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SCOPING REMOTE NORTH AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

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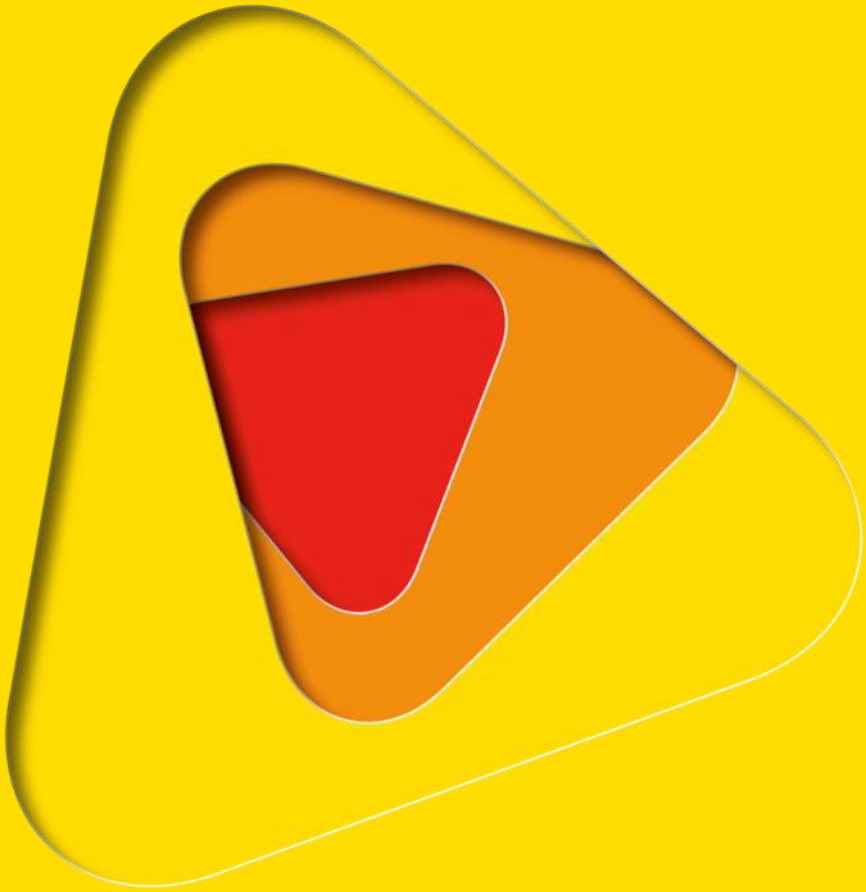
Annual Report 2014



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Annual Report

Scoping Remote North Australian Community Resilience

Project Title	Scoping Remote North Australian Community Resilience		
Project Leader	Jeremy Russell Smith (CDU)	**Cluster Lead End User**	Ms Suellen Flint Jennifer Pidgeon (a/g)
Core research team	Dr. Jackie Gould (CDU)	Mr Glenn James (NAILSMA)	
	Dr. Bev Sithole (ARPNet)	Hmalan Hunter-Xenie (ARPNet)	

The Elevator Pitch

What is the Problem: Remote north Australian communities are susceptible to cyclones, floods and bushfires. Many communities experience minor events each year, and are at risk of events which are catastrophic in scale. Many of these communities consist of largely Indigenous populations. Cultural and socio-economic factors combine with the challenges of remote service delivery (cost, low levels of infrastructure, and distance from the urban centres which host key service delivery organisations) to create situations where communities can be highly vulnerable to natural hazard events. In this context, it is important to understand how these variables could be navigated to enhance community resilience. This task requires a detailed understanding of current capacities, preparation and response strategies, communication pathways and local governance structures.

Why it is Important: The existing body of academic literature on resilience contains limited material which deals with remote Australia. By and large, this literature raises the need to fostering greater community engagement and empowerment, on better communication strategies, and the need for better education regarding emergency procedures. This work however contains few detailed case studies about current arrangements or how such goals can be realised. This project is important because it will address this critical research gap, to enhance the safety of people and infrastructure in the remote north, and identify cost-effective and locally-relevant mechanisms for increasing community resilience.

What we are doing : This project will undertake and synthesise three streams of research. The Aboriginal Research Practitioners Network (ARPNet) consists of Indigenous researchers trained in Participatory Action Research. They will work in two Northern Territory communities (Ngukurr and Gunbalanya) to document community understandings of natural hazards, risks, current response strategies and community capacity. The North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance (NAILSMA) will map the hard, institutional and cultural assets which underpin local capacity and the delivery of emergency services (and which are at risk during a hazard). And the Research Institute for Environment and Livelihoods (RIEL) at CDU will work with End Users to explore the challenges faced by agencies in the delivery of emergency services to remote communities. The project team will then work collaboratively to identify where community and agency understandings/expectations converge and diverge, and areas of community capacity which can be built on to enhance community safety.

Introduction:

Nearly 45% of the north Australian community are Indigenous and the majority of these live in remote communities which are susceptible to major cyclones, floods and bushfires. Despite this, most are ill-served by existing emergency services. While these communities have significant Indigenous and local knowledge allowing them to understand and interact with their traditional estate, poor health, under-investment in infrastructure, restricted communication services and flawed governance models heighten vulnerability to the (increasing) array of natural hazards extant across the region. Current government services appear ill equipped to deal effectively with BNH events now and there is no clear path for improvement in the foreseeable future.

At the same time it will be prohibitively expensive to attempt to replicate the urban service model in remote communities. More importantly, such an attempt may not match the needs, capabilities and expectations of remote Indigenous communities: north Australia is replete with examples of development projects in remote communities that have failed due to poor communication in the planning phase, a failure to consult to achieve culturally sustainable outcomes and the mismatch of resources to requirements. A key question then is what service models can be employed to facilitate greater resilience in the context of Australia's remote Indigenous north?

Resilience is broadly seen as a capacity to respond to and 'bounce back' from a major natural hazard. Remote communities are generally seen as 'vulnerable' because of poverty, poor health, low education levels, and the lack of services and infrastructure associated with their isolation from major urban centres. Remoteness, and cultural and linguistic diversity, compound the issue of poor communication between communities and the structures of political representation, resource allocation, and service provision which are centred in the city.

Current Australian policy positions resilience as "the collective responsibility of all sectors of society, including all levels of government, business, the non-government sector and individuals". It describes "a disaster resilient community" as "one that works together to understand and manage the risks that it confronts" (National Strategy for Disaster Resilience, COAG, p iii). In a remote Indigenous setting, the risks which need to be managed are different to those affecting other locales, as are the capacities of local communities. 'Working together' in such settings requires different kinds of partnerships and response structures. This unique context underpins the rationale for the *Scoping Resilience* project.

Community resilience among Indigenous communities in remote areas is an interesting but complex concept. An appreciation of the complex nature of Aboriginal circumstance, lifestyle and history is crucial for the project. For example, initial discussions at a focus group meeting to plan for the project elicited such as *"them mob government worrying for natural hazards when being in a community is hazardous itself",* suggesting complexities inherent to how Indigenous people view natural hazards vis a vis the hazards they face in daily life. The notion that hazards may be punishments from ancestors for people because they failed to look after country or are not living on country is also very strong. The belief that hazards can be minimised, stopped or averted with good natural resource management presents interesting dimension to this work, and may represent an emerging space for developing mitigation and preparation/response strategies which bring both Indigenous and Western knowledge systems together. While approaches to 'resilience' often emphasise such contextual dynamics, little research exists which un-packages these complexities in detail, as they play out in remote Indigenous Australian communities.

The Project:

This project will address the complexities inherent in this problem by identifying and building on the existing scaffold of knowledge and understanding of bushfire and natural hazards. It will develop a fine-grained understanding of how local knowledge and other capacity underpin existing risk management and post-event responses, and what changes would be most effective and valued. It will also document how communities proposed positive changes could best be implemented.

The key aims of the project are to:

- Describe the types of natural hazards and impacts of greatest present concern to Indigenous communities in remote northern Australia;
- Summarise the aspirations of participating communities for social and economic development and meeting cultural obligations, and identify those aspirations that appear most vulnerable to natural hazards;
- Describe present approaches to dealing with natural hazards and outline Indigenous views of their appropriateness and effectiveness;
- Describe human capability, including skill sets and experience, formal institutions and social networks, presently available within participating communities;

This project, along with the complementary 'Project B1.2.2 Action research on appropriate governance models for building and maintaining resilience in local communities' (to commence in early 2016), will employ a highly participatory, applied and action-oriented approach to engage residents of (selected) remote communities and relevant stakeholders. This approach will in itself contribute to the generation of solutions by creating a strong two-way flow of information. Its findings will be widely promulgated through face-to-face contact with key end-users as well as conventional communication products and media.

The project will utilise the research services of the Aboriginal Research Practitioners' Network (ARPNet). ARPNet is a coordinated network of Aboriginal people who have been trained in Participatory Action Research. Members of the network are contracted to conduct research, evaluation and planning activities using qualitative and quantitative methods from the ARPNet Dilly Bag (Sithole 2013). For each project ARPNet members work with a community-based Lead Researcher to clarify the research objective and frame the approach. ARPNet research is then conducted in the first language of the participants with due attention to cultural sensitivities. The axiomatic incorporation of cultural relevance has consistently led to research findings of a high explanatory calibre. Consistent improvements in understanding of things like project failure in remote communities, when compared to previous 'traditional' research approaches, have been observed in ARPNet research projects.

The findings made by ARPNet will be cross-referenced against parallel research streams undertaken by NAILSMA and RIEL. NAILSMA will conduct a desk top literature survey, and an asset mapping exercise. RIEL will liaise with emergency service agencies and key End Users. Together, these will allow a detailed depiction of the service delivery landscape, and varied understandings of it from agency and community stakeholders.

A summary of sought outcomes include:

- Understanding of issues and views of remote Indigenous communities that require consideration in improved BNH response;
- Assessment of capabilities and institutions presently contributing to responses, and awareness of those presently under-utilised or poorly applied;

- Developing local and regional awareness of risk combined with relevant planning tools and responses;
- Better informed local and external institutions (e.g emergency service providers) about Indigenous needs for information and preferences for disaster response;
- Integrate and raise the profile of existing local knowledge and capacities to respond to and mitigate disasters;
- By recognising the value of local Indigenous research capacity, improve the capability of community based research practitioners through the activities, local partners and other resources in this project;
- Communications and collaboration models informed by customary networks, local authority and capacity and other local/regional stakeholders as well as the requirements of government and emergency services.

What's been happening:

- Initial meetings involving the RIEL/NAILSMA/ARPNet project team were held to discuss roles and responsibilities, scope and methodology for the project. Jackie Gould (TNI Post-doc) commenced work with the project in mid-March. Representatives from the respective Northern Hub projects further discussed how to coordinate methodologies and project scopes to enhance synergies and reduce tensions/duplication of research efforts.
- The hosting of a focus group with ARPNet members in March discussed views of natural hazards, potential case study sites, and initial discussion of field methodologies.
- Initial outreach made to key Northern Territory agency End Users (Steve Rothwell, Chief Fire Officer/Director, NT Fire and Rescue Service; Mark Ashley, Director, Bushfires Northern Territory).
- Interview conducted with Steve Rothwell, Director/Chief Fire Officer, Fire and Rescue Services (NT Police, Fire and Emergency Services).
- Connections established with Cluster Lead End User, Suellen Flint.
- Project Management Plan developed.
- Case study sites identified.
- Subcontract for NAILSMA finalised (but has not yet been signed).
- Subcontract for ARPNet finalised and approved.
- ARPNet Lead Researchers in each community confirmed, and process of confirming project team members is underway.
- ARPNet contacted the case study communities, and developed a draft 'Field Manual' with the participatory tools and questionnaire to be employed during fieldwork. These are being field tested by community based researchers in Maningrida.
- ARPNet contacted key organisations and researchers in the selected communities (Ngukurr and Gunbalanya). Consultations to get formal consent from local organisations, community institutions and TOs have been completed.
- Training for the ARPNet practitioners will occur in late August/early September, and fieldwork will be scheduled in the weeks following the training. Preparation for these activities is already underway and dates for training have been confirmed. Field plans for each community will be developed following the training

- An ethics application has been submitted to AIATSIS. We hope to have the application approved at their meeting on 11th August.
- A draft paper has been prepared for the CRC conference and is currently being finalised the project team. A conference poster has been submitted.

Publication list:

A conference paper and poster are currently being prepared for the 2014 AFAC conference.

List of current integrated project team members:

- Jackie Gould, The Northern Institute, CDU
- Glenn James , NAILSMA
- Dr Bev Sithole, ARPNet
- Hmalan Hunter-Xenie, ARPNet
- Suellen Flint, Fire and Emergency Services WAG
- Steve Rothwell, NT Fire and Rescue Service
- Mark Ashley, Bushfires Northern Territory