

# The Utopia Homelands Project: *Lessons from Experience*

Robyn Grey-Gardner

Metta Young



**Centre for  
Appropriate  
Technology**



**URAPUNTJA ABORIGINAL  
CORPORATION**

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**Cover Photo:** Edward Jones selects house repair and upgrade options at Soapy Bore Homeland.

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## Background and Purpose

This paper distills lessons and recommendations based on the Centre for Appropriate Technology's experience of delivering *the Improving the Built Environment Project* in the Utopia Homelands, Northern Territory (2013-2014).

The Utopia Homelands project aimed to address the immediate problems of unsafe living environments experienced by the residents of Utopia through repairs and maintenance to housing. The long-term aspirations for the residents of Utopia to continue to live in the region was also augmented through planning and capacity building programs to manage small water supplies and increase householders knowledge of energy efficiency measures.

The Utopia Homelands are located approximately 260km north east of Alice Springs. They are the traditional homelands of the Alyawarr and Anmatyerr peoples. The pastoral settlement of the region began in the 1940s and Utopia became a pastoral lease at that time. The Alyawarr and Anmatyerr peoples stayed on their country and many worked on the pastoral lease. In 1976 the Aboriginal Land Fund purchased Utopia Station and in 1979 the Alyawarr and Anmatyerr peoples gained permanent legal title to the Utopia leasehold. From that time families' moved back to their traditional lands. There are approximately 1200 people living across or directly affiliated with the 18 Homelands in the Utopia region.

The return to country movement escalated throughout the 1970s and 80s as government policy embraced principles of self-determination and Land Rights Acts became a mechanism for recognising ancestral rights to un-alienated Crown Land. Establishment grants for securing basic necessities such as potable water supplies and shelter became available and development occurred incrementally, although sporadically, as various Commonwealth programs such as CDEP and NAHS were accessed. Outstation Resource Agencies emerged often assuming governance and representative roles as well as undertaking service delivery activities.

The whys and hows of support for Homelands has been a contentious issue since the late nineties when ATSIC instituted a moratorium on funding for new Homelands. In recent times the Commonwealth has been devolving responsibility for Homelands to State governments although the process is still evolving. It is apparent that the Commonwealth remains intensely involved with Homelands to the extent that overarching policies in Aboriginal Affairs, even with the sharpened focus on economics, education and employment, determine the lives, livelihoods and amenity available to remote Aboriginal residents across settlement types and locations.

The Utopia Homelands have suffered in recent years with regard to housing and infrastructure because their demographics and settlement patterns do not lend themselves to

initiatives under National Partnership Agreements, initiatives such as Growth Towns or the hub and spoke models of development. Although services and housing management are supplied by a combination of Barkly Regional Council and NT Government, the scale of the homelands and the scope of delivery requirements has made service provision particularly challenging.

Indeed it is evident that a hierarchy of asset and service availability as well as economic opportunity between Aboriginal settlement types has been emerging over the past six years. This has been driven in part by the push to deliver equivalent services and citizen responsibilities in Aboriginal settlements as are available in similar sized towns across Australia. The mainstreaming approach is not only shaping new understandings of what housing, infrastructure and development in Aboriginal places means but is also premised on utilising standardized structures and processes for delivering and managing these. It would appear that the greater the difference in settlement type (size, remoteness, existing facilities, eg telecommunications and roads) from mainstream experience and understanding the more the assumptions underpinning standard service delivery approaches are challenged. Such challenges often lead to tighter top down controls and scaled down deliverables to manage costs blow outs leading to greater end user dissatisfaction as deliverables are trimmed and consultation and engagement processes become fractured by shifting deliverables.

The Utopia Homelands Project provided an opportunity to test and refine an effective and efficient service delivery approach to housing and infrastructure programs in remote Australia. The approach developed was scoped around a series of principles and staged with iterative scopes of works. This recognised that the depth and breadth of the work needed in terms of the three components of the project - repairs and maintenance, water management and energy efficiency programs- was not quantifiable at commencement. Indeed there was little data available that outlined the numbers of houses or dwellings, the maintenance or upgrades that had occurred or the current state of amenity available to Homeland residents. This is not an uncommon problem across remote Australia where the sporadic audits of assets and infrastructure that have been undertaken tend to document crisis responses rather than investments in asset maintenance or upgrades over time, and rarely capture end user experiences or priorities.



Work Crew supervisor Ken Getawan with Danny Dixon

## Key Lessons

*The model of governance for the project enabled both downwards and upwards accountability and utilized the principle of transparency to actively track the progress of the project, solve problems and make decisions as required.* The first stage of the project consisted of an audit and make safe works – to better understand the situation, to refine the number of houses on scope and the types of works to be undertaken in the next stage. The Steering Committee comprised of representatives from Prime Minister and Cabinet (the funders) and Utopia Homeland residents via the Urupuntja Aboriginal Corporation (the end users) and the Centre for Appropriate Technology (the project manager). Its terms of reference emphasized an enabling rather than operational or compliance checking role. There was high accountability for deliverables – an improved amenity for residents - but an evolving and iterative program scope. This ensured that feedbacks from residents were factored into project works. Oversight thus became geared to understanding and ensuring positive impact rather than merely meeting quantitative outputs.

*The service model was structured around key principles that shaped mobilisation and process. These were: no survey without service; no service without permission; local skills and local knowledge are valued and utilized; engagement has a purpose and an outcome.* The project had clear parameters. There was agreed funding and agreed outcomes up front but the model of principle based and staged service delivery was able to evolve within a framework of accountability and transparency. Stage one incorporated the initial make safe works and an audit of housing, shelter and infrastructure. The safety and amenity of each house was

improved at the same time data were being collected, enacting the 'no survey without service' approach. Local work crews were recruited to assist with the audit and Make Safe works from the outset enabling the building of goodwill and trust. Homelands across the region were clustered into zones and the Make Safe works and audit were conducted progressively through each zone. Graphic information about the schedule of works in each zone was made available to all residents. Stage two works were based on improving the living environment from the new baseline standard that had been achieved during the Make Safe works. The works were formulated based on the real time understanding of mobilization costs, local priorities and the condition of housing and infrastructure elicited from Stage One thus underscoring the importance of flexibility and adaptation in the scope of works.

Standard models of service delivery to housing and infrastructure programs in remote communities deploy resources to deliver pre-defined outputs based on pre-determined assumptions. The desired amenity is sometimes drawn from an initial consultation phase. Such top-down approaches thwart responsiveness to emergent local needs and circumstances. The Utopia Homelands Project incorporated a more nuanced meld of predetermined deliverables – the overarching project parameters – with more bottom-up approaches that functioned to enhance local responsibility, involvement and ultimately increase end user satisfaction.

*Effective community engagement is based on honesty and transparency in communicating project parameters and involving residents in decision making within these parameters.* The project was framed from the outset on delivering the amenity requested and valued by residents *within* the constraints and limitations of the project brief. The engagement process was not bolted on the beginning or end of the project but integral to each stage and step. The engagement team gathered permissions from 'house bosses' to enter and commence works in each house and facilitated the creation of the scope of works for each house based on negotiations about how much money there was and what options there were – from new windows and windbreaks to kitchens and gun cabinets. Such engagement practice requires focused commitment to good communication within the project team, especially when the broader team comprises local workers, contractors and organisational staff. But the engagement process was contained and sharp. On average one and a half hours was spent per house on engagement matters plus travel time. With approximately 106 houses on scope this equates to less than one-fifth of the project time and less than 10% of the total project budget. Ultimately, effective engagement is more about skill, care and project design and less about cost.



The local work crew at Antarrintja

*Aboriginal people in remote communities have skills and abilities and value employment opportunities.* Sixty per cent of the staff on the Utopia Homelands Project are Aboriginal, far exceeding the targets achieved in projects such as SIHIP. There are 38 Aboriginal people and 14 non-Aboriginal people. 28 of these are Aboriginal people from the Utopia Homelands. If local Aboriginal people are desired and valued as part of the workforce, then the service delivery model has to be different from the usual contractor or Alliance driven models. Project staff need to be able to work effectively with Aboriginal people, provide enabling environments that recognize existing skills, offer opportunities to gain new skills and value the local knowledge and understanding they can provide access to. It also requires a nuanced focus on identifying the nature of work tasks on the project and categorizing these into streams that prioritize tasks for work crews and limit contractors' tasks to those requiring certification or specialization.

**BOX 1 Comparison of contractor costs to local resident costs:**

The actual cost for an external contractor (a carpenter and an apprentice) to spend an hour in a remote community fixing the doors, door locks, hinges and fitting windows in a house is approximately \$350 an hour. This cost includes their hourly rates and their mobilization costs which includes accommodation, vehicle and fuel.

Alternatively, two local residents working alongside a supervisor (carpenter) in a house involved in the work preparation and assisting with fixing doors, door locks, hinges and fitting windows has an hourly rate that is \$125 per hour including mobilization costs (salary overheads, supervisor salary, vehicle, fuel and accommodation). The hourly rate for two local workers is 1/3 of the hourly rate of a contractor and an apprentice doing comparative work in remote areas.

The issues that may arise in using local Aboriginal workers are well documented. These include cultural obligations interfering with work obligations, lack of skills, lack of commitment and so forth. There has only been two days during the Utopia Homelands Project when works have not been able to continue due to 'sorry business'. This is due to the willingness of the work crew to communicate and liaise with the local residents to find appropriate places and ways to continue our work during cultural activities as well as the further guidance available via the Steering Committee. In essence, the local work crew has been an enabler for maintaining project delivery and momentum. Given they were working on their own, their families and other relatives houses, quality control emerged as pride in the work and keeping people happy became imperative. A number of the local work crew actively relocated themselves to other residences and locations across the Homelands as work progressed, so that they would not miss out on a day's work and nor would they place additional demands on the transport logistics required to get to work from one end of the Homelands to the other. The project team had a 'home' base within the Homelands. This was a previously abandoned house that was offered by the Steering Committee on the condition it would be made fit for habitation and returned to the house tenant upon project completion. Mobilization required mixes of work teams (engagement teams, work crew supervisors, project staff, contractors) relocating from Alice Springs for weekly stints every week also which fostered an integrated work effort and ethic. Communication between all staff on the ground was strong – particularly communication around access and the needs of residents. This also fostered space for reciprocity and opportunities for local Aboriginal input into project design and deliverables as the iterative approach (within guiding parameters) rolled out.

Local work crews learnt new skills on the job, as well as being provided with some initial training qualifications (eg White Card). The crew will have their new competencies recognized through RTO RPL processes. Reward needs to be factored into effort and commitment.

*There is very limited information available about the current status of housing and infrastructure amenity, service regimes and required works in remote areas, particularly outside the priority townships.* Housing and infrastructure audits have been conducted over the years across remote communities. However, data gathered has tended to be a point in time snapshot, shaped to meet a particular purpose and use and not readily adapted to other purposes and uses, not always publically available and rarely updated over time. The degree of change in service responsibility, from local Councils to Shires, from the Commonwealth to the States as well as the myriad of services providers assuming responsibility for aspects of service delivery, maintenance and upgrades (contractors, utilities, governments, Councils, Corporations) renders accurate information difficult to obtain. Given this, an audit of housing and infrastructure amenity, combined with a small population census was conducted during Stage One of the project and progressively updated as works proceeded. This has been



compiled into a purposefully designed data base that will be handed over to the Urapuntja Aboriginal Corporation at project completion. The intent was to provide a benchmark and mechanism for scheduling and prioritizing future works across the Homelands. A significant opportunity exists to further develop the data base and incorporate processes for regular updates and utilisation in asset management regimes. The opportunity for local work in this area is apparent.

A key aspect of the knowledge management approach enacted in the Utopia Homelands Project is the linking of the housing and infrastructure data sets with the familial and social structures that influence their 'ownership', management and use. Thus it is possible to understand not only what is there and what is needed but who needs to be engaged and why, in any future works.

*Capacity building emerges from an understanding of the required matrix of responsibilities for the management, maintenance and use of technology and infrastructure in remote areas as well as from skills development.* The community water management and energy efficiency programs delivered alongside the repairs and maintenance program across the Homelands developed the skills and knowledge of residents to be actively involved in ensuring the reliability of their potable water supplies and the sustainability of their energy usage patterns. Risk management approaches offer significant advantages over compliance based approaches especially in remote areas. For small water supplies, the active participation of residents in monitoring the water supply systems, eradicating small scale risks when they arise (eg contamination via dead animals) and clear lines of reporting for structural breakages or in times of emergencies underscores ongoing reliability. The key challenge remains establishing and delivering agreed service responsibilities based on assessments of risks with regionals service providers. Workshops on water small supply risk management approaches were run for the relevant regional Council during the project.

*A focus on delivering outcomes for end users rather than meeting project targets or outputs has delivered multiple yet unforeseen positive impacts for homeland residents.* The iterative approach to project design and implementation underpinned by robust but streamlined engagement practices elicited a deeper level of understanding of the nature of housing and infrastructure amenity valued by Homelands residents. Wind breaks around verandahs were a popular choice in the Stage two upgrade process as they provided less dusty and dog free spaces for people to sleep or create art. The Utopia region is renowned for its fine art and this is a significant area of economic activity across the region. Gun cabinets were also popular as residents were keen to ensure the safety and security of their family and visitors.

**BOX 2****Gun Cabinets**

Throughout the Utopia Homelands we have installed 20 gun cabinets. The people in Utopia are keen hunters and storage of guns needs to be safe and lawful.

After CAT installed the gun safes according to the specifications, CAT staff provided a list of the houses where gun safes were installed to the Police. The residents of those houses have since been able to get gun licenses because a requirement for a license is a gun cabinet.

The rhetoric about abandoned houses arises most often in relation to Homelands. At one Homeland a house that was in reasonable condition had been vacated for a number of years due to sorry business. In the process of making decisions about Stage two improvements to a different house on the same Homeland, an elder (TO for the Homeland) determined that if the vacated house was refreshed with a coat of paint, it would mark the appropriate end to sorry business and the 'new' house could be occupied again. This example of the benefit of engagement reveals the potential benefit of blending cultural obligations with housing outcomes. Painting the house would be an affordable means to increase the shelter available to residents of this Homeland.

In a number of Homelands there was significant erosion of the ground around houses that was undermining house foundations. Waste management practice across the region involved using a front end loader to scoop rubbish off the ground and deposit away from the community. This practice was effectively routinely stripping layers of topsoil from around the housing but would have been outside a 'conventional' appraisal for housing repairs and maintenance. The program of works for the project was modified to include remedial works to the grounds around the houses to stabilise the foundations.

**BOX 3****Box air conditioners – a telling preference**

The small box air conditioners are frequently installed in houses across the Homelands by the residents. They are popular because they can keep a room cool in summer and warm in winter but it is the design and functionality that suits the residents. Small box air conditioners can be installed without an electrician, easily be removed from the window and relocated from one residence to another and the units are relatively cheap to purchase.

The box air conditioner is a technology that suits the residents of Utopia because residency is not based on one house in one Homeland. During the term of the project, for example some families lived between in 3 or 4 houses – taking their box air conditioners with them from one house to another. Understanding why Aboriginal people prefer box air conditioners exemplifies the amenity and priorities Aboriginal people have for their housing.

The amenity, service and opportunities valued by Aboriginal people in Homelands derives from rational and logical responses to their context and circumstances and is in turn driven by aspirations for economic independence and the sustenance that comes from country and culture. Service delivery approaches can only leverage good outcomes when engagement processes underpin project design and local decision making and agency is incorporated wherever possible in achieving project outcomes. Feedback loops and iterative design within agreed parameters are key tools for service delivery where unknowns need to be uncovered, old processes and habits reviewed and people enabled the experience and possibility of new opportunities.



Residents at Welere signing permissions