

# 'We help each other': stories and experiences of disaster management and preparedness in Aboriginal communities in Darwin

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## Introduction

In 2015, the NTES funded a research project<sup>1</sup> which consulted housed and homeless Aboriginal people in Darwin, learning about their experiences of severe weather, cyclones and other emergency events. The research was initiated as a partnership project between the Australian Red Cross and Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation (the local traditional owners of Darwin); two organisations with responsibilities for keeping people safe during emergency events in Darwin.

The aim of this research was to provide NTES with stories and background information which would help them to evaluate and improve their current policies and practices for populations within Darwin who may respond to emergency events, and emergency management practices, differently to mainstream populations. A collaborative research design, was developed with the Ground Up research team at the Northern Institute, Charles Darwin University, and Aboriginal researchers, consultants and community leaders.

## What we did

Initial consultations were carried out with housed Aboriginal people living in each of Darwin's seven Aboriginal Communities, as well as with homeless Aboriginal people living rough in the Long Grass. While population numbers can vary radically, at any given time there are likely to be around 7000 Aboriginal people living in government owned housing in Town Communities in Darwin (Australian Government 2010). Housing in these communities is often managed by local housing corporations, who connect with, but are not responsible for, emergency management procedures. Population numbers also fluctuate amongst Darwin's Long Grass population, with several thousand people likely to be sleeping rough in temporary or semi-permanent camps each night. Many of these people are from remote Aboriginal communities and are very comfortable

## ABSTRACT

In 2015, the Northern Territory Emergency Services (NTEMS) funded a research project concerned with the strategies employed by housed and homeless Aboriginal people in Darwin when responding to emergency situations. These groups represented vulnerable populations which were catered for within existing Territory based Emergency Management Plans, but had not previously been consulted about their experiences of cyclones or other emergency events. This paper details some of the outcomes of this research as it was carried out by the Ground Up team at the Northern Institute in partnership with the Australian Red Cross and Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation. It focuses on stories and experiences of living with cyclones and other emergency events as told by Indigenous project participants, as well as on policy and service delivery implications for government and non-government organisations. Drawing on these accounts, we suggest it is productive to recognise resilience as a collective achievement, which arises in appropriate forms of partnering and collaboration between local Indigenous people and NT Emergency Services.

<sup>1</sup> This project was funded through the Northern Territory Natural Disaster Resilience Program For further information see <https://dcm.nt.gov.au/supporting-government/natural-disaster-resilience-program>.

sleeping under the stars in a place where it is never cold. Homelessness in this situation has a somewhat different meaning in Darwin compared with other Australian cities (Pollard et al. 2017), but of course these Long Grassers may be particularly vulnerable during severe weather or cyclones. It was for this reason that NTES were interested in hearing their stories.

During these project consultations, we worked with Aboriginal community leaders before consultations were carried out with residents living in Darwin's Aboriginal Town Communities and in the Long Grass. An Indigenous researcher always initiated discussions, which, where possible, were carried out in Aboriginal languages. Those we spoke to told stories of emergency events they had experienced in the past, and explained how they had managed during these times—working together with friends and family, as well as with government agencies and service providers.

## A Ground Up approach

The Ground Up<sup>2</sup> research process takes seriously the Aboriginal knowledge production and agreement-making practices made clear over many years of collaborative work with Yolngu Aboriginal Elders from north-east Arnhem Land. In one rendering of such processes, originally written in a Yolngu language and then translated and closely analysed, a hunting metaphor is mobilised to explicate research (see Garnngulkpuy & Lawurra 2005). It begins with the right people sitting properly in the right place. A lot of talking needs to precede action, reminding us of where we have come from, our rights, roles and accountability, and our strengths and callings. Decisions are made together as to who should do what, in which direction they should go before returning. When everyone has undertaken their agreed task according to ancestral rule, and returns to share what they have procured, they discuss the different subtle flavours and tell their stories and make plans for an even more successful collaboration sometime soon. Such careful, in-place sharing of authority and capacity must characterise research. (For a more detailed discussion of metaphysical commitments underlying such Indigenous practices, see Garnngulkpuy 2002).

From a Western methodological point of view, this approach could be said to use Kathryn Pyne Addelson's (2002 p.123) notion of 'participants in collective action'. Read through this lens, disaster resilience and effective emergency management emerges as an outcome of diverse forms of collective action, including various means by which organisers, policy-makers, academics, Aboriginal participants and others, differently enact resilience and preparedness. Our research in this area, assumes that both Aboriginal people and emergency management organisations can and should be the end users of research, and that the development of collaborative theoretical and practical approaches to disaster resilience will benefit by engaging with differences.

## Research in Town Communities and the Long Grass

At the outset of the project, NTES (and other government departments within the emergency management area) were concerned that Town Community residents, and people living in the Long Grass did not understand how emergency services work, or how they could be engaged. However, through this research it became apparent that these groups knew quite precisely the nature of emergency response services, including the role of police, NTES and the Larrakia Nation Night Patrol (an early intervention service supporting Darwin's Aboriginal populations<sup>3</sup>). They had stories to tell of their understanding of how NTES, Night Patrol and police services could be mobilised. They were confident of their rights, and of the value of these services. They were also able to articulate very reasonable strategies around how they might connect with these services in the event of an emergency, depending on where they happened to be at the time.

Those in the Town Communities told stories of ways that they had organised themselves and others in their communities during previous emergency events - collecting food, alerting neighbours and either preparing to remain in their houses, or organising private and community vehicles to transport themselves and others to shelters. There were some camps where Larrakia Nation vehicles were welcome, and others where NTES vehicles were generally deployed to support emergency management activities. Residents were clear about this distinction and what could be expected from these respective organisations. In speaking with Long Grassers, we found that people were generally very appreciative of the support that they received from Emergency Services organisations during adverse weather events. The work of the Police and Night Patrol assisting people at these times was highly valued, as were the efforts of government agencies and service providers assisting people with food, shelter, bedding, and medical attention following a cyclone or other emergencies.

Reporting on these discussions, comments below have been roughly arranged to correspond with the key principles of emergency management which are mobilised in the Northern Territory Emergency Plan: Preparedness, Response and Recovery (NT Emergency Management Council, 2016).

## Preparedness

We asked people if their communities had formal plans or procedures to follow in event of a cyclone. While some people could describe personal strategies for managing cyclones that they had enacted in the past, no community reported having a pre-prepared cyclone plan, but many people mentioned that community leaders often provided information and guidance prior to and during bad weather or other emergency events.

2 For further information on Ground Up projects, visit <http://groundup.cdu.edu.au>.

3 For more information see: <http://larrakia.com/cause-view/night-patrol>.

Very early on in our consultations housing emerged as a key issue. This was around the number of cyclone coded houses available to residents and clarifying responsibilities for housing maintenance. People in the Town Communities were often worried that their houses were not adequately coded or maintained, at the same time as describing themselves as feeling safer in their homes and preferring to stay there during extreme weather events. The importance of involving Yilli Rreung Aboriginal Housing Corporation as a key stakeholder in cyclone safety discussions was reiterated on several occasions. Residents were not always clear which houses in their communities were cyclone coded or safe given structural and other deterioration.

NTES were interested to know the best ways of informing people of an impending cyclone. The Long Grassers had access to quite profound environmental knowledge of the weather; they were very good judges of impending weather events, and had very impressive networks of communication which were opaque to outsiders. Primary mainstream sources of information for people in Town Communities were their elders, TV, Radio and direct contact with the police or Night Patrol. Frequently Town Community leaders took on the role of monitoring media reports, and making decisions around suitable actions or evacuation procedures for other residents. There was no mention of social media as a current source of information.

When asked how they are informed about bad weather, Long Grassers talked about remaining connected within networks of family and friends. Many were in constant contact with relatives who would keep tabs on their health and safety and update them with important information—such as approaching storms and cyclones. Sometimes specific local hubs, were significant to remaining safe. For example, those we spoke to in a popular beachside suburb, also said that the people in the general community, such as the staff at the bottle shop would tell them when very bad weather was coming. Royal Darwin Hospital has long been a meeting place for Aboriginal visitors to Darwin, and was also identified by people camping nearby as a cyclone proof venue, where people felt safe to congregate and be close to their relatives who were in hospital. If bad weather was coming, people talked about all moving into the hospital so they could see the news on the TV.

Some participants used traditional environmental knowledge:

*'First of all if all the bird sounds go silent, if you listen and there is not a single sound, then you know the cyclone is coming. After that the wind will come. Blow and stop. Blow and stop. Then everyone knows the cyclone is coming.'*

## Response

Transport was raised as a significant issue at the Town Communities we visited. There were various strategies mentioned for making do with available vehicles, as well as requests for better transport services to be provided. In the Darwin Town Communities it was very common for people to recall being picked up by the police or Night Patrol.

*'The Emergency Services people have a bus to pick people up. They come here, not the Night Patrol (Note: some communities are not serviced by Larrakia Nation) but the NT Emergency Services. They ask if people want to be picked up.'*

However, this was not the case in all Town Communities, particularly those at a distance from the CBD. Some residents talked about ways that they organised their own transport or missed out.

*'I took people to the Nightcliff shelter in the church bus. We could use the church bus. There were loads of people to be taken. I just kept going back and forth. Then I came back and stayed here in my house.'*

*'Most of us mob have cars. Here the community supports each other; we give all the kids a lift. Northern Territory Emergency Services come here, we haven't seen the police or Night Patrol.'*

However, it was notable that many people we spoke to were very comfortable being picked up by police and Night Patrol, and described strategies of either calling police vehicles to come and pick them up, or arranging their movements so as to come into contact with Night Patrol or NTES vehicles they knew would be patrolling certain areas. Being able to connect with these services was a part of the narrative account of emergency management provided by those we consulted, and the significance of maintaining stability in these services became very clear.

People living in the Long Grass in particular were appreciative of these transport services and could frequently recount times in the past when they had been taken to shelters by police, NTES or Night Patrol vehicles.

*'Night Patrol know where we are, at Casuarina, other places. They come and get us.'*

Some people also talked about the strategies they had developed to help these services find them and pick them up in the event of a cyclone.

*'When very bad weather comes, straight away we pick up all our things, and we go over there to that toilet block [pointing]. We all crowd in there, wait for the police or Night Patrol. We get to the shelter, wait to be picked up.'*

There was some recognition that Town Community and Long Grass residents felt more comfortable engaging with Indigenous staff and volunteers around emergency events (i.e. during preparations, and at shelters and recovery centres), and that employing Indigenous staff to liaise between Indigenous communities and official agencies may help limit distress and cross-cultural miscommunication at these times (Spencer et al. 2016, p. 26).

## Recovery

Following a cyclone or severe weather event, the recovery stage is generally more significant for Town Community residents than Long Grassers who will not have experienced damage to housing or community infrastructure<sup>4</sup>. Town Community residents spoke about

clean-ups as the primary means by which they could work together and help things to get back to normal.

*'Afterwards we check our house, put rubbish on the road, assess damage, move trees – work together.'*

There was a general interest in greater involvement in preparations and management of emergencies; both in relation to general maintenance to be carried out year-round, and in the event of an emergency. They all agreed that the Night Patrol and other Larrakia Nation outreach services play a crucial role in supporting Darwin and Palmerston's Indigenous communities and play a very significant role in the management of emergency events.

There was also a clear agreement that increased levels of support around current emergency management practices would help improve safety and well-being in times of crisis. Specifically, assistance with clean-ups and increased levels of general housing maintenance in the Town Communities, increased availability of transport to shelters, and earlier and more localised access to shelters for those in the Long Grass.

Policy and Service Delivery Recommendations:

In many of the Town Communities we visited, residents sought further collaborative engagement with Emergency Services on the development of future disaster management strategies and service provision. Continued engagement with elders and prominent community members was a respectful practice, and an appropriate way to negotiate emergency management responses in the future.

Continued commitment to information and knowledge sharing between Indigenous communities government and service providers was seen as important by most of the Indigenous participants. In relation to Town Communities in particular, it was clear that these communities have viable social and political structures and leadership, and developing a formal role for emergency management within the community was seen as a promising way for NTES to be able to access and appropriately engage these structures.

### Development of Safety Leader positions in interested Town Communities

In all communities we visited, there was clear support for this initiative which was proposed by the Indigenous researchers working on the project. Such a position would couple employment and capacity building within Town Communities with a commitment to culturally appropriate disaster response and good working relationships between Town Communities and emergency management organisations. The proposal was that any action in this direction should be undertaken on a trial basis and may only be undertaken in a few pilot communities in the first instance. It would involve clear identification of the role and its responsibilities, training programs and appropriate institutional support from Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation and one or more other organisations.

These Safety Leaders would be a point of contact for NT Emergency Services, service providers, and community members. These ideas were very clearly articulated. These

safety officers could be offered a clearly defined paid role, which would include a uniform (e.g. hi-vis vest with 'Safety Leader' printed on the back), and involve formal training, and a mobile phone before and during emergency events. In the first instance this role may be offered on a 3 month trial basis, and it may be offered to more than one person in each community. Duties may include: community education, monitoring and maintenance of hazards outside of emergency events, transport coordination during emergency events, responsibility for distribution of cyclone packs, responsibility for upkeep of community signage, familiarity with social media as a means of receiving up-to-date information during emergency events.

### Collaborative development of emergency management strategies in Town Communities where a need has been identified

The focus of this project has been on hearing stories and learning about the experiences of Indigenous people in greater Darwin during emergency events. It has not been on the negotiation of community-based strategies for disaster management. However, in several communities this has presented itself as a possible next step. The development of these strategies would take place in the Town communities themselves and would differ considerably from community to community. The focus of this work may not necessarily be to seek the close integration of Town communities and Northern Territory Emergency Services systems of operation, but may offer communities the opportunity to focus on their own ways of managing emergency events, and how they may seek to productively connect with services or assistance able to be offered by external organisations. This work may be connected to the appointment and development of Safety Leader positions, and would require the involvement of Larrakia Nation.

### Prioritise working through existing Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation outreach programs to support those living in the Long Grass during the wet season

Indigenous people living in the Long Grass come from many different tribal groups in the NT are most often well connected to family in the area and their remote communities, and are collectively aware of how and where to access shelter in event of a cyclone. They also believe firmly that the Larrakia people are the traditional owners of Darwin and therefore have significant authority. Those who are not able to seek shelter with family at these times do remain reliant on transport provided by Larrakia Nation Night Patrol, or NTES and police vehicles. Larrakia Nation staff maintains constant contact with Long Grass communities through their outreach programs and have an up-to-date sense of where people are camping and their particular vulnerabilities at any point in time. This

<sup>4</sup> Some Long Grassers expressed some concern that after an emergency event they may lose their camping spot, or their clothes and bedding become wet and may need replacing. However, recovery activities were not discussed or mentioned in terms different to the management of other everyday life challenges.

knowledge, and these face-to-face relationships, are a great resource for any external agencies seeking to work in the Long Grass, particularly around assessing and supporting preparedness prior to severe or extreme weather events. Any further work supporting awareness and preparedness in the Long Grass should also support and operate through, or in connection with, existing Larrakia Nation programs.

## Conclusion

Emerging in each of the sites of this research project have been stories and descriptions of ways in which people have continue to manage bad weather events and other emergencies, and how management and preparedness may be carried out as a collaborative practice to build community. What did not emerge in any of these accounts was an understanding of emergency management as something that was imposed on or offered to a community as a means of managing or ameliorating existing social or other problems. Rather, disaster resilience was seen as emerging out of appropriate collaborative practice between Indigenous people and various government and non-government service organisations.

This is a significant reversal of conventional ways of seeing resilience as either ontologically prior to the work of emergency management, or as contingent on high levels of self-reliance (Gaillard 2007; Manyena et al. 2011). In the consultations carried out as part of this project, disaster resilience seems more appropriately conceptualised as an outcome of the already ongoing work of maintaining appropriate relationships of practice and authority in Aboriginal communities, whilst also extending these to include other emergency services people and practices.

This again entails an understanding of disaster resilience as – in Addelson’s terms – as emergent in collective action. The Yolŋu philosophers in our collaborations enlisted a metaphysics akin to that of Dewey’s (1927) *The Public and Its Problems* in which the public, here as safe and resilient communities, is constituted by the problem of working together to explore and enhance practices of care and concern that go beyond, but remain consistent with, the bonds and accountabilities of ancestral kinship networks. This entails a commitment on the part of non-Indigenous organisations to working collaboratively with community elders to build community and keep traditional accountabilities of care and concern strong.

For this reason, emergency management organisations and their managers should beware of committing to practices that reflect a top-down way of thinking about and constituting resilience. To avert such undermining practice, elders and safety officers should be recognised as crucial hubs and advisors, not as volunteers. As with all authoritative work within traditional society, their work with government and non-government organisations needs to be recognised and valued. Then, sensitive and respectful young Aboriginal Australians, under the guidance and authority of local elders, can contribute to the constitution of more resilient and diverse forms of social life.

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