



Aboriginal Resource and Development Services (ARDS) welcomes the Yolngu Nations Assembly's decision to reject the federal government's Stronger Futures Bill, and associated legislation.

ARDS develops and delivers programs and resources in partnership with communities and homelands across North East Arnhem Land, Darwin and other parts of the Northern Territory. Working in close collaboration with Yolngu communities, we are committed to enabling Indigenous Australians to take control of their own lives and to find ways to continue to contribute to the on-going resilience and vitality of their communities and to the wider Australian nation.

Within this context, ARDS is concerned by the Federal government's apparent commitment to passing the Stronger Futures legislation against the expressed and articulate wishes of Yolngu communities.

Through our work, ARDS recognises the fundamental importance and use of Indigenous languages in Yolngu communities. Language, culture, and expressions of both freedom and responsibility go hand in hand. These are fundamental to the prosperity, creativity and economic opportunities and responsibilities for people of all cultures. ARDS therefore acts and supports programs and strategies that respect what Indigenous people already know and what they want to know through mutually respectful inter-cultural and bilingual "two-way" learning.

Despite the government's 2011 Stronger Futures consultations, we continue to hear that Yolngu concerns, ideas and initiatives were not listened to and, by and large, are not recognised in the legislation.

- We remain committed to the evidence that a key to the development of resilient and productive engagement of Indigenous people in Australia society will be dependent upon the recognition, support, and respect for the languages and cultures of Australia's first people.

*By 'using local languages as the key to education ... we can really contextualise and empower people. We can begin to understand concepts and ideas, and really understand the meanings. This in turn gives us a better idea of where we are at this time. And then together, as a reconciled community of people in Australia, we can go forward and make a better future for all of us, black and white.'* Maratja Dhamarrandji. (former ARDS Chairperson)

- Alongside our Yolŋu colleagues and stakeholders, we are concerned about the ongoing policy of compulsory income management, which disproportionately affects Indigenous Australians. We encourage Senators to consider policies which will empower Yolŋu families and communities to make their own choices and raise strong families, rather than punitive approaches that take yet more responsibility and control away from those already disadvantaged.
- During the consultations, many Yolŋu themselves highlighted the need for children to attend school and become proficient in English *and* home languages. We are therefore concerned by the government approach that appears to punish “bad” parents for children’s low school attendance – rather than asking why children and families have become disengaged from the education process and what the government can do to support greater community involvement.
- Yolŋu have expressed concern that the proposed tough sentencing for liquor offenses will lead to problems within families as parents are removed to serve prison sentences for what in many cases are minor transgressions. Yolŋu themselves are concerned about the negative impact substance abuse is having on their communities, and have been creative and proactive in suggesting culturally appropriate solutions. We urge Senators to consider the alternatives put forward during consultations. Solutions generated and controlled by the people will be more effective and less costly.

In over 25 years of community development ARDS has seen the positive impact of empowering Indigenous people with knowledge, employment and independence. We have recognised the importance of listening to Yolŋu and standing by them as they work through problems and challenges faced by so many Indigenous Australians today.

We therefore call on Senators considering the Stronger Futures Bill to please LISTEN to what the Yolŋu Nations have outlined in their statement, and put an end to the destructive impact of this legislation and excessive intervention into the lives of the Indigenous peoples of the Northern Territory.