

Indigenous intercultural governance and adaptation

ABSTRACT

Current research highlights the contribution of Indigenous knowledge to climate change monitoring and observation, the role of community organisations in developing adaptive capacity, environmental justice and regimes for the participation of Indigenous people in abatement and climate change economies (Cameron 2012, Green 2009 and Leonard et al. 2013). The way in which Indigenous people exercise decision-making between Indigenous organisations, and more broadly, is rarely situated in the context of adaptation governance. This poster reports on research into the challenging intra-Indigenous and intercultural governance for successful participation in adaptation decision making in two remote Aboriginal communities. It focuses specifically on the role of recognised native title holders who have legally determined rights and interests to their traditional territories.

How do traditional owners, who have had determinations of native title on their country, make decisions about the management of their land and waters? How do we help them to better respond to the impacts of climate change?

BACKGROUND

Native title has changed the way in which Indigenous people are engaged in land and water management. Under the *Native Title Act*, native title holders are now formally involved in land and water management through their Registered Native Title Bodies Corporate (RNTBCs), which manage their native title rights and interests. RNTBCs such as the Karajarri Traditional Lands Association (KTLA) and Abm Elgoring Ambung are in a strong position to contribute to climate change adaptation because of their unique knowledges and experience; native title and other land holdings; and responsibilities under legislation (Weir 2011; Tran et al. 2013).

The KTLA and Abm Elgoring Ambung are already participating in climate change adaptation roles, including being involved in town planning, water planning, coastal erosion monitoring, feral/animal eradication and cultural mapping. However the effectiveness of these roles is greatly influenced by the distinct lack of partnerships that are needed to address the broader context of Indigenous socio-political marginalisation, a result of successive policy interventions impacting on Indigenous autonomy over their traditional lands (Rowse 2012).

Indigenous peoples' engagement in the decision making structures that facilitate climate change adaptation, requires greater understanding and action that is responsive to their authority, knowledge, rights, interests and responsibilities. We have focused on native title lands, but many of our findings have relevance for other Indigenous land holdings, including extensive land rights and conservation lands, and Indigenous involvement in climate change adaptation more generally.

METHODS

AIATSIS carried out an 18-month project on the social-institutional barriers to the role of native title holders in climate change adaptation decision making, with two case study partners: the Karajarri Traditional Lands Association RNTBC based in Bidadanga located in the East Kimberley, and Abm Elgoring Ambung RNTBC based in Kowanyama located in the Gulf of Carpentaria.

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FINDINGS

1. RNTBC caring for country priorities, governance and community development are consistent with climate change adaptation priorities, yet the lack of development of RNTBC priorities, such as through land use planning, is a significant barrier to Indigenous participation in adaptation activities.
2. The retrospective recognition of native title has supported traditional owner authority in land use and natural resource management and decision making, whilst simultaneously creating the institutional marginalisation of RNTBCs as a 'new' governance sector.
3. Governance arrangements need to be renegotiated *within* Indigenous communities, especially where RNTBCs are perceived to displace previous decision-making processes, causing inconsistencies, tension, and confusion over roles and responsibilities.
4. The imperative for a long term approach is driven by the communal and binding nature of decision making over native title lands as well as the intergenerational consequences of climate change.
5. There has been a lack of respect for the plans and priorities developed by RNTBCs and local communities, coupled with ad hoc and at times divergent development proposals, undermining agreed upon decisions and decision-making processes, and affecting sustainable land use planning outcomes that are central to climate adaptation.
6. The former community councils system, has been slowly replaced by mainstream structures that impose new forms of accountability or remove accountability to a broader regional constituency. The regionalisation of planning and local government risks the under-representation of the unique needs and priorities of remote Aboriginal communities. The involvement of RNTBCs in planning and decision-making processes can play a part in mitigating this risk.
7. Funding preferences created by different regimes to support different Indigenous forms of governance can place Indigenous community/shire councils in *competition* with RNTBCs, often with an outcome that draws resources away from RNTBCs.
8. The design of decision-making structures needs to reflect the cultural legitimacy and representative role of RNTBCs and, at the same time, have this reflected in the distribution of resources.
9. Integrated planning consistent with native title holders' holistic and intergenerational perspective on country holds the greatest potential for RNTBCs to play an effective enabling role in climate change adaptation.

For traditional owners, climate change adaptation involves developing strategies to engage with and implement their holistic attitudes towards community and Country and wellbeing.



Native title now comprises 20 per cent of the Australian continent with over 440 claims remaining to be resolved. These lands are managed by over 100 Indigenous organisations known as Registered Native Title Bodies Corporate (RNTBCs).



Karajarri traditional owners participating in a project workshop. (left to right) Joe Edgar (Chair), Lenny Hopiga (Cultural advisor), Faye Dean (Director), Joseph Munro (Director) Anna Dwyer (Nulungu researcher) (image: Jessica Weir)

We've noticed already, along our coast, other things, it affects our culture, and protecting significant sites along our coastline, our Dreaming sites...

Joe Edgar, Karajarri Traditional Lands Association Chair



Anna Dwyer, Nulungu researcher conducting interviews throughout the Bidadanga community (image: Felicity Brown)



Jessica Weir with Teddy Bernard (Chair, Abm Elgoring Ambung), Viv Sinnamon (Manager, KLNRM) and Rodney Whitefield (General Manager, Abm Elgoring Ambung) (Image: Tran Tran)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was carried out with financial support from the Australian Government (Department of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency) and the National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility. The authors acknowledge the support of the case study partners the Karajarri Traditional Lands Association Aboriginal Corporation RNTBC and Abm Elgoring Ambung Aboriginal Corporation RNTBC. We also thank our research partners the Nulungu Research Institute from the University of Notre Dame, the Kimberley Land Council, and the Kowanyama Land and Natural Resource Management Office and the University of Melbourne for their assistance.



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