

“Waka Ngurrkanhayngu”: Regenerating the existence of life

Reducing the risk of natural and social disasters – reviving and strengthening Indigenous law, culture and governance in remote Indigenous communities

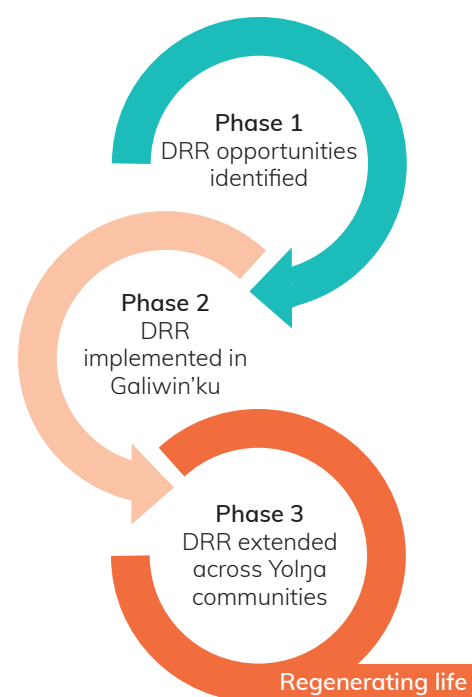
Waka Ngurrkanhayngu research team

Remote and very remote Indigenous communities are particularly vulnerable to climate change impacts including disasters due to colonisation. Yet, at the same time, Indigenous worldviews, knowledges and practices are the key for healing the causes of disasters and for adapting to climate change. Recognising this great value of Indigenous culture, the UN Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) has been calling for reviving and strengthening Indigenous knowledges and adaptive capacities. This long-term initiative is answering this call in the Australian context.

In 2015, two Category 4 cyclones hit Australia's Northern Territory, in quick succession.

The remote Yolŋu community Galiwin'ku on Elcho Island was heavily impacted. Whilst nobody died or was injured, much nature was destroyed and Yolŋu living in Galiwin'ku were devastated. Two-thirds of the houses were destroyed or badly damaged, amounting to about \$80 million. Residents had no water and power for many days. 250 residents were still homeless a week after the cyclones. Worse, five years after the cyclones, over a third of the funding allocation to rebuild houses remained unspent, further worsening overcrowding and the multitude of associated detrimental impacts especially on mental and physical health.

To ensure that this devastating history does not repeat itself, Elaine Lawurra Maypilama, a Yolŋu elder, senior Yalu Aboriginal Corporation researcher, Adjunct Professor (University of Canberra) and A/Professor (Charles Darwin University), started a long-term community-based research initiative to ensure that Yolŋu are ready in the future. Building upon strong, long-term, respectful research relationships resulting from genuine two-way exchanges, in this initiative Yolŋu researchers and Western researchers work together two-way to revive and strengthen Indigenous worldviews, knowledges, law and cultural



practices to strengthen Yolŋu and to reduce the risk of natural and social disasters.

In phase one of this initiative, A/Prof Elaine Lawurra Maypilama and A/Prof Petra Buergelt (University of Canberra) co-lead a research team consisting of Indigenous researchers Yungirra Dorothy Bukulatjpi, Rosemary Gundjarranbuy and Stephen Maliku Dhamarrandji from Galiwin'ku's Yalu Aboriginal Corporation; Prof Douglas Paton (Charles Darwin University, University of Canberra), Prof James Smith (Menzies School of Health) and PhD student Tahir Ali (Charles Darwin University). This scoping study was funded



From left to right: A/Prof Petra Buergelt and A/Prof Elaine Lawurra Maypilama have been working together two-way since 2015

by the University of Canberra's Collaborative Indigenous Research Initiative (CIRI).

Using a strengths-based approach, the research aimed at starting to holistically identify and understand the psychological, psychological, cultural, social, environmental, economic and political factors that interact over time to influence the disaster risk reduction (DRR) beliefs and practices prevailing in Galiwin'ku. In February 2020, Lawurrpa, senior Indigenous local co-researchers Rosemary and Dorothy, junior researcher Stephen, and PhD student Tahir talked with and listened to 20 Yolŋu from diverse clan groups living in Galiwin'ku.

The conversations and yarning circles took place in their diverse clan languages, with Yolŋu co-researchers translating the stories into English.

The research revealed that before colonisation the sophisticated worldviews, knowledges and cultural practices of the Yolŋu reduced the risk of natural disasters and made Yolŋu strong. "Yolŋu had Yolŋu Rom [law and culture] and Yolŋu identity, which gave us Yolŋu power. We are Country and Country is us," said Lawurrpa. "Yolŋu were healthy and strong. The sharing of the Dreaming Stories, songs, ceremonies, art, language and history explain how Yolŋu connections with

the environment make people strong." The clan group who are custodians of the burrmulala (cyclone) songline also sang and danced the burrmulala.

"The stories the Yolŋu shared, the songlines and dance show how burrmulalas are cherished because they are a natural part of Yolŋu and life," Lawurrpa says. "Prior to colonisation, when people lived in connected and harmonious relationships with nature, burrmulalas were smaller and less intense. They didn't cause damage, but recycled life – they cleansed and purified everything, refreshed everything and gave new life." Tamara, who participated in the study, shared that "A natural event is a natural event. Back in the old days,



Indigenous researcher A/Professor Elaine Lawurrpa Maypilama and Rosemary Gundjarranbuy having a yarn exploring research findings with community members. Photo: Tahir Ali

if a cyclone came in, slashed everything, it was a normal thing. It prevented the natural disaster itself. It is the recycling of life.”

Participants’ stories also exposed diverse ways in which historical and contemporary colonisation has been and remains the real disaster, because colonising practices have and still are weakening Yolŋu and increasing the risks of extreme natural events and disasters occurring. Participating Yolŋu emphasised that to reduce the risk of disasters, non-Indigenous peoples need to stop engaging in the diverse colonising practices that weaken and undermine Yolŋu, and instead create conditions that enable Yolŋu to revive and strengthen their ancient worldviews, knowledges and practices. Participating Yolŋu realised that they need to take back their inner power and values, revive their beliefs, strengthen their socio-cultural capabilities, and live according to their traditional worldviews and knowledges.

At the end of phase one, the research team engaged in two-way feedback sessions with the Local Authority (comprised of Traditional Owners and non-Indigenous Shire Representatives), Yalu Aboriginal Corporation and seven community groups. This research aspect was especially important as findings are unfortunately rarely fed back to the community, let alone via two-way dialogue. The collective story that emerged from the analysis of individual stories deeply resonated with, was validated by, and strengthened the over 50 Yolŋu who participated in these yarns. The story opened their hearts, minds and eyes, and lifted their



Taken during an AIATSIS visit to Quandamooka Country as part of the Youth in Governance project, February 2021. Photo AIATSIS

confidence, strengthening the community members. Rosemary shared that the collective big story started to open Yolŋu’s eyes to how colonisation has weakened them and how they can reclaim their power.

Through this research, Yolŋu started realising how the cyclones were an opportunity to reclaim their power and to become involved in reducing the risk of damaging cyclones to occur. “Cyclones wiped away the old thinking and allowed new grass shoots to come up – representing how Yolŋu get stronger,” Lawurrpa emphasises. “We need to get ready inside for the next disaster, for our kids and for the future by bringing back our power. We need to do something. We need to stand up and take power back. We have to start to open up the package [what the government says] ourselves. Women and men need to walk together side by side in this.”

Yungirrŋa added that “one of the key messages that we got from this research is that that Yolŋu people are now seeing the things that need to be done here on the

ground in Galiwinku”. “This is the first time I am going to raise and discuss this in a Shire meeting. It is through this research that we will write this proposal. We want to see young Yolŋu being trained for emergencies and getting jobs in emergency services,” said participating community member Valerie Bulkunu Garrawura.

Building upon this scoping study, Lawurrpa and the other Yalu researchers initiated phase two of this long-term initiative. Together with A/Prof Petra Buergelt (University of Canberra), Prof Douglas Paton (University of Canberra), Dr Rowan Bedggood (Swinburne University) and Prof James Smith (Flinders University), they co-created an Indigenist community-based participatory action research that they called: **“Waka Ngurrkanhayngu”:** **Regenerating the existence of life.**

Phase two aims at:

- reviving and strengthening their Yolŋu law, knowledges, culture and governance to heal from and reduce the risk of natural and social disasters,



PhD student Tahir Ali, A/Professor Elaine Lawurpa Maypilama, Dorothy Yungirrŋa, Rosemary Gundjarranbuy and Stephen Dhamarrandji. Photo: Tahir Ali

- (re)building their Indigenous capacities that reduce the risk of natural and social disasters, and
- contributing to increasing the recognition of the value of Indigenous culture

Together they applied for the AIATSIS Research Exchange Program and were thrilled when they found out that AIATSIS selected them as grant recipient in 2022.

In April this year, the team will commence step one of this project. In this step, they will draw out deeper true stories of local Yolŋu knowledges and practices, and further reveal any additional Western knowledge areas required to complement existing local Yolŋu knowledges.

Based on the findings from step one, they will in step two co-create, co-implement and co-evaluate two-way transformative DRR knowledge sharing pilot programs that draw out and integrate DRR relevant Yolŋu and Western knowledges to revive and strengthen Yolŋu Indigenous knowledges and practices. The evaluation stories will be fed back to the community using two-way exchange yarning circles to ensure their accuracy, and facilitate two-way learning and co-creating of knowledges with the wider community. The knowledge created will be used to facilitate Galiwin'ku reviving and strengthening their Yolŋu law, knowledges and cultural practices and governance, to heal from disasters, (re)build

Indigenous adaptive capacities that reduce the risk of natural and social disasters, and to increase recognition of the value of Indigenous worldviews, knowledges and practices related to DRR. At the end of phase two, the researchers will explore jointly co-creating an ARC funding application to be able to finance phase three of this initiative, which has the ambitious goal of expanding the project to other Yolŋu communities.

We would like to express our deepest gratitude for the late chairperson of Yalu for being such a visionary leader and great supporter of our initiative. We will greatly miss him and are committed to make him proud with this initiative.