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Working Together with Remote Indigenous Communities to Facilitate Adapting to Using Energy Wisely: Barriers and Enablers

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Abstract

A $12 million Commonwealth funded consortium project trialled energy efficiency initiatives in six remote Indigenous communities over three years. This project, which won several awards, employed and educated over 80 local Yolŋu to educate their fellow community members to use power wisely. The research and evaluation component was designed together by Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers and entailed ethnography and a local Indigenous co-researcher approach. Sixteen local Yolŋu co-researchers conducted 125 in-depth qualitative interviews with community members across six communities in the local languages. At the beginning of the project, the Yolŋu co-researchers conducted 40 narrative interviews with fellow Indigenous community members to find out how they use power, and to identify barriers to and enablers of using power efficiently. Towards the end of the project, Yolŋu co-researchers conducted 85 in-depth interviews with fellow Indigenous community members and with Yolŋu who had educated community members to evaluate the project. The interpreted and transcribed interviews were analysed using a combination of thematic and narrative strategies (interviews at the start of the project) and of content, thematic and narrative strategies (evaluation interviews). The stories provide rare insights into how Yolŋu used, experienced and interpreted fire or power in the old days, missionary times and government days. The stories identify

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barriers to, and enablers of, Indigenous and non-indigenous people working together designing and conducting projects. The stories capture how Yolŋu educators and Indigenous community members experienced and interpreted the project—including effective practices, challenges, impediments and recommendations for the future. In this paper, we share the essence of these stories to provide an overview of the key barriers and enablers of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people working together in remote Indigenous communities to use power efficiently. We propose that, for projects with Indigenous people to be effective, non-indigenous partners need to closely and genuinely work together with remote Indigenous communities prior to applying for funding and implementing projects as well as throughout the projects. The projects need to employ a long-term and adaptive process.

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Keywords: Energy efficiency; Indigenous communities; Collaboration; Enablers; Barriers

1. Introduction

In Australia, nearly 100,000 Indigenous people live in remote communities in a tropical monsoonal climate consisting of a dry and a wet season [1, 2]. Both seasons are characterized by high temperatures over 30 degrees, but the wet season between November and April is experienced as very hot because of high humidity of up to 80% as compared to the lower humidity during the dry season between May and October [3]. Indigenous Australians in remote communities generally classify as low-income earners because of limited education and employment options in remote communities [4].

Power facilitates access to light, cooking and thermal comfort. Indigenous communities are dependent on essential services including power being provided by external providers from government and industry [5]. Ensuring power availability is a constant challenge for Indigenous households. However, the ability to access energy, in turn, influences the frequency and severity of other significant but less obvious interdependent challenges Indigenous communities continue to experience such as loss of traditional knowledges, chronic diseases, mental health issues, employment participation, substance abuse and domestic violence, school attendance and retention rates, and lowered life expectancy [6, 7]. In addition to these challenges, climate change increases the risk that infrastructures, including provisions for power, will be compromised in remote Indigenous communities in Northern Australia [2].

Although households pay for power, because of rising costs of power production and higher costs of providing power in remote Indigenous communities, the provision of power to remote communities tends to be heavily subsidised [5]. Consequently, energy providers are increasingly interested in improving energy efficiency and reducing energy consumption in remote Indigenous communities. Nevertheless, rising electricity and fuel prices create opportunities for Indigenous communities to provide services in monitoring energy; educating the community in energy efficiency; enhancing the energy efficiency of private, community and commercial buildings; supplying renewable energy; and maintaining energy and water infrastructure [5]. Furthermore, new opportunities are emerging for Indigenous communities to (re)build and extend their adaptive capacities based on utilizing their traditional knowledges to utilize the emerging carbon neutral economy and to assist Australia with greenhouse gas emission abatement [6, 10, 11]. These energy related services could not only save energy and carbon but significantly contribute to changing the current detrimental trajectory of Indigenous communities from struggling to thriving by increasing empowerment, self-sufficiency and ecological sustainability, and thus adaptive capacity, of Indigenous communities [5, 6, 12].

These issues can only be addressed and these opportunities can only be utilized if Indigenous communities and non-Indigenous agencies (from different authority levels and with different expertise) are sincerely working together. However, being able to genuinely work together seems to have eluded us so far. A $12 million Commonwealth funded consortium project that trialled energy efficiency initiatives in six remote Indigenous communities in Northern Australia over three years provides some insights into the barriers to, and enablers, of this collaboration.