

Case Study

Smart Budget Special Award

Power and Water Corporation | Borroloola Water Treatment System Upgrade

Borroloola is one of the most remote communities in Australia, located on the McArthur River in the Northern Territory, about 1,000 km southeast of Darwin. Borroloola lies on the traditional country of the Yanyuwa people.

The community has a permanent population of around 1,000 (over 80% of whom are Indigenous) and it functions as a service centre for the surrounding region.

The water supply system is operated by Power and Water Corporation (Power and Water) and water is sourced from underground by five bores. Following six years of planning and preparation, the water treatment upgrade project was delivered in 2018.

The overarching objective of the Borroloola water treatment supply upgrade project was to ensure the Borroloola community has access to reliable, safe drinking water and to provide adequate redundancy in water source infrastructure to secure Borroloola's water supply for the next 30 years.

Due to the technical nature of the project and its very specialised field, the overarching public participation process for the project was focussed on informing the community about the project drivers, schedule and community benefits with balanced and objective information.

There were a few discrete project elements where the community was provided an opportunity to participate in the decision making process. It should be noted that for the most part it was not the general public involved in this decision making, rather it was representatives of key community groups with the relevant authority and expertise.

The extension and modification of the existing water treatment compound

Traditional Owners of the land and the Northern Land Council were consulted during the decision making process for the compound modifications. A site visit and a meeting were conducted with these community stakeholders to obtain feedback on the analysis the project team had undertaken and discuss possible alternatives. This consultation resulted in the project team having a clear understanding of the impacts and public perspectives of each of the options, which influenced the final decision. Consultation was the participation process utilised in this instance because the project team genuinely listened to and acknowledged the concerns and ideas put forward by the community stakeholders, however the final decision regarding the preferred extension and modification of the compound rested with the project team.

The development of a new safety procedure to respond and manage a gas chlorine leak from the new water treatment system

The Mabunji Aboriginal Resource Indigenous Corporation, the Roper Gulf Regional Council, the Northern Territory Fire and Rescue Service and the Northern Territory Police were invited to collaborate with the project team in the development of a safety procedure for responding to and managing a gas chlorine leak from the upgraded water treatment system. The procedure was developed in partnership with the relevant stakeholders, including the consideration of alternatives and joint identification of the preferred approach. A site visit was organised to facilitate this collaborative decision making approach. Collaboration was the participation process utilised in this instance because the project team relied upon the advice and expertise of the community stakeholders in formulating the solution.

Community Artwork Project

The project team decided to pursue the possibility of a community artwork project, to encourage public participation in the project and ensure community buy-in and support for the project. For this project element, the local art centre was empowered to design the artwork project – including how they could be involved. Input was sought from the local art centre through a combination of face-to-face meetings, emails and phone calls, spanning a number of months. The local art centre took the lead in designing the artwork project, including leading engagement with the local school and working with students to develop artwork that was then transferred onto infrastructure at the water treatment compound (refer photos). Empowerment was the participation process utilised in this instance because the project team was committed to implementing and supporting what the art centre decided was the best approach for the art project.



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Describe how the public participation process responded to key challenges faced:

Sensitive political context

The project evolved in a complex political context where external stakeholders (e.g. Ministers, government representatives) had a strong interest in the project for its social and political outcomes. This required the project team to respond to many enquiries and ministerial briefs which added an additional level of complexity and scrutiny. The project team had to ensure the project wasn't mistakenly associated with other local social and environmental issues occurring in parallel. Prior to and during the delivery of the project, media attention was on Borrooloola regarding including water quality issues at a nearby outstation (i.e. a very small Indigenous homeland) and water quality and environmental concerns associated with a nearby mine.

Active communication and extensive stakeholder engagement delivered throughout the project established strong relationships between the community and the project team. Through the provision of timely, balanced, informative information (across a variety of mediums), the public participation process provided the opportunity for the community to be actively informed and to see understand what was being delivered for them, the benefits and the positive impacts that the project would have for the community. Such clarity around the water treatment upgrade project mitigated the risk of public confusion about the links to the other social and environmental issues occurring in parallel.

Complex cross-cultural environment

The project was delivered by non-Indigenous team members in a community where 80% of the population is Indigenous. The cultural context presented a wide range of complexities that the project team needed to be aware of, including:

- Borrooloola community structures
- Aboriginal community structure
- Local Aboriginal language groups and nations
- Differences between the terms 'Indigenous', 'Aboriginal' and 'Torres Strait Islander'
- Cultural sensitivities
- Appropriate language and methods of engagement
- Awareness of cultural bias

The public participation process was reliant on active engagement with Aboriginal community members to ensure cross-cultural communication was delivered effectively. This included seeking assistance from the community and local businesses for the delivery of key communications (e.g. through translation, radio recording, artwork project, local industry participation). The result of this public participation process was two-way – not only did it facilitate better community understanding of the project and its benefits, it also facilitated an improved the project team's understanding of the complex cultural and social environment of the project. This process delivered greater understanding and respect between all parties.

Dealing with a wide range of project stakeholders

Due to the project nature and its social and political impacts, various styles of communication were required across the entire project life cycle. During the initial phase of the project, the project team had to communicate with various technical, managerial and executive groups within Power and Water to seek approvals and ensure key technical aspects were agreed (technical standards, specifications, etc.).

During the procurement phase, the project team liaised with legal groups, commercial entities, contractors and technical reference groups to select and appoint the head contractor to deliver the project. During the delivery phase, extensive engagement with several ministerial offices and media groups were necessary to justify the project and to promote its benefits. The project team had also to engage with local government, the local Aboriginal corporation, local businesses and other community groups to convey project objectives, benefits and community impacts and to obtain necessary approvals (road access, land clearance, etc.). This was done through various face to face meetings, site visits, phone calls and email correspondence.

With consideration of the appropriate public participation process across the project's key decisions, a detailed communication strategy was developed. The communications strategy identified the communication approaches to be undertaken for each stakeholder and/or community group. During the delivery of the project, the project team adjusted the communication strategy and key messages based on feedback received from stakeholders.

Overall the project was very successful across numerous aspects but particularly in terms of community and stakeholder engagement. The effective public participation process adopted throughout the project has established strong and lasting connections between the community of Borrooloola and Power and Water