

OPINION**Communication barriers thwart the intervention**

Claire Smith

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Despite their best efforts, the people implementing the intervention are not always communicating effectively with the people they are trying to help. (File photo) (*FaHCSIA*)

I was at the Aboriginal communities of Manyallaluk and Barunga when members of the intervention task force came to visit.

Major General Dave Chalmers and Dr Sue Gordon addressed the communities. They said they wanted to find out what people needed, and to communicate with them, not speak at them. They were pleasant and courteous.

It was only when they moved on that a serious problem emerged. Many people had not understood what they were saying.

Aboriginal people in these communities speak Kriol as a first language, and English as a second language, used only when speaking to non-Aboriginal people. These are multi-lingual and socially sophisticated communities, and some old people speak several Aboriginal languages, as well as Kriol. For them, English is a third, fourth or fifth language.

No wonder they could not understand Chalmers or Gordon.

My friend Joslyn explained it like this: "They talked too fast, and used too many big words ... people couldn't understand because there was no-one there to explain to the people what they were saying."

The task force is willing to use interpreters but in this case they'd been told it wasn't necessary. Their advice had come from the community, but it was not fully informed, and neither Chalmers nor Gordon were aware that every community in the Northern Territory has people who will need an interpreter.

This reveals a serious problem. Despite their best efforts, at all levels the people implementing the Northern Territory intervention are not always communicating effectively with the people they are trying to help.

The implications for the potential success of the intervention are disturbing.

Without proper communication it will be impossible for the Government to target funding to the areas where help is most needed, or to the programs most likely to succeed.

This is a failure of the past, of course, in the process of being repeated.

Addressing the basics

The intervention has injected \$1.5 million into the community of Barunga. There is new roadwork and drainage, new fences and signage, a wonderful new basketball court.

All of these were needed, and each is an important element of an overall government strategy, but they are not the community's immediate priorities, which are food, transport and safety.

Food is fundamental. The alcohol restrictions mean that profits from the local shop can no longer underwrite food costs. While there are plans to address this, in the short term people have less access to healthy food than they did before the intervention.

Less access to healthy food is not improving the lives of children at Barunga.

Manyallaluk has a different problem. The store here been closed for a couple of years now, and the minibus broke down a few months ago. Hardly anyone can afford a car, and it is a \$440 return trip by taxi to shop at Woolworths in Katherine. The priority here is a minibus to get people to and from town.

In this case, the intervention has not exacerbated the problem, but it hasn't helped either.

Safety is a priority, too. The 'signboard' where people can drink alcohol legally has been moved so it is now 25 kilometres from the nearest community. The old signboard was located on a flat area away from the road, and had a water tank, toilets and a shelter. It was within walking distance of the police station, handy if there was an accident or serious argument.

At the new signboard, there is nothing. No flat area, no water tank, no toilets and no shelter. So drunks sit along the side of the road, in the rain (since it is the wet season) or wander across the road, hoping to cadge a lift. It is only a matter of time until someone gets run over.

The community solution is a social club, which sells only beer and has strict limits: six cans for a man and four cans for a woman. At the intervention meeting, people called this out. While Chalmers and Gordon heard them, I'm not sure they understood that people were talking about the lives and health of loved ones, not just a new facility.

Better communication

If it is going to achieve effective policy outcomes, the intervention needs better communication, and a coordinated communication strategy.

Firstly, we need more effective communication systems for the task force and government business managers. To do this the Government should call on those people who regularly communicate with

Aboriginal people-anthropologists, linguists, church groups and, above all, local Aboriginal organisations. There is a wealth of experience to be drawn on.

Secondly, we need community vision/management plans for the 73 prescribed areas to identify what individual communities need and what works for them. These plans should address both the immediate effects of the intervention and the community's vision for its future, and they need to be co-ordinated so the data can be fed into regional plans, where required, and an overall plan for the Territory.

Community Vision Plans will allow an alignment of government and community priorities, and a more effective targeting of government funding. They will make it possible to shape the intervention so that it articulates with the needs and aspirations of the people affected.

Thirdly, we need cultural awareness programs, held on community lands, to instruct new residents about specific social structures as well as local histories and protocols, providing a basis for relationships of mutual respect and a safer and potentially more co-operative working environment.

We are at a critical point in Australia's history. Never before has there been such support for addressing the conditions of Aboriginal communities, and for closing the gap in life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

The intervention is the hot spot here, but its success requires much more than financial support and good intentions. The great challenge facing the Rudd Labor government is to convert the current attention to disadvantage into programs that work.

Effective policy outcomes require effective communication systems.

The alternative is a lovely new basketball court, a confused audience, and a \$440 taxi fare to do the weekly food shopping.

Professor Claire Smith is a researcher at the Institute of Advanced Study for Humanity, University of Newcastle. She has worked with the Barunga and Manyallaluk communities for almost 20 years.