

WANALA FORUM
Facilitating the future:
towards a coalition of First Nations languages

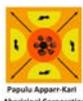
Contents

Forum Background	1
WANALA: the Western and Northern Aboriginal Languages Alliance.....	2
Linguistic diversity and endangerment	2
Regional challenges	3
Policy background.....	4
Towards a coalition.....	5
The “Towards a Coalition” Forum on 2nd June 2016.....	6
Outcomes discussion 1: Today’s issues facing language organisations	7
Outcomes discussion 2: What should a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages peak body do?	9
Declaration	11
Appendix 1: Language Rights.....	12
Appendix 2: Motivations for sustaining languages.....	12
Appendix 3: Typical activities undertaken by WANALA member organisations.....	14

Forum Background

Thirty of Australia’s First Nations language centres, organisations and associations gathered for a Forum held at the Desert Peoples’ Centre in Alice Springs on 2 June 2016. The Forum was part of the annual meeting of Western and Northern Aboriginal Languages Alliance (WANALA), where delegates representing language bodies of the region gathered to share their experience in maintaining, revitalising and advocating for Aboriginal languages.

The Forum addressed many key issues facing language centres. Its particular focus was to seek input from a wide range of language representatives and formulate an approach to future support of First Nations languages that is thoroughly representative of all regions of Australia and which takes particular note of the key roles played by language centres on behalf of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.



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Over 40 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages organisations from right across Australia were contacted and invited to attend or provide their input. Taking part in the Forum were 39 people from about 30 organisations and representing more than 100 Aboriginal languages. The Forum was facilitated by Professor Jakelin Troy, a Ngarigu (NSW) Aboriginal woman and linguist at the University of Sydney.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages should be supported, documented and sustained. These First Nations languages are key to understanding Australia's environment, ecology, land management, archaeology, and human sciences such as linguistics. Indigenous cultural expression and identity are now recognised as crucial for individual and community health and wellbeing. Rights frameworks, legislation and government reports highlight the positive impacts of promoting and nurturing Aboriginal languages. (See the Outcomes discussions below and Appendices 1 and 2 for further information on why these languages should be supported.)

WANALA: the Western and Northern Aboriginal Languages Alliance

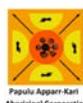
WANALA was formed in 2011 with the goal of enabling Aboriginal Language Centres and projects of the west and north of Australia to share expertise and to advocate for better support and representation of the languages of the region. It is managed from Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education through the Centre for Australian Languages and Linguistics.

WANALA's 16 member organisations comprise well over half of the Aboriginal language bodies in Australia and cover an area that is home to more than 150 Aboriginal languages. These organisations support around half of all Australia's languages including 90% of the languages that are actively being transmitted to the next generation and that have prospects for long-term survival.

WANALA's membership includes several language centres that are the longest-established, most sustainable, effective and well-run centres in Australia. WANALA has highlighted its particular advantages in being community and industry led, grounded in Aboriginal self-determination, and following in the footsteps of an 'alliance' model long established in other sectors such as the arts. It has also identified the challenges characteristic of working in its remote and far-flung region, which are further detailed below. WANALA has made a significant contribution in delivering focused support and services to its members.

Linguistic diversity and endangerment

Around half of all Australia's Aboriginal languages, and the majority of those which are spoken today, are located in the west and north. The Pilbara and Kimberley areas are each home to dozens of languages, while Arnhem Land has Australia's greatest concentration of languages. The



Living Tongues Institute, an international language advocacy body, classifies Australia’s ‘Top End’ as the world’s number one hotspot of both language diversity and language endangerment.

WA has at least 75 Aboriginal languages, in addition to important groups of regional languages and dialects. The NT has at least 46 languages and a large number of dialects. This diversity of languages is one manifestation of a rich network of social, economic and political groupings.



Map showing the large numbers of languages in the west and north of Australia.
Map: David R Horton (creator), ©Aboriginal Studies Press, AIATSIS, and Auslig/Sinclair, Knight, Merz, 1996.

The WANALA region is linguistically rich due to its many centres and communities where Indigenous languages are spoken, in fact representing 90% of Australian languages that have prospects of long-term transmission and survival. Many of these communities and schools have a strong Aboriginal presence and a living and unbroken connection to language, culture and land.

Regional challenges

Despite the rich linguistic environment in the WANALA region, working with languages in the region means facing the challenges of remoteness, climate, limited access to services, numbers and distribution of languages, diversity in the vigour of languages, and the health and age of principal speakers. Other challenges include isolation, travel costs and time, limited availability and increased cost of infrastructure and services, lack of employment, transient incoming populations, and boom and bust local economies.

Turning specifically to languages and their contexts:

- language centres in the region typically need to support multiple languages over vast areas (e.g. Wangka Maya Pilbara Aboriginal Languages Centre supports 26 Pilbara languages across 200,000 km²)
- the strengths of languages varies from strong to endangered to extinct, so a variety of language support activities and strategies are needed
- many languages are currently on the brink of survival. This is a critical time as a generation of elders, many the last fluent speakers of languages, are passing away. There is extremely limited time to record and document these languages and associated knowledge and stories – and it is local community-based activity which can best work with such speakers.



A recent survey of WANALA members indicated that on average each organisation:

- supports 16 different languages
- covers an area of over 200,000 square km
- supports languages of varying vigour, from strong to no active speakers
- has 14 staff including 5 language teachers, and engages 30 elders or language experts
- conducts 15 different kinds of activities (see Appendix 3)
- caters for about 600 learners and over 300 visitors per year
- is located more than 1,500 km from its state capital (Perth or Darwin) and costs over \$700 for travel to that capital (or 11 hours drive)

Policy background

The Forum discussions strongly resonated with many of the national policy formulations over the last 30 years, most of which, however, have not been brought to fruition. There have been several policy initiatives on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. The first Aboriginal language association was formed in the 1980s and evolved into the then FATSIL (later FATSILC). In the first national policy in 1987 – the *National Policy on Languages* (Canberra, Australian Government Publishing Service, 1987, p5) – Jo Lo Bianco's preamble states:

Aboriginal languages have an ancient history on this continent. Aboriginal languages are the product of the unique cultural, historical and environmental identification of the Aboriginal people. Aboriginal languages have been used to define and interpret the Australian landscape and environment and many of these languages remain viable forms of communication. In addition, they are repositories of cultural values, information on socio-cultural organisation and law.

As Australia approaches the bicentenary of European settlement, it becomes a national obligation of great importance to recognize, value and take action to enhance the survival of Aboriginal languages and promote an appreciation and an awareness of them among non-Aborigines ...

A later formulation appeared in *Australia's Language: The Australian Language and Literacy Policy* a Commonwealth White Paper released in 1991.¹ An explicit National Indigenous Languages Policy has been in place since 2009, in the form of *Indigenous Languages – A*

¹ See

http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House_of_representatives_Committees?url=/asia/languages2/report/chapter3.htm (viewed 9/6/2016)



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*National Approach: Social Justice Report 2009.*² This document set out the Commonwealth plan to preserve Indigenous languages through actions including:

- increasing recognition of and information about Indigenous languages in all spheres of Australian life
- supporting greater coordination and assistance amongst Indigenous language centres to maximise their impact nationally and to reach languages not currently supported
- supporting language programs in schools
- undertaking a feasibility study to develop a National Indigenous Languages Centre.

Towards a coalition

Until recently, there were no regional, state or national bodies that fully engage with and respond to the needs of WA and NT Aboriginal language activities. WANALA has filled an important gap. WANALA's efforts complement those of the recognised peak body First Languages Australia, but even in combination are not able to represent all regions of Australia or the diversity of organisations, sectors and activities crucially involved in supporting languages. This uneven fragmentation of representation is not well addressed by setting up a hierarchical structure with language centres, state or regional bodies, and a single peak body, because language centres from vastly different locations share similar roles and challenges – for example, issues faced by languages in far north Queensland are more similar to those of the west coast than those faced by languages of Perth or Brisbane. Equally, WANALA members believe very strongly that activities and decisions about languages need to be kept accessible to and 'owned' by local, grass-roots language communities.

WANALA members believe that through WANALA's activities they are building the effective support and advocacy network that is needed to strengthen their voice. However, if the funding for WANALA and other advocacy networks comes to an end, these crucial voices and channels of communication will be lost. Therefore the Forum aimed not only to share the benefits of knowledge and experiences gained so far, but also to work towards a national organisational framework, policy and guidelines that can inform funding bodies to attain the best possible outcomes for languages, language organisations, and communities.

WANALA members are also concerned about the context of setting language policy, about participation (and access to outcomes of) the National Indigenous Collections Strategy, and

² See <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/appendix-3-indigenous-languages-national-approach-social-justice-report-2009> (viewed 9/6/2016)



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other matters of intellectual property and ownership whose implications devolve right down to families and individuals.

The “Towards a Coalition” Forum on 2nd June 2016

The “Towards a Coalition” Forum was the outcome of the WANALA membership’s discussions about the challenges they face in providing language services to their communities and in receiving appropriate levels of representation at the national level. A full day of the 2016 WANALA meeting in Alice Springs was dedicated to an open discussion of the issues and the way forward.

The Forum was facilitated by Dr Jakelin Troy, a Ngarigu Aboriginal woman and senior linguist at the University of Sydney. Over 40 Aboriginal languages organisations and projects from right across Australia were contacted and invited to attend or provide their input.

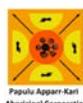
The aim of the Forum was to stimulate debate about major questions of national representation, such as whether languages are best served by having a ‘peak’ body. And if so, should there be a single body, or should it take the form of an alliance or coalition? What would be the scope of its functions and responsibilities? How should it be constituted, governed, and resourced? Is a coalition the best vehicle for evolutionary progress rather than revolutionary change, and to enable organisations to continue performing activities where they are best skilled and experienced?

During the Forum, all participants had the opportunity to voice their views. Video-conferencing was arranged to enable a small number of additional people to participate.

Documents and follow-up from the Forum appear at <http://wanala.org/coalition>.



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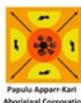
Outcomes discussion 1: Today’s issues facing language organisations

Following is a summary of the key issues that the groups identified:

1. recognition and respect for the value of languages, and for the elders who speak and speak for them
2. recognition of languages through rights frameworks such as Human and Indigenous Peoples’ rights, and the connections between language and Native Title
3. action on the links between language and wellbeing, examples including (mis-) communication between medical practitioners and Aboriginal people, and in legal contexts - understanding the law, and reducing incarceration rates
4. investing in the important and causal link between language and positive identities, education and employment outcomes, mental and physical health, and other indicators of wellbeing
5. fundamental problems in sustainability and flexibility in the languages support area where the resource and activity base are primarily designed around projects rather than capacity; for example one centre spent 3 years developing a stable program but progress halted when subsequent funding submission was unsuccessful
6. frequent mismatch between high expectations within and outside communities and depressed motivations and outcomes in difficult and disadvantaged situations
7. loss of bilingual programs in schools
8. need for design and recognition/accreditation of culturally responsive, appropriate learning environments
9. limited career pathways, progression and professional development for teachers
10. recognise and broaden what counts as qualification for teaching language within schools and other contexts
11. achieving recognition and payment for elders engaged in programs, also the logistics of payments to community members
12. practical and pedagogical issues in teaching “mother tongues” as second languages; a need for first language training for language workers and bilingual training for more experienced staff
13. inconsistent development of literacy and orthographies
14. wide diversity of working and cultural contexts, not only between urban and bush, but also between contexts like Alice Springs and remote communities
15. understanding and catering for high variation and granularity of languages, including clan languages, ceremonial languages, respect registers
16. responding to language change, such as the emerging language variants spoken by young people, “on the street” and in the media



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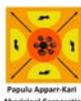


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17. need for high quality practices, and sufficient resources and capacity to deliver information about law, health, and business in Indigenous languages
18. funding is decreasing despite raised demand for services, for example language centres are increasingly providing teaching services to schools, cultural orientation for service providers (e.g. police, miners), providing more holistic programs for communities etc.
19. high workloads for staff who are also engaged in a wide range of auxiliary activities including training new staff and managing volunteers
20. urgency of but high resource cost for archiving, digitisation, data management – all needing expertise, policies, training, resources, infrastructure, co-ordination, and collaboration
21. industry-oriented activities take expertise and time but often there are not sufficient qualified staff or budget for employment; activities include administration; budgeting; applying for funds; governance/compliance; analysing risk management; contracts; policies and procedures; business acumen; mentoring; systems management and monitoring; community engagement; public relations, promotion and marketing; managing buildings, vehicles and equipment; and dealing with diverse clientele
22. new activities such as promotion, public communication, sharing are now necessary and positive but impose yet more demands
23. the complex relationship between Australian law and Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property rights and practices
24. opportunities and impacts of digital technologies and media
25. ultimately, the survival of languages effectively depends on this massive web of activities and the financial health and good governance of the language organisations



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Outcomes discussion 2: What should a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages peak body do?

This session asked participant groups to consider whether all could come together as one national body representing all language centres and projects, and what would be that body's roles, responsibilities, functions and structures. Again, participants split into 4 groups to undertake break-out discussions. A summary of the discussions follows.

A national representative body would:

- be a nationally funded, incorporated Indigenous body, with full financial transparency
- be experienced in the management and support of language services, with the capacity to work in partnership with language centres and related organisations to consult, develop and implement strategic plans
- be a strong governing body, with knowledge of and incorporating both contemporary and traditional ways of governance
- have broad representation of a least 2-3 representatives per state/territory, and ensure bottom up connection of community grassroots into decision making
- be knowledgeable about the following: the history of language policies; the economics of language maintenance, revival and usage; the relationships between languages and justice and wellbeing; and the tangible and intangible value of languages to communities and the wider public
- be a hub rather than having day-to-day management of, or responsibility for, language centres and related organisations.

Its functions would include:

- develop a national strategic plan for languages and their support organisations
- work with Government and communities in policy development
- share knowledge and culture to facilitate mutual support across bodies in the sector
- advocate on behalf of language centres and related organisations, with appropriate engagement with a wide range of sectors from Health to Sport
- involvement in the recommendations for language activity funding levels and distribution by Governments at all levels, with the knowledge and capacity to identify streams of funding to support training, professional development, and employment through RJP, CDEP, and IEI
- have the capacity to develop appropriate professional development and training nationwide to foster language centre and cross-institutional cadetships, traineeships, and scholarships



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- provide input into national accreditation of language practitioners, taking into account cultural and community values, for example the conferment of honorary higher education qualifications
- develop national industrial award programs for categories of language experts, language workers, linguists etc.; support development of the language industry through advice on training and qualifications, HR, staffing, budgets, working with schools, and employment support
- advise and advocate for language centres regarding legal requirements, copyright, Intellectual and Cultural Property Rights, rights of teachers, and advocate for suitable legislation where appropriate
- be involved in setting policy and resource distribution for archiving and other language preservation and documentation activities
- outreach through holding national forums, and a range of outlets including a national newsletter and active website



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Declaration

Declaration from a national meeting of language organisations at the Desert Peoples Centre in Alice Springs on 2nd June 2016 facilitated by WANALA and Batchelor Institute.

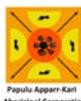
WANALA members and associate members value that the Ministry for the Arts supports the initiative to bring language organisations together to discuss language revival/maintenance and share collective experiences.

This meeting recommends the establishment of a national coalition to represent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and the community organisations supporting our languages.

1. The coalition will represent the voices of Aboriginal Language Centres and Language Projects through consultation and collaboration with our Elders and our communities.
2. The coalition will provide guidance for people who support and work with us for the benefit of our languages and cultures.
3. The coalition members will work together to respect the languages and cultures of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through a both---ways/two---ways approach.
4. Government and the coalition will work as partners in supporting our language work for our communities and shaping policies that impact on Aboriginal languages, cultures, identities and wellbeing.
5. We call on Government to recognise and promote Aboriginal Language Centres and Language Projects as one of the key pillars within our communities.
6. This declaration is prepared in an inclusive spirit to embrace all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and our languages.



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Appendix 1: Language Rights

There is widespread national and international awareness of the importance of the preservation of Aboriginal Languages and the interconnection it has to Aboriginal peoples cultural and spiritual wellbeing and identity. Article 13 of the United Nations’ Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples,³ for example, states that:

- Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures...
- States shall take effective measures to ensure this right is protected and also to ensure that indigenous peoples can understand and be understood in political, legal and administrative proceedings...

Currently, a large amount of research in Australia and overseas confirms a positive link between Indigenous language proficiency and wellbeing, including better physical and mental health, improved social cohesion, higher levels of education and employment, and a reduction in incarceration rates.

Appendix 2: Motivations for sustaining languages

1. SCIENTIFIC

- linguistics and cognition
- environmental and ecological knowledge: historical, biological, land management
- botanic, medical applications, plant use etc.
- archaeological knowledge, e.g. climate, geographical, settlement patterns
- language documentation methodologies

2. CULTURAL

- languages represent a group’s history, worldview, cultural expressions
- language relationships to land, land management, religion, kinship

3. EDUCATIONAL

- better education outcomes for Indigenous students through enhanced identity
- educational advantages in bilingualism
- mainstream awareness of Australian languages, cultures, histories and diversity
- becoming more educationally mainstream and supported in some states, e.g. NSW

³ www.hreoc.gov.au/social_justice/declaration/assembly.html



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4. HEALTH AND WELLBEING

- social cohesion, family ties, identity, self-esteem
- family relationships and continuity
- mental health, addictions and suicides etc.
- incarceration causes and rates
- employment - increase avenues and options

5. RIGHTS AND JUSTICE

- existing human rights frameworks e.g. UN declarations
- international movements and networks for language recognition and rights
- historical justice for dispossession and discrimination
- reconciliation/constitution/restitution/stolen generations
- evidence component of native title claims
- explicit recommendations, e.g. # 55 and others of the RCIADIC Report
- fairness of distribution of resources
- upcoming recognition referendum and its statements on Indigenous languages

6. ARTS

- unique verbal arts
- appreciate Indigenous languages as cultural expressions parallel to Indigenous arts

7. SPECIFICALLY AUSTRALIAN AND RELEVANT TO BROADER AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITIES

- languages as vehicles for respecting Indigenous cultures, knowledge, values, aesthetics
- community cohesion – multiculturalism and diversity, including in local communities
- Indigenous languages describe and are part of Australian history and identity
- knowledge of specifically Australian languages - relevant to this land, its precolonial, contact and colonial histories
- Indigenous language have unique expressions for Australia’s environment
- 100s of words from 70 Indigenous languages borrowed into English
- help understand mainstream history, e.g. through placenames
- specifically Australian history and legal processes: reconciliation/constitution/land rights/stolen generations
- now appearing in national institutions serving various functions, e.g. Prime Minister’s speech in Ngunnawal
- current national priority for ‘development of the north’ has positive and negative implications for Indigenous language-speaking communities





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Appendix 3: Typical activities undertaken by WANALA member organisations

The average WANALA organisation conducts 15 of these activities:

- language documentation
- language classes
- on-country visits
- translation/interpreting services
- develop language teaching resources
- publishing of books, videos, apps etc.
- broadcasting e.g. radio programs
- train language teachers
- archiving / records curation
- create/maintain a website
- provision of resources to language community
- evaluation, user surveys etc.
- public language awareness activities
- conferences, workshops
- community/public access, e.g. library, reference
- collaboration with local businesses or agencies
- responses to queries e.g. from media, researchers, public etc.
- provision of teachers/lessons to other bodies (schools, agencies etc.)
- specialist language activities, e.g. language nests, engaging youth etc.



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