THE UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME AUSTRALIA

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Notre Dame researchers tackle Indigenous energy poverty

Researchers from the University of Notre Dame Australia are exploring solutions to energy poverty in remote Indigenous communities – a problem that sees some of Australia's most vulnerable left without power in extreme heat for days on end.

The project will also allow researchers from Notre Dame's Broome-based Nulungu Research Institute to identify opportunities for Indigenous people to reap the benefits of Australia's clean energy transition and get better access to renewable energy sources.

About 1400 households in WA's Kimberley region rely on a pre-paid electricity system, which allows them to pay for power in advance but results in an immediate disconnection if their credit runs out.

Recent work by Nulungu researcher Kathryn Thorburn in a Kimberley community found some people were running out of credit about 45 times a year – leaving them without power for anything from hours to days at a time.

Addressing energy poverty among the poorest households in the country would have a positive impact on food security, family and domestic violence rates, intra-community conflict, hospitalisations and community wellbeing. It would also future proof remote communities against the impacts of climate change.

Dr Thorburn and two fellow Nulungu researchers, Associate Professor Steve Kinnane and Research Fellow Lloyd Pilgram, are now on a mission to find solutions to the crisis by consulting with people in remote communities and empowering them to advocate for their energy needs.

Their research project will consolidate groundbreaking data on the impacts of energy poverty, making the issue more visible and giving them the tools to raise the issue with policy makers, utilities and governments.

Associate Professor Kinnane said reliable electricity was taken for granted by most Australians, but for remote Indigenous households in regions where the cost of living was already high, disconnections were an all-too-common experience.

"Living and working in the Kimberley, we have seen firsthand the pressures remote households face when their power is disconnected on a 42C day," he said.

"There in an overwhelming burden to find the money to top-up credit so the air-conditioning keeps running, the food and medicine in the fridge stay cool and the phones stay charged.

“This research will deliver a real-world impact by bringing a heightened focus to an energy crisis that is unfolding in remote Indigenous Australia, and it responds directly to the Australian Government’s First Nations Clean Energy Strategy.”

The project received funding from Notre Dame’s Big Ideas funding scheme – an initiative of the University’s Research Strategy that aims to foster research innovation and ambitious research partnerships.

“This is a very strong research team, and I am positive this project will deliver improved outcomes for Indigenous Australians in remote communities,” said Notre Dame’s Pro Vice-Chancellor Research Professor Aron Murphy.

Notre Dame is planning to host the inaugural Kimberley Aboriginal Clean Energy Forum in Broome in September, bringing Indigenous groups together to share their experiences, identify barriers and find solutions to the energy crisis.

Case study

Dr Thorburn was doing research in Fitzroy Crossing in the Kimberley region on a 43C day when she came across an elderly woman sitting under a tree.

The woman, who had recently had a stroke and was having trouble walking, was under the tree because it felt cooler outside than in her house. She had no electricity, and as a result no food in her fridge.

Dr Thorburn shared some food with the woman and asked her to complete a survey as part of her research. With the $30 payment that came with the survey, the woman immediately topped up her power credit.

“It is levels of hardship that are mind-blowing, to have not even a fan circulating when it’s that hot because you don’t have electricity,” Dr Thorburn said.

“It might only be for a couple of hours, or it might be for a couple of days, but clearly when it’s very hot up here for five months of the year, that’s a big problem.

“Your fridge switches off, your food spoils, if you have medicine in your fridge that’s a problem. And the stresses that it causes are spread out across the community because people have cultural obligations to look after each other.”

The homes Dr Thorburn visits in remote communities are often made from iron, are not insulated and are cooled by inefficient air conditioners that are placed into holes in the wall that have not been cut to size.

She suggested one of the ideas that could be investigated as part of the remote Indigenous energy poverty project was the extension of a scheme that sees the benefits of solar panels shared between entire communities, rather than being isolated to households.

“We are looking for solutions that speak to those cultural foundations of sharing and recognise the strengths of Indigenous community resilience, she said.

“We genuinely want to be driven by what people in the communities tell us are their priorities.”

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