From Cyclones to COVID-19: Yolŋu perspectives on Disaster Management

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Ground Up:

GroundUp is an approach to research and service delivery:

• Developing tools, methods, understandings and practices appropriate for those with whom we work

• Working collaboratively on the ground

• Taking seriously the knowledge and governance of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people
Ground Up Disaster Management Research

**Cyclones Lam and Nathan (2015-2016)**
- Safety of people living in Aboriginal Town Communities and the Longgrass in Darwin and Palmerston
- Indigenous volunteering and disaster management

**COVID-19 (2020)**
- Experiences, perspectives and insights from Yolŋu

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Sat with people in Aboriginal Town Communities and the Longgrass in Darwin and Palmerston talking to them about their experiences of cyclones.

- Those we spoke to were part of strong networks of kinship and care
- Had strategies for knowing when the cyclone was coming and remaining safe
- Clear ways of connecting with expected and appreciated policy responses
- Vulnerabilities only emerged at points where these policy responses changed unexpectedly
Cyclones: Yolŋu perspectives on disaster management

Sat with people in Galiwin’ku talking about volunteering before, during and after emergencies

- Yolŋu care for each other by connecting with family, kin and their places/homelands
- This ‘volunteer’ work is always happening
- Working together, beyond networks of kin, creates strong communities in times of emergency
- The term Yolŋu used for this was räl manapanmirr
Cyclones:  
Yolŋu perspectives on disaster management

Note:

Rāl-manapanmirr is a concept often used to describe Yolŋu ways of working together. Rāl is used to describe the particular abilities of an individual to procure food through hunting. Manapan is a verb which means to join or place together. Mirri is a suffix which makes a verb reflexive - we do it for each other, together.

When talking about volunteering for disaster management, the introduction of the verb rāl-manapanmirr implies several things:

1. That each person is different, each has their own talents and potential contribution.
2. That successful activities, for example hunting or volunteering, need to be properly negotiated and undertaken as a group working together.
3. That the authority of the people who know and own the land needs to be central to the negotiations around how to go about an activity together.
Working together in the time of COVID-19
COVID-19 and remote communities

There has been a proliferation of mainstream biomedical stories of COVID-19:
Wash hands, stay apart, create borders, teach everyone about germ theory

There are also other important stories and responses that can be shared...
COVID-19:
Yolŋu perspectives on disaster management

Balanda are panicking because they don’t realise we have our own ways of doing things properly. They are trying to put the fear into the Yolŋu... but they themselves are panicking and going to the supermarket to buy so many toilet papers. Balanda are panicking and calling Aboriginal people ‘high risk’ and very vulnerable, but we have our own internal power to tackle this [pandemic]. By using that old law which was always there before colonisation, that is a strong law for all Indigenous people. Following this law shows our original leadership – Gawura

How do you individually think about the threat of the virus?
My response was I have to look after the family first rather than myself. Family is the first priority. So we need to keep looking after our family, our clan groups, keeping them close to each other. Protecting our own family or clan groups, and other Yolŋu will do the same for their families. But on the other side the balanda law is preventing that from happening. You have to sit far apart from each other, that’s what they say, that’s their policy – Gawura

We have the clan leaders, Djirrikay and Dalkarra
They are already standing there, ready to display that leadership that is there. That is something that needs to be understood by the balanda and the community and the younger Yolŋu – Gawura
COVID-19: Yolŋu perspectives on disaster management

The young people are disbelieving.

It’s up to us old people to demonstrate to them the strong, strong, strong law showing those little children that are running around. For example, we’re in Darwin and our children are all in the different communities. They are all independent but we’re able to contact them. We always look around for them and make sure they are alright, so that is the sort of the sharing and caring practice we need to maintain strongly. This is how senior people act. Even though we at work, we’re always busy with looking after our families. These new arrangements must never interfere with our ancestral law, including how we are living. So, we need to work out a strategy so those traditional practices don’t get obscured or disappear – Joy

The COVID-19 law is made by the ministers and the government.

How are we going to solve this because we already have our own law. So how are we going to look after each other and our family, and work this out truly in our way? – Joy

The message we have received is sickness is coming.

You have to sit away from each other, that’s their idea. The way that we live at the moment, we’re actually living together with our children, husbands and other family members – Rosemary
• If Balanda don’t understand Yolŋu law and governance, they panic when a difficult situation comes along

• What counts as an appropriate ‘unit’ or ‘body’ to be cared for is different for Yolŋu and biomedical science

• Different understandings of the body imply different practices of care. These practices need to be negotiated in place

• As organisations bypass Elders in addressing community problems, young people are beginning to look only to one (biomedical) body and practices of care
COVID-19: Yolŋu perspectives on disaster management

The story is coming from the government but here it gets stuck. It doesn’t come out properly. The balanda can only talk to each other about it but it is not going to the traditional owners or the clan leaders of ours that are here – Stephen

The story comes from the government to the shire and from the shire to the clinic. Then the clinic gives everyone a bar of soap – with no story. This is what makes the senior people afraid. No-one has come to them to tell them the story first. They are the ones that should share it with their clan groups and coordinate everyone – Rosemary

We’ve already got the Makarr Dhuni (Yolŋu governance group) They can oversee the ways in which the story is coming in. They will receive the story, put it all together and put the best way forward for everybody, then choose a pathway and then let the Yolŋu know in all their different clan groups – Rosemary
COVID-19: Yolŋu perspectives on disaster management

How is the story being told to Yolŋu people?

I’m based in Darwin now and as for my community Gapuwiyak which is where I am really from, I wondered whether the story of COVID-19 was being told to the Yolŋu people if they were aware of it. The story I got from the community is that the whole thing was being set up only through the local police and the local health centre to get the story across to the Yolŋu people. The stakeholders (only the balanda people) came to a meeting and only invited 1 Yolŋu. The story was being told narrowly, they were expecting expecting that one Yolŋu to have the confidence to tell all other Yolŋu about it. But it didn’t happen.

At least they should have invited more Yolŋu people, (for example – Milindji Trust/TO group 3, Goŋ-Däl 3, Arts Centre 3, Ranger Program 3 and so on and come up to a total of 12-14 Yolŋu). This way everyone would be involved. And then [in Gapuwiyak] this was done, and this group was called Djarrma Gänhamirr mala. After this group had their first meeting they went to 50 houses, doing house to house visits telling the deeper truth of the situation. That’s a good example of Yolŋu leadership and rāl manpanminyawuy dhuwurr – Gawura
Commentary

• Working with clan leaders and identified leadership groups helps strengthen Yolŋu authority and increase collective capacity.

• There are ways to co-design workable solutions which take seriously Yolŋu and balanda imperatives.

• Working together in the right way will assist communication, coordination and safety on the ground.
Summary

- The way to keep Yolŋu body strong is following both laws – Yolŋu law and balanda law
- Processes for doing biomedical safety are important, but so is the care of the Yolŋu body as a whole (including country through networks of kinship)
- This includes respecting the awareness that is already there in communities and approaching Yolŋu leaders first when bringing stories of new diseases
- When the young people only listen to the biomedical law and Balanda understandings, it can make it harder for Yolŋu elders to maintain strong authorities
- Resilience and preparedness emerge as an outcome of doing our differences together
Thank you!