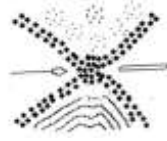


Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring



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Submission in response to the Inquiry into language learning in indigenous communities by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs

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Summary

Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring Language and Culture Centre (MDWg) has been working with Indigenous people of the Kununurra region (East Kimberley, Western Australia) for more than two decades in order to maintain and preserve the local traditional languages. The program has been strengthening the linguistic, cultural and ethnic identity of Miriwoong and Gajirrabeng people by employing a variety of strategies and projects designed to revitalise local languages despite the enormous socio-economic and other pressures faced by the Indigenous community. All age groups are targeted by the language program, with a focus on school-aged children and young adults. Traditional language is also promoted across the general public by a number of different activities. Regarding the involvement of the local district school, classes are only held for special at-risk youth though MDWg would welcome a broader approach to involve more learners. While language teaching is having a positive impact on Indigenous learners, issues include limited funding, excessive living costs and staff shortage. With increased resources, the program could be significantly expanded.

Detailed report

1. What are the languages spoken in your community?

Traditional languages are Miriwoong and Gajirrabeng; Kriol (East Kimberley variety which includes a significant number of Miriwoong words) is also used but is not a traditional Australian language as it only developed over the past century or so. It should be noted that Kriol is regarded as a variety of English by many speakers even though this is not the case. People do not identify themselves with Kriol but with the traditional languages in terms of ethnicity.

2. How well are they spoken by children, adults and elders?

Kriol is spoken fluently in most households by most age groups.

Miriwoong is the original language of the area. It is spoken fluently by the most senior people (usually aged 60+) and is present at different levels of proficiency in other age groups. Most middle-aged people are able to communicate in the language, with some deficiencies on the grammatical level; young adults have a good passive knowledge of Miriwoong but need encouragement to actively use the language. Children have a basic passive knowledge, mostly on the lexical level (single words but not complete sentences). Miriwoong language is a strong element of identity, given that language and culture must be regarded as inseparable.

Gajirrabeng is close to extinction and only spoken by a few senior individuals.

3. Describe your group and project:

- Why was it important to start up?

The language program for Miriwoong and Gajirrabeng started in the early 1970s when Indigenous people realised that their language would suffer under the dominant influence of English. It followed the time when Indigenous people were driven into the new township of Kununurra where English was the only recognised means of communication. After decades of discouragement of using the language, social and economic pressure made it difficult to maintain traditions. At this stage Miriwoong and Gajirrabeng elders realised they needed to engage actively in language maintenance and preservation.

Preserving one's own language is important as its extinction would trigger further alienation from positive traditional values. A group which loses their language will suffer from a loss of identity and be vulnerable to negative influence. This is one of the main reasons why language preservation is important. In the same way as non-Indigenous Australians would

not want to give up English under the pressure of a more dominant language, the right to use a native language should be regarded as a basic human right for all Australians (which is in fact part of the UN charter of human rights and which in Australia is reflected through the support received by migrant populations). A multicultural society composed not only of migrant communities but including the diversity of traditional Australian languages would be of great benefit to this country in many ways.

- How long have you been running?

While language-related activities commenced as early as 40 years ago, Mirima Council Aboriginal Corporation was incorporated in 1986 and the language centre (MDWG - Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring) was built in 1991. Initially MDWG received only minor support from public bodies. It is important to say that this was a community-based initiative whose activities and impact have grown significantly over the years.

- What age groups are you working with?

All age groups are targeted at this stage, in different capacities. An initiative involving the youngest (1-5) only started in July 2011. The main target groups are school-aged children and young adults but middle-aged and mature adults are also involved. MDWG aims at having a tailored approach for each age group to meet their needs more effectively.

- How many people are involved?

All members of the Miriwoong and Gajirrabeng community (estimated population up to 1,000) are familiar with the work of MDWG and many are involved in one way or another. About 20 Indigenous staff are employed, most on a casual or part-time basis; up to 40 additional community members are involved in MDWG activities as volunteers or on demand; for larger (community-internal) events such as corroborees, the involvement rate may exceed 100 people.

MDWG aims at involving the general public in selected activities. Audiences of up to 4,000 people have been recorded at cultural performances as part of the Ord Valley Muster.

4. What activities do you record or encourage the use of languages, including local languages?

MDWG engages in a variety of language-related activities which include the following:

- Language documentation (audio and audiovisual recording on site or on country)
 - Archiving of language records (digital editing and storage)
 - Development of resources for use in language teaching (print and digital media)
 - Development of language reference materials (dictionaries, grammar)
 - Language and culture awareness training for the general public
 - Structured language classes (details see below)
 - Bilingual and interpretive signage
 - Language and Culture Learning project (teams of old and young people on country)
 - Master-Apprentice Language Learning Program (coupled language learning based on a monolingual model)
 - Develop Indigenous language radio broadcasting programs (in planning)
- How are local schools involved?

There are two weekly Miriwoong language classes with the school, separated by gender. These are organised in collaboration with the Clontarf program (boys) and the *Werlemen* program (girls), both with the involvement of Kununurra District High School (KDHS). Both groups involve at-risk youth enrolled in these special programs. Previously, language classes were also held with the St Joseph's Primary School in Kununurra; many years back elders were invited to teach Miriwoong informally to mixed classes at KDHS. There is a tendency for changes to existing arrangements caused by high staff turnover rates at the schools.

Other issues are a) that attendance rates fluctuate and b) that the schools do not appear to have resources for extended language classes.

- What help do you receive from the government or other organisations to carry out your activities?

For a small organisation with a relatively low budget, MDWg offers a wide range of language-based activities.

Funding is received through the MILR (Maintenance of Indigenous Languages and Records) program currently under the Dept. of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (responsibilities for this program have been changing with every change of government in the past years). MILR funds most of MDWg's day-to-day operations, five part-time language worker positions (National Jobs Package) and one language-specific project involving a part-time linguist. Additional projects are being funded by the MG/Ord Enhancement Scheme (Master/Apprentice project, Language and Culture Learning) for a limited period of time. MDWg also generates some activity-based income through fee for service for local organisations and businesses. As a strategy, MDWg aims at forming long-term partnerships.

- Can you describe how your project's activities may have helped the whole community?

The impact of MDWg's language program has been significant, both for the Indigenous community as well as for the general community which is outlined as follows:

- The ethnic identity of Indigenous people is significantly strengthened by the language program. In the light of Aboriginal history it has become evident that this community struggles with the tensions between traditional and modern ways of life and that socio-economic pressures have a detrimental effect on daily life of the entire Indigenous community. Language is one of the primary means to establish identity in humans. MDWg has been strengthening this basis and helped Miriwoong and Gajirrabeng community members develop a stronger sense of positive distinctiveness.
- At the same time the involvement with MDWg's activities assist on the path towards reconciliation between the Indigenous and non-indigenous community.
- MDWg's activities have been providing training and employment for Indigenous people, enhancing their socio-economic perspective.
- The general community benefits from MDWg's work through access to language and cultural awareness training, consultancy in regard to traditional language and culture and partnerships relating to a variety of projects.
- Since 2010 MDWg offers a public Miriwoong language class which is attended by members of the public. This is in fact the only language learning program in the East Kimberley region as not even the local schools or TAFE include language learning as part of their curriculum. In such an environment the offer of language classes by MDWg is unique.

5. How are your languages, including your local languages taught at school?

As mentioned above, the schools do not offer any language learning at all to all students. The only language classes are in conjunction with the specific programs listed in (4), with a limited set of participants. MDWg is prepared to engage in further language teaching activities if the schools were open to the idea and funding became available. Additional resources would be required in order to develop an extended curriculum and train Indigenous staff as teaching personnel.

- What difference has the teaching of local languages made to children's attendance and achievement at school?

This is difficult to answer as the number of hours taught is low and the number of students involved is small. During the year between July 2010 and June 2011, 435 attendances were recorded (in a total of 49 lessons taught). The classes are taught on site at MDWg and not at the school. It would be up to the school to request language lessons for further students.

However, it is evident that engaging in a process of active traditional language learning has had a positive impact on students. Participating in activities which reflect relevant issues in the local community has been useful with respect to a general understanding of school education in students and with regard to a strengthened linguistic and cultural identity.

6. What interpreting and translation services are available in your local languages? How useful and effective are they?

Interpreting and translation services are available for Miriwoong and Kriol as well as for several other Indigenous languages, through the Kimberley Interpreting Service. These services are crucial for communication in essential services such as health and the legal system. MDWg is aware that many community members are unable to communicate effectively in English which in some cases may lead to disadvantage, especially in court, in dealing with the police or within the health system. Where community members had access to an interpreter, communication was facilitated in all cases. However, interpreters are not available at all times and MDWg would recommend that additional resources be invested in Indigenous interpreting and translation services.

7. What are the main difficulties facing your project?

The task of maintaining and revitalising the traditional language requires significant efforts by qualified staff. While funding is somewhat available to employ Indigenous staff - which is a notable instance of progress in this regard - funds are extremely scarce in order to manage and administer the additional responsibilities and projects. With housing and living costs in the East Kimberley region soaring to unaffordable levels (rental property costs are in excess of \$600 per week), it has become almost impossible to recruit suitable staff. Resources need to be invested in making housing available to organisations such as MDWg in the same way as for staff of government organisations. Salaries also need to be adjusted in order to retain qualified personnel in the long term.

MDWg sees the potential of doing much more in relation to language work and the necessity to act quickly is undisputable as language programs function at their best as long as senior, fluent speakers are still available - it is a race against time. However, the language program would require further assistance in order to expand and address important issues before the decline in fluent language speakers progresses any further.

8. What are you aiming to achieve in the future?

This will depend on how the issues mentioned under (7) are addressed. MDWg is working at full capacity with the given resources. With an increase in support, the following projects would be developed:

- Further training of Indigenous staff to engage in language teaching
- Additional documentation efforts involving senior speakers
- Increased language teaching in conjunction with local schools
- Transfer of traditional languages into the public domain such as through the media

Kununurra, 15.08.2011