



Remote Engagement Coordination – Indigenous Evaluation Research (REC-IER) Project

EARLY FINDINGS

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Introduction

The Remote Engagement Coordination – Indigenous Evaluation Research (REC-IER) project is funded through the NTG Department of Housing and Community Development. CDU researchers have worked collaboratively with Indigenous research organisations, researchers and knowledge authorities to clarify local understandings and imperatives of good engagement and coordination, and to develop processes for giving feedback to government on their engagement and coordination activities in remote Aboriginal communities.

Key learnings from community consultations

Early research involved CDU and local Indigenous researchers working together to speak with Elders and community members asking them about their experiences of government engagement, as well as what good government engagement and coordination means for them.

General Insights

Effective engagement and coordination includes:

- Maintaining, and working through, the original and final **authority of elders**.
- Supporting the development of **new generations** of leaders and elders, who will learn how to lead by watching how government people and elders engage each other properly.
- Talking to the **right people**, in the right order and at the right time; while these people may be different for different business, but must always include the landowners.
- Bringing the **'back-story'** behind government projects – the policies, the funding decisions, the roles of various departments and individuals – out into the open for discussion.
- Learning from **history**. Both the good history (for example) of how we used to work together and mentor each other properly, and the bad history (for example) of the way poor housing development and land allocation has undermined the community spirit and coherence.
- Recognising that **unemployment** poisons young people, and working, in all areas of interaction between government and community, to produce more stable and properly paid employment opportunities.
- Implementing what could be called a **community development** approach, recognising that the final goal of effective engagement and coordination is always to bring to life a new generation of strong, respectful, connected young people on country.



Community Specific Insights: Galiwin'ku

Authority of Elders

- Decision-making needs to start with traditional owners and elders groups, not at the council office.
- The government officers speaking with elders should themselves be senior enough to make decisions.
- Younger Yolŋu can be 'brainwashed' by the government (and others) to act precipitously, (for example to make announcements on the loud speaker or to call a community meeting). Discussions should be had with the right people in a proper context. There is a Yolŋu word for this context: *dhuni*.

New generations

- The purpose of good engagement is to provide role models and a pathway for the next generation. Government departments need to invite young people to meetings so they can learn, listen and watch.
- Working in the right way with young people is a good way for governments and elders to learn to work together.

Right people

- The integrated machinery of government must meet and engage with an integrated working community, meeting with equal opportunity for both.
- Good engagement involves community, parents and organisations and their representatives.

Back-story

- Engagement involves beginning with what the community wants, comparing this to what the government wants, and then negotiating a pathway forward together. This includes opening up discussions about where money is coming from, and where it will go to.

History

- There is a hope to one-day return to working through a community council, with Balanda assisting and mentoring. There was one of these in Galiwin'ku as recently as 2007.

Unemployment

- Good government engagement and coordination depends upon a vibrant community, and a vibrant community depends upon employment.
- If government people don't listen to Yolŋu voices, then Yolŋu learn to lean on service providers, getting their instructions from Balanda instead of leaning on each other as Yolŋu – 'if we listen to each other in a good way everything will go well and Yolŋu will be interested to work'.

Community development



- Every department should have its agenda set locally and maintain this focus consistently.
- When government people come to discuss issues like housing they often push Yolŋu into making decisions quickly, so they can take the answer back on the plane. That is poor engagement. Workers should stay 2 or 3 nights, so they can understand the problem and the decision should be made in the community, not in the departments.
- It is important that Yolŋu in community can trace the messages and information they have given as they travel into government. That is, that there is a clear picture of how the system works and the ‘twisting journey’ their suggestions will take when delivered to government departments.

Community Specific Insights: Ngukurr

Authority of Elders

- Elders need the opportunity and resources to sort out problems themselves and in collaboration with departments and organisations, such as the police.
- Aboriginal elders need the chance to negotiate housing allocations
- Senior elders addressing problems together allows them to make connections between various issues and develop more integrated solutions. There can be ‘massive consequences’ if decisions are made without taking history and place seriously.

New generations

- Good engagement with government is important because that is the way in which we can model good agreement making practices for our young people. Good engagement is actually undertaken with our young people in mind.

Right people

- Government workers not engaging properly with the right community members undermines the elders’ authority in the eyes of the young people and produces a ‘gap’ between young people and the land.

Back-story

- Government needs to know that there are traditional rules around housing and accommodation – e.g. who can be close to whom, and special practices for funerals. Poor housing arrangements result in disunity.
- Good engagement and coordination include opening up and making clear information and decisions about money.

History

- There is a significant and fundamental difference between Aboriginal and Munanga (European) cultures. But many Munanga seem to want us to live like them. They don’t respect Indigenous people or take our history seriously. White people need to accept that ours is an Aboriginal world.



- The old village council used to be a good way for the Munanga and the elders to agree on what government business was to be undertaken, its budget, and time lines, local workers etc. It took seriously the clan affiliations and responsibilities of elders just like the language centre today.

Community development

- Good engagement entails asking what the community wants as well as telling them what is happening. Work 'done from the inside' keeps people-places strong.
- Good engagement (like the work of the linguists for example) entails understanding and respecting the life and culture of Aboriginal people, and providing good feedback and recognition. When we provide feedback to government workers we have no idea whether government takes it seriously or not.

Early insights arising from community evaluations conducted by local Indigenous evaluation researchers

In this section we are focusing on what the Indigenous researchers communicated after attending meetings and conducting interviews. The insights are specific comments on the engagement occurring in these meetings.

Galiwin'ku

The Galiwin'ku research team, supported by Yalu' and led by Stephen Dhamarrandji, have attended two L.A. meetings (22 April and 21 June) and conducted follow up discussions with Engagement Advisory Board members.

A written report on the April L.A. meeting has been partially completed. Preliminary findings are listed below:

Making decisions on behalf of others.

- For Yolngu, not all issues can be addressed by the same group of people. Depending on the issue, the relevant decision-makers may change. An example of this is in a discussion around the allocation of available funds to build a BMX track in Galiwin'ku, which highlighted that it is often a small group of Yolngu who are being asked to make decisions on behalf of a much wider constituency. **This insight should be relayed to: East Arnhem Regional Council.**

L.A. messages to the community.

- Working with a decision-making group which remains the same despite the issues being discussed can put pressure on these members, and stifle decision-making processes which are relevant for Yolngu. Developing or renegotiating existing processes of communication and message exchange between the insides and outsides of the L.A. may be beneficial for community governance and cohesion. **This insight should be relayed to: East Arnhem Regional Council.**

Working from our own experience.



- Engagements around the new cyclone shelter at Galiwin'ku are going well, this is in part because people have a clear experience with what the problem has been and clear explanations of the solution to address them. **This insight should be relayed to: Department of Housing and Community Development.**

Beyond engagement and coordination.

- Presentations within the L.A. meetings are often delivered clearly. While this is good, it is only half the story. The rest concerns how these messages will be delivered to others, and if the actions they refer to are oriented towards making long-term improvements for Yolngu in the community. An example of this arose discussions around the Slow Builds where it was agreed that many of the houses have been built and government has largely delivered on their promises. However, there was a concern that successful engagement may also be measured by the transition of Yolngu to paid jobs well beyond the life of the project. **This insight should be relayed to: Department of Housing and Community Development.**

Ngukurr

The Ngukurr research team, led by Ian Gumbula, has attended several meetings (June L.A. meeting, Yugul Mangi Board Meeting, Yugul Voice Meeting and Ngukurr School and Language Centre meeting) and conducted follow up interviews with community members.

A written report on the May L.A. meeting has been completed. Key findings are listed below:

Dangers of post hoc engagement and a lack of systemic engagement.

- A recent issue with the installation of new electricity metre boxes has highlighted how this seeming *technical* issue is also an *engagement* issue. There was little communication with householders when the problem of new metres being faulty arose, and this resulted in damage to property as people tried to rewire their boxes to access power. If appropriate communication (i.e. a P&W representative working with a local person to speak to householders) had occurred at the time, this damage and associated safety issues would not have arisen. **This insight should be relayed to: Power & Water.**
- There has been some confusion around the Room to Breathe policy. Discussion with the broader community seems to have happened after the awarding of a building contract, rather than before. Also, information provided often concerned money available for the policy as a whole, rather than clearly explaining what funds would be available when, where and through whom in Ngukurr. Many community members have heard there will be 20 houses affected, but the L.A. members have now been told there will be upgrades to only 10 houses in Ngukurr. **This insight should be relayed to: Room to Breathe.**

L.A. messages to the community.

- L.A. members are finding it difficult to carry the burden of explaining to others in the community what has been happening at the meeting. It may be useful to address this issue by re-negotiating whose responsibility this is,



and/or other possible message dissemination pathways. **This insight should be relayed to: Department of Housing and Community Development.**

Young people's inclusion in governance systems.

- Elders recognise that attending the L.A. meetings is an important learning experience for young people learning how to do governance in the community. However, they are finding that young people do not want to attend, and they see this as an outcome of them not being included in the governance training programs set up at the initiation of the Local Authorities. **This insight should be relayed to: Department of Housing and Community Development.**

Government engagement with the project.

- Ongoing questions and concerns have been raised around what actions might be taken by government in response to this research and evaluation work. Are the government people who visit our community going to be helped to implement the findings of this research? **This insight should be relayed to: NTG.**

Message exchange: From government to community (and within community)

These insights have been drawn over the course of our work in the project communities. They may also be indicative or helpful when considering possible systems for message exchange in other places.

These insights exclusively address communication from government to community members. They DO NOT address communication from community to government or communication and coordination between government departments. These are equally important aspects of good engagement and coordination, but not the focus of the list below.

Signs and Brochures

- In the past, signs and posters were often used to alert community members to upcoming events. These signs were commonly posted on walls and community noticeboards in high-traffic areas.
- When asked about how government should communicate around upcoming events, people often say that they remember when signs used to be put up at the store and other places, and how they appreciate this when it occurs.
- The shop (on the notice board and over the ATM), the school, the clinic and the airport are key locations where signs and brochures may be displayed; once appropriate permission has been sought.
- It is significant how images, logos and colours are used on printed materials. The arrangement of images and use of particular colours all indicate to community members who the message came from, who it is for and the kind of implications it may carry. For example, are government logos and colours prioritised? Is there equal significance given to logos of government and Indigenous organisations?
- It is also always immediately clear when photos or visual material are drawn from stock footage of Indigenous communities or faces. Where possible, community specific images should be used; they will generate interest and produce the best effect.



Community Facebook Pages

- Facebook is a very common and well used messaging medium in Indigenous communities
- Where there a vibrant and active Community Facebook page in operation, this can be an exceptionally effective system for communication and message exchange.
- The Elcho Island Notice Board is one example of this, and has been recommended by community members as a good place to post notices of events and other information. This site is widely used to communicate within the community, and for sending messages between family and organisations outside the community. It can be recognised as healthy because it carries a diversity of posts – football scores, job offers, notices of lost dogs, greetings to family, old photos of community and family, video clips etc etc.
- The situation in Ngukurr is slightly different. Here they have a community Facebook page ('Ngukurr Community News Page'), which is used but not as widely by community members as the notice board in Galiwin'ku. Ngukurr also has a local newspaper that is both printed and posted on Facebook ('Yugul-Ngukurr News'). There may be an opportunity to liaise with Daphne Daniels, the Yugul-Ngukurr News editor, to ascertain how this paper might support government message exchange in the community.
- In such cases as these, it is better if the government sees itself as a participant in existing processes for message exchange, rather than as a director or administrator of new ones. Community Facebook pages may be easily subscribed to using personal or organisational accounts and can then be used by government to post notices which will appear alongside any other messages circulating in the community at the time.

Loud Speakers

- Loudspeakers are used in some communities. These can be a highly effective communication mechanism, but the manner in which they are used is important.
- It is likely that there will be a group of a few people who commonly make any announcements; and it is more likely that messages will be listened to when coming from these familiar people.
- It is far more appropriate for a local community member to make an announcement in language than it is for a government worker to make an announcement in English.
- However, not all messages are appropriate to communicate over the loudspeaker.
- Announcements can be very penetrating for people who hear them – “when we hear that announcement to come to that meeting we feel bad inside” and “we know government have convinced those Yolngu to make the announcement” – and so care should be taken when negotiating an announcement. Is it a message that Countrymen would like to pass to other Countrymen? If not, perhaps another route is more appropriate.
- In communities where there is not a loudspeaker, it should be noted that messages will flow differently. There may not be as clear a way to generate an 'all of community' communication, and as such message flow might be expected to proceed through other routes and at a different pace.

Phone and Email

- The use of phone and email as a means for maintaining communication with people in communities is highly variable.
- Within the community, some people may maintain their same mobile phone number for years, others only for days or weeks. Some phones are the property of individuals, while others are shared within families.



- Saving phone numbers with both a name and a date can be helpful when trying to maintain an active list of phone numbers for people in community. This can help gauge the likelihood that a number is still active, and prevent confusion around multiple numbers.
- Many Countrymen do not use email, but there are some who are intermittent or very regular users. People often have a greater level of confidence around receiving and reading emails, than they do around sending a reply.
- It is best if the use of phone and email as a communication pathway is negotiated on a case-by-case basis (also recognising that an agreed arrangement may be subject to change at any point).

Word-of-mouth

- While it might be assumed that word-of-mouth is an effective form of message exchange within communities, this is not always the case.
- Members of the Local Authorities, and other committees, often express a sense of exasperation and fatigue around the expectation that they will disseminate information from these meetings to the wider community.
- For government and planning purposes, 'the community' is often considered to be a single unit within which communication might be assumed to flow from person to person in a smooth and uniform fashion (as gossip does). However, for Countrymen 'the community' is not necessarily a natural or homogenous entity. Information exchange involves crossing family and clan groups, and as such may encounter frequent stoppages.
- It may therefore be unreasonable to rely on word-of-mouth as a mechanism for communicating discussions and decisions to community, without the negotiation of other processes or mechanisms for message flow.