should make substantial use of local images, graphics and colour preferences, use direct and simple language, and the local indigenous language where appropriate, and convey a sense of local control or involvement in the process.

The information being conveyed should be directly relevant to indigenous people's lives and should reflect regional and local needs, values and priorities.

Use of negative images, particularly relating to the theme of death and dying, should be avoided.

Distribution of information products should be accompanied by appropriate briefing processes.

Torres Strait Islanders should be able to develop their own distinctive information products and strategies because of their unique cultural traditions and political demands and aspirations.

Recommendation 5: As indigenous people generally do not favour written forms of communication the value of using newspapers and magazines in departmental information strategies is minimal.

Newspapers and magazines should therefore not be considered as necessary components of future departmental information strategies.

Recommendation 6: Radio and television are widely supported as being effective media for use in departmental information strategies. Increased use of radio and television should therefore be considered.

Programming and information segments should reflect local production and content as much as possible. The indigenous media industry are uniquely placed to do this as they are sensitive to what should be represented, and how it should be conveyed, to indigenous communities. Increased use should be made of their services.

BRACS has the potential to enhance the effectiveness of information strategies and should be supported, particularly in areas where it is currently experiencing difficulties in establishing itself.

Recommendation 7: Intermediaries play a critical role in supporting information strategies through the provision of advice and advocacy to clients and community members. In order to support and enhance this role there should be a more inclusive approach taken by the departments, with the emphasis shifting to a relationship based on partnership and collaboration.

Channels of communication between the departments and intermediaries need to be improved and made more systematic. Briefing and planning meetings and workshops should be held with intermediaries as a matter of course to ensure that at the regional and local community levels, coordinated strategic approaches are considered and implemented properly.

Recommendation 8: Special government information campaigns, that aim to raise awareness amongst indigenous people on particular topics, should be developed in close collaboration with other partners at the regional and local community levels.

Indigenous people should have a clear, determining influence in the development and decision-making processes.

Information campaigns should appropriately reflect the following qualities, which are associated with successful, positive strategies:

* consulting with people on the ground and working with communities and their organisations;
* using local actors and spokespeople that people can relate to and identify with;
* using appropriate spoken and written language ;
* showing things happening in environments that people recognise;
* applying cross-cultural adult education models which emphasise people doing things for themselves;
* emphasising visual images and graphic designs;
* making sure that the information is relevant, life enhancing and positive; and
* having a sense of humour, which people can identify with.

Recommendation 9: Information strategies should be based on an integrated, holistic and strategic approach to supporting indigenous people's information needs.

The elements of this approach include:

* grass roots involvement in planning, decision-making and implementation
* developing network relationships between communities, organisations and departments
* increasing employment opportunities for indigenous staff
* cross-cultural training and sensitisation for non-indigenous and indigenous staff
* improving information delivery models and processes
* using language centres to assist in determining appropriate language(s) to be used
* increasing the use of information technologies
* using indigenous media organisations to assist in planning, developing and implementing information strategies
* developing more integrated, holistic and strategic approaches to program planning, service delivery and information campaigns

Recommendation 10: There should be a much more serious effort by the departments to listen to and collaborate with indigenous local community and regional organisations and their representatives.

Impositional and paternalistic processes that deliver the message that departments know what is best for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be avoided.

Greater effort needs to be made to find out what indigenous people really need or want. This should be done consistently as an on-going process, using participatory and collaborative models of community research, development and evaluation.

Recommendation 11: A more coordinated approach to policy and program development is needed that will require a greater commitment to developing networks between communities, their representative and community-based organisations and the departments.

The participation of local community people and organisations is essential in the development of appropriate and effective network relationships.

The diversity of languages, cultures and historical experiences has to be acknowledged and reflected in the regional and local community arrangements that are developed.

The departments should therefore respond to and support community-based initiatives and the production of locally targeted information.

The DHSH report Working Towards a Regional Focus provides a detailed model and process for responding to this challenge and should be implemented.

The Torres Strait Regional Authority Corporate Plan 1994-95 provides the basis for greater regional autonomy in the delivery of programs and services for the Torres Strait and should be supported.

Recommendation 12: The range of issues related to the employment of indigenous staff need to be examined carefully.

More indigenous staff are needed in the departments, especially in liaison and field positions, but also in a wide range of other positions including senior management.

Whenever possible, indigenous staff should have a major involvement in the consideration of indigenous issues. This should be the case at all levels and in all areas.

More time should be spent by indigenous staff on directly working with people in the communities and community-based organisations in order to improve the strategic and operational responsiveness of their work.

There should therefore be a greater emphasis on recruitment, induction, training and on-going professional development and support for indigenous departmental staff.

Recommendation 13: Cross-cultural training and sensitisation is necessary for both non-indigenous and indigenous staff at all levels, including middle and senior management.

It is essential that staff be made aware of how neo-colonial relationships are formed, maintained and reproduced and how departmental staff can potentially or actually participate in such relationships.

Staff need to be assisted to develop sensitivity about what is conveyed to them by indigenous people and the necessary skills to translate that into appropriate action.

Sensitisation and training processes should be regionally and locally based and should be directed and conducted by local indigenous people as much as possible.

Recommendation 14: Information delivery models and processes should make use of direct, face to face communication as much as possible.

These models and processes should make appropriate use of:

* posters;
* videos;
* information booklets with easy to read text and attractive pictures and graphics;
* information expressed in terms of stories and parables;
* kits that promote music and dancing and include artefacts; and
* indigenous media.

Public information days, where indigenous people can gather together, share ideas, celebrate and have fun, should be used for major presentations.

Paper-based approaches requiring literacy skills, and structured meeting formats should be avoided.

Increased resources need to be made available at the regional and local levels to support the development of effective information delivery models and processes.

Indigenous people in the different regional and local community contexts must be able to represent issues in their own distinctive ways based on what they regard as culturally appropriate and effective communication.

Wherever appropriate, departmental indigenous staff photographs should be displayed in poster form so that they can be readily identified by indigenous clients and community members with the roles, relationships and responsibilities they have.

Recommendation 15: The increased use of language centres that are supporting the maintenance of traditional languages is crucial in the development of more effective information strategies.

More realistic funding for language centres should be examined if they are to play an expanded, more proactive role.

Recommendation 16: Interactive communication technologies that allow for user control and manipulation, such as computers, computer networking and two way audio and visual television using satellite linkups, have the potential to improve information delivery systems and strategies. Use should be made of these technologies whenever appropriate, especially in the more isolated rural and remote areas.

The Community Information Network has particular strengths which should be examined for potential use in indigenous community contexts.

Recommendation 17: Because indigenous media organisations provide such appropriate and effective information services to indigenous communities, increased use should be made of them in the planning, development and implementation of government information strategies.

Recommendation 18: A more integrated, holistic and strategic approach to program planning, service delivery and information campaigns for indigenous people is required. This approach needs to focus on what indigenous people actually want and need if they are to overcome the disadvantages in their lives, maintain their cultures and participate effectively and productively in the broader social, cultural and economic systems.

Time frames for arrangements need to take into account cultural values and priorities, and information strategies need to reflect regional and local cultural sensitivities.

Indigenous people must be given the opportunity to determine their own goals and priorities, with appropriate resources and support to achieve them. Indigenous communities should have relative autonomy to determine what messages are conveyed and the manner in which they are delivered. This will require appropriate consultation and respect for cultural protocols.

Community-based organisations and representatives should play a more central role in determining appropriate strategic and operational arrangements.

This approach will require departmental staff to move out of their office environments into more dynamic relationships based on partnership and collaboration with other providers and with the communities themselves and their community-based organisations.