

SETuP – Lessons Learnt Report – Remote Community Engagement



September 2019



Lessons Learnt Report: Remote Community Engagement

Project Name: Solar Energy Transformation Program (SETuP)

ARENA Knowledge Category:	Logistical
Knowledge Type:	Community Engagement
Technology Type:	Solar PV
State/Territory:	Northern Territory

Key learning

Remote Community Engagement for the Solar Energy Transformation Program (SETuP) developed through a number of different approaches and benefited from the following lessons:

- Community Engagement outcomes were met more effectively when delivered by trained internal staff, however this approach has implications for resourcing.
- Outsourcing of community engagement requires selection of experienced partners with commitments to maintain key personnel for longer contracts
- Early community consultation assisted in optimum site selection
- Lease acquisition is a significantly complex process. Seeking early advice from Traditional Owners benefitted the application process.
- Highly visual graphic elements used in posters and banners were identified as the best way to communicate ideas.
- Face to face opportunities such as Local Authority and other community meetings are a highly effective communication method.

The Solar Energy Transformation Program (SETuP) is operating in some of the most remote parts of the Northern Territory and during early conception, SETuP's architects recognised the importance of effective engagement with the Aboriginal people living on that land. Communicating program benefits, construction realities and renewable outcomes would require a different approach to standard marketing and stakeholder engagement.

The initial approach was designed to utilise an external resource to largely plan and deliver Community Engagement within SETuP communities. Power and Water's procurement scope for this work was to implement the then drafted Community Consultation Plan; deliver plan outcomes through community visits; engage with the broad sweep of community stakeholders and encourage acceptance of the newly built solar facilities. Community education, awareness and support were key drivers for the plan's goals. Two contracts were subsequently awarded to two suppliers who would operate regionally (Northern and Southern) and once resources had been developed, community visits including 'event days' were planned and undertaken by the contractors.

During both planning and delivery of the first engagement activities in each region, SETuP's Manager Community Engagement provided support and instruction in order that consistency and a high standard of engagement was met. This oversight provided a clear view into the effectiveness of the chosen approach and an ability to accurately evaluate service delivery. Feedback on the consultant's preparation and delivery were given and opportunities to improve encouraged. The lack of capacity to meet deliverables by both consultants was determined a program risk and the contracts were not renewed.

While the contracted parties bought a level of expertise and strengths in some areas, they were unable to provide the consistency of service we required due to available human resources. Engagement services in the Northern Territory are relatively limited, and the specialist knowledge required, accentuates the need to have appropriately skilled and experienced personnel both off and on-site. A contract requirement for detailed Curriculum Vitae's of the personnel committed to the project may assist decision making, and requirement for approval of any changes to key personnel is recommended particularly for contracts of longer than six months.



To ensure effective representation, unambiguous messaging and genuine community awareness and support for the program, community and stakeholder engagement was returned in-house and delivered with full organisational support.

Advantages of in-house delivery have included: an undiluted view of community sentiment and a greater understanding of our customers; application of bespoke delivery of the consistent message; ability to monitor, evaluate and improve engagement approaches; and elevate internal communications to assist business transformation.

The cost of in-house delivery has also proven financially cost effective, as value of the outsourced Community Engagement contracts included items such as materials preparation for event days that we subsequently costed, organised and paid for in-house. Moreover, the cost per day for contractor disbursements is additional to the cost to company when an engagement specialist role is also funded within the work group.

It can be said that a disadvantage of Community Engagement carried out in-house is the limiting factor of time. Commitments requiring significant time in communities and travel can impact on the other important office based tasks. Even with the best intentions to effectively perform a balancing act, that is at times not feasible. There are only so many hours in the day, and if expectations on one person are too great, they may run the risk of burnout. There is a need to ensure that effective support is provided to in-house personnel, and to consider the use of targeted resources to support on-ground delivery and regions that are higher risk.

Implications for future projects

The decision to apply in-house expertise or seek skilled contractors should be thoughtfully undertaken. There are pros and cons in both instances and the importance of risk, reputation and ultimately outcomes should not be underestimated.

The initial assumption of needing many visits per site and access to region specific knowledge was seen to justify the use of contractors, however this concept has been replaced by the understanding that for most communities we can provide effective engagement with internal staff through shorter targeted visits, and use regionally specific contractors only for areas requiring additional focus.

Additionally, there is the potential for turnover of staff in a longer time frame project, and that eventuality that must be planned for. Good documentation of assumptions and drivers for certain approaches should be kept, but also design use of contractors to allow for targeted approaches and future flexibility.

It is recommended that a thorough situational analysis and ongoing evaluation of effectiveness will provide answers on an organisation's current needs and capacity.

Knowledge gap

The desire to minimise vandalism at the solar array sites led to identifying and involving local stakeholders in key processes so as to gain support for the technology. This raises the challenge of how to broach vandalism without inadvertently sowing the seed of an idea.

Working with schools and talking to families about the value of the system does have a positive effect, but of more importance is demonstrating an understanding and empathy of Aboriginal issues and values.

Calling on local leaders to manage young people's behaviour and supporting them to do so, will ultimately have a greater impact, though these conversations are not the typical realm of a utility, and cultural experience will be required.



Objectives or project requirements

Each stage of the project required a different approach to engagement.

Each of our sites has unique and complex land tenure, and in order to secure site leases for construction, we worked with Land Councils, the Northern Territory Government's Land Tenure Unit and Traditional Owners and custodians. During the initial identification of suitable land, the organisation sought agreement from Traditional Owners through the Land Councils as to suitable site location. This then influenced lease application.

On a number of occasions, it was during these consultations that the community pointed out the drawbacks of an otherwise technically suitable site, e.g. boggy during the wet season. Without effective engagement at that point, we may have had a few suboptimal sites.

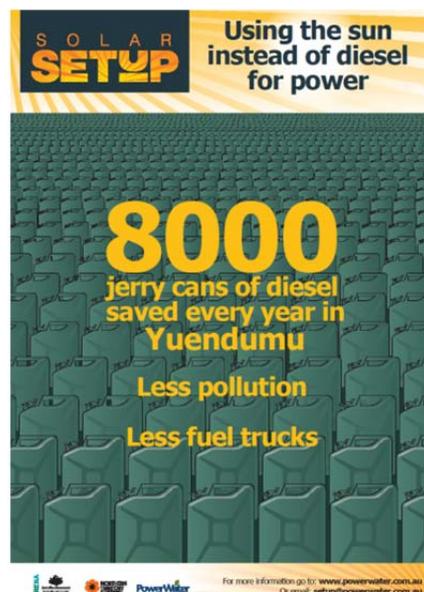
Following lease agreement, implementation of the Community Consultation Plan was required. The plan's goals were to create a community that is educated, aware and supportive of the new developments in energy production and delivery into the community. It aimed to provide information to the broader community to assist understanding of the environmental benefits of solar energy production. Where possible, the plan also aimed to leverage any local employment opportunities in the civil and construction phases. It was largely these goals that were difficult to achieve through consultant services contracts.

Supporting information

Resources

In order to meaningfully convey messages, our very clear objective was to have culturally appropriate tools to do so. In working with Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory, it's important to recognise that English is often not even a third or fourth language, but there may be ten or more other languages spoken before English. This being the case, pictorial tools are very important and provide a common language platform.

Resources were developed with the assistance of the Centre for Appropriate Technology (CAT) and an experienced graphic designer to draft posters and banners that told our story visually, but resource development itself was a learning experience.



Example of targeted Solar SETuP resource

Collaboratively, we drafted messages that clearly stepped out the process of creating a solar diesel hybrid system in community from initial meetings, through to preliminary civil works like clearing and fencing, then on to construction and commissioning.



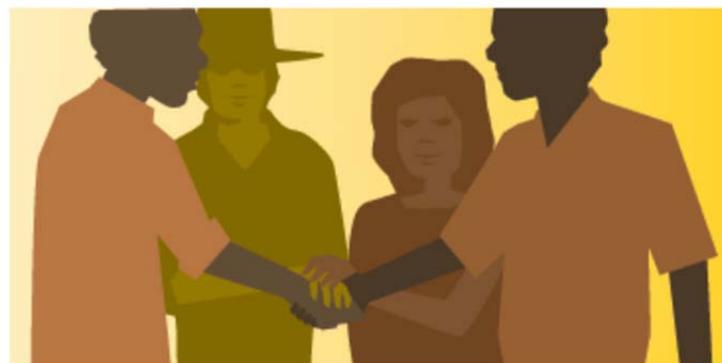
In order to do this, we went to a graphic designer who had experience in community messaging. Graphically he preferred the use of stylised faces as opposed to those that look more like a pencil sketch. In some instances, if a sketch resembles a member of the community, it can be inappropriate for use. Modifications were however, still required.

It was felt the initial depiction of the meeting and negotiation that takes place during the land tenure consultations (below), portrayed the Aboriginal people playing a very passive role in the process. Standing in the background while decisions were made through a bureaucratic process. The deal is sealed, while the owners watch on in silence.



Initial depiction of lease agreement meetings

Unintentional, however it might easily have been interpreted that way. In order to depict the true collaborative nature of those consultations, we defined the brief more clearly and the following design was agreed on.



Final depiction of lease agreement meetings

The suitability of our resources has been gauged during both formal and informal meetings with community stakeholders and deemed successful. Stages and timeframes are clearly depicted and benefits and impacts receive consensus.

‘Event Days’ versus Local Authority presentations

Event Days were held during the planning and construction phases of Tranche One at ten remote Aboriginal Communities. In order to reach the key stakeholders within each of these communities, meetings with regional council staff, the clinic, police, shop and school were scheduled. Broader community members were reached through a community BBQ, with generally high success. School groups were shown resources and the technology was explained through the use of a solar demonstration kit (small panel and ‘generator’ demonstrating the continuous – reliable – power supply to a small fan both while the panel was producing power and moved to the shade).

This individualised approach, led & delivered by the Manager for Community Engagement was successful and met with enthusiasm, though while the approach met the evaluation criteria, it was resource intensive and at times over ambitious for completion by one officer.



The review of the Community and Stakeholder Engagement Strategy for Tranche Two, provided an opportunity to refine our method, and resulted in a far greater emphasis on utilising local networks and job service providers.

Local Authorities give people in regional and remote Northern Territory an opportunity to understand and influence local decisions. Regional councils operate Local Authorities to learn about what their communities want and need and Local Authority members are nominated from within the community. This makes them an ideal forum for strategic engagement and information dissemination in a relatively time effective way. As an open meeting, Local Authorities are often attended by a range of community stakeholders such as job service providers and local retailers and this adds further value to the presentation.

In a time constrained program, Local Authorities have provided a mechanism that enabled SETuP to meet outcomes effectively and have become a preference to Event Days.



The solar demonstrator kit in action