



# Disasters as transformative opportunities

## Indigenous Australian, Taiwanese & Zimbabwean communities recovering and rebuilding stronger



Aboriginal Research Practitioners' Network

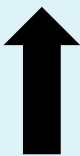


Petra T. Buergelt, University of Canberra, Australia  
Elaine Lāwurrpa Maypilama, Charles Darwin University, Australia  
Chin-Ju Lin, Kaohsiung Medical University, Taiwan  
Apu'u Kaaviana, Takanuva Recovery Station, Kaohsiung Medical University, Taiwan  
Bev Sithole, Aboriginal Research Practitioners' Network & Charles Darwin University  
Tahir Ali, Charles Darwin University, Australia  
Douglas Paton, Charles Darwin University & University of Canberra, Australia



Panel presented at the Susan L Cutter Seminar Series 12<sup>th</sup> August 2020,  
ANU Disaster Risk Science Institute, Canberra, Australia

# Centuries-long & growing existential crisis



- climate change, environmental destruction & loss of biodiversity
- extreme "natural" events, disasters & global pandemic
- mental & physical disease
- violence & wars
- food & water security challenges



Century long social disaster → Colonizing Indigenous peoples



vicious cycle of death, poverty, distress, physical & mental illness,  
intergenerational trauma & malignant grief



## Fortunately...

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**"In the point of the greatest instability lies the greatest potential"**

(Lange, 2012, p. 203)

Context → space for potential can be difficult to see + cultural differences & sensitivities + suppressed

**"In a crisis, be aware of the danger – but recognize the opportunity"**

John F Kennedy

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**What is this opportunity or potential?**

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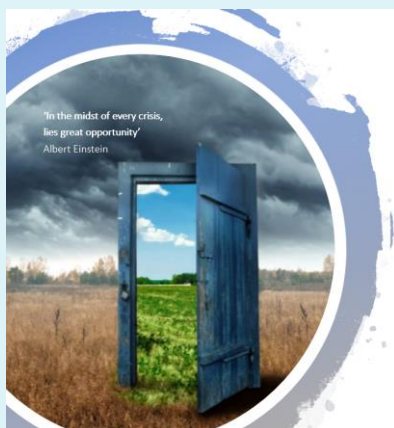


## Crisis → Windows of opportunity for transformation UNIVERSITY OF CANBERRA



... experiencing deep structural shifts of consciousness in thinking, feeling & acting → dramatically & permanently alters way of being & seeing self & world

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### These shifts typically involve:

- understanding ourselves, others & world
- relating with other humans & the natural world
- understanding how power relations play out
- envisioning alternative approaches
- sensing possibilities for social justice, peace & happiness

(O'Sullivan, Morrell & O'Connor, 2002)

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### Transformation opens spaces for:

... being **open**, **critically examining**, **questioning**, **reflecting** on their & other's beliefs & actions, and **engaging in dialogue** to:

- redefine problems from different perspectives
- revise beliefs --> actions
- become more responsible agents of their lives & in their communities
- learn how to take & sustain effective social actions

(Mezirow, 1997, 2001, 2003; O'Sullivan et al., 2002)



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## How & why does transformation in crisis happen?

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**Symbolic Interactionism** (Blumer, 1969; Charmaz, 2014; Williams, 2008)

**Narrative Theory** (Abrams, 2016; Bruner, 2004; Crossley, 2000)

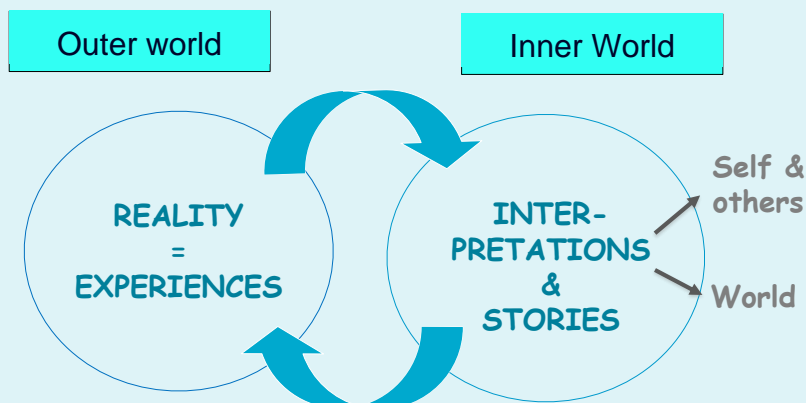
**Transformative Learning Theory** (Mezirow, 1997, 2001, 2003; O'Sullivan et al., 2002)



- to deal with the world → people constantly **assign meaning** to events/experiences & **act/interact** based on this meanings
- to construct this meaning **people invent & share stories** that organize events/experiences into a whole that connects events & actions over time
- stories used as long as they are **relevant & useful**



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- unfamiliar events → challenge stories
- if stories no longer make sense/lose usefulness → people experience a **disorienting dilemma** → break down



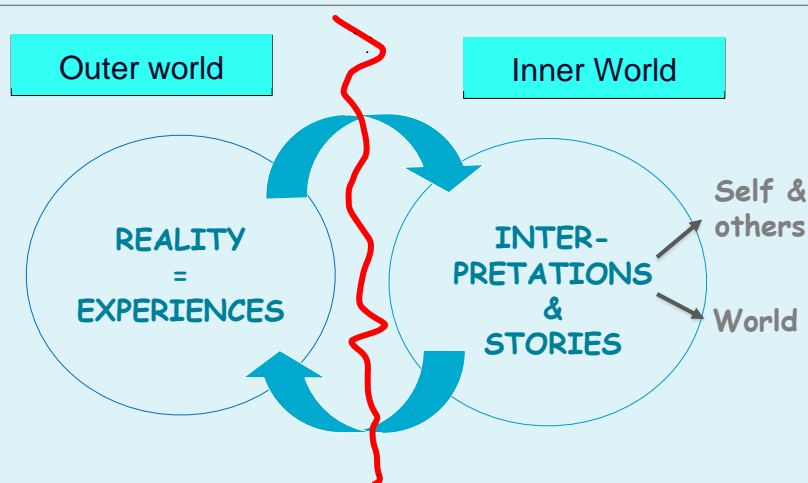
- new stories can emerge
- accepted when people can make sense & perceive the new story as **relevant & useful**



create spaces for people, communities and societies  
to create ways of being, knowing and doing that enable them better  
being healthy/well, fulfilling their needs and thriving



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## Transformative Stories...

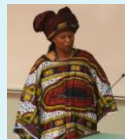


... of how Indigenous communities in Australia, Taiwan & Zimbabwe used, and are sustaining, the transformative potential of disasters



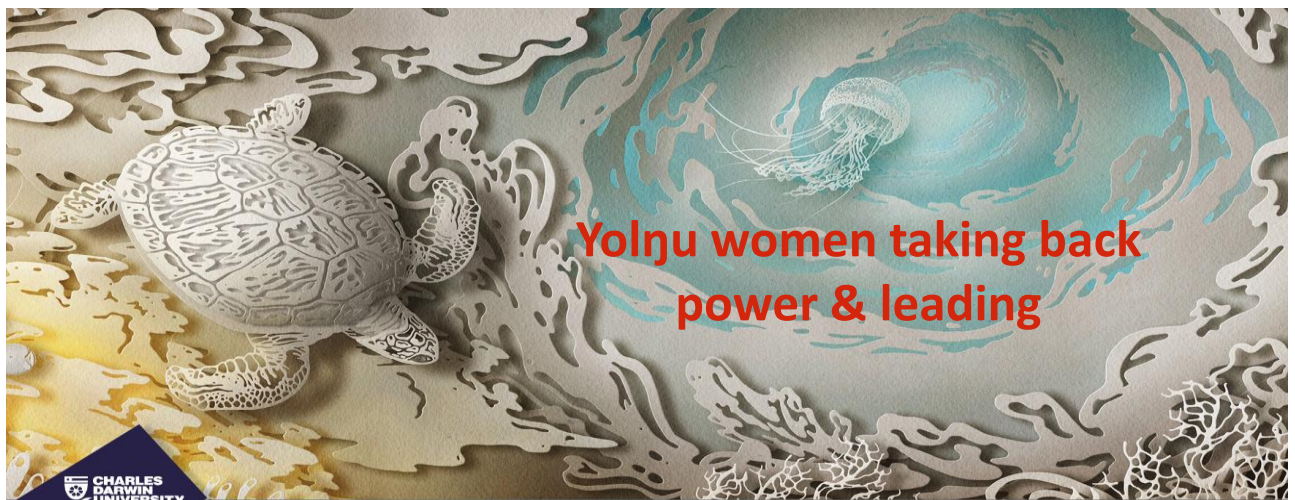
Reviving Indigenous  
Knowledges: Kanakanavu  
Women's Field

Yolngu women taking back  
power & leading



Are disasters really  
transformative opportunities  
in remote/poor communities  
in Arnhem Land & Southern  
Africa?

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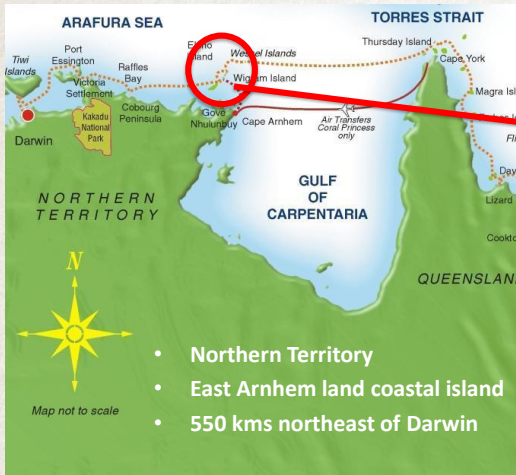


A/Prof Elaine Lāwurrpa Maypilama, CDU, College of Indigenous Futures, Arts & Society  
Tahir Ali, CDU, College of Human & Social Sciences  
Assist/Prof Petra Buergelt, UC, Faculty of Health  
Prof Douglas Paton, CDU, College of Human & Social Sciences



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## DRR research with remote Indigenous community Galiwin'ku



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## In the old days before colonization...

Yolngu had identity, which gave us Yolngu power  
Yolngu women had power

### **Cyclones *burmulala***

Cyclones are natural part of life and us -  
"Cyclones are in our song line. We sing and  
dance cyclones."

Cyclones used to be smaller – they didn't  
destroy and recycled life:

- ✓ they cleansed and purified everything
- ✓ they refreshed everything
- ✓ they gave new life



prevented future disasters



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## Colonising times before & during cyclone Lam & Nathan

Balanda [non-Indigenous people] undermined that power  
Yolŋu men took some of the power of women

Balanda try to change Yolŋu & tell them what to do

Balanda govt changing policies & programs without talking with Yolŋu → then bring that package to Yolŋu & tell them what to do

Yolŋu men do nothing – they don't open package govt gave them because they think *"we got no power"*

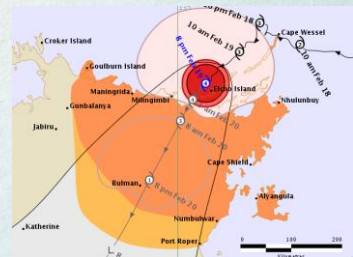


Same when cyclones happened:

- Yolŋu didn't know what was happening
- didn't understand why
- didn't know what to do



Yolŋu frustrated & confused  
Lots of damage



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Damage on Elcho Island estimated to be  
A\$ 80 million

Lam destroyed several houses along Elcho Island & left residents without water or electricity.

Two-thirds of the houses were affected

A week after the storm, 250 residents were  
still displaced



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## Yolŋu women reclaiming their original internal power

Cyclones wiped away old thinking → cleansing



New grass shoots came up → representing how Yolŋu women got stronger



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## Yolŋu women reclaiming their original internal power

Yolŋu women wanted to lead but men did not let women to take power.

Yolŋu men said *"You women can't have that power. We have that power"*

But women more aware that:

- cyclones now dangerous → destroying life → WHY?
- cyclones make Yolŋu weaker & vulnerable but still there is a power

Women took that power to stand up & do things the right way to show how we do it the good way



new life – fresh stories  
new thinking & feeling  
new thinking ahead for new pathways



Yolŋu women said

*"We both have power. Let's work together for our kids and make them resilient"*

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## Yolngu women reclaiming their original internal power

***"We were not ready. What men have been doing has not worked. Only few male elders came out to tell community about cyclone and those men died. We need to take up that role and get ready. We need to get ready inside for next disaster for our kids and future by bringing back our power. We need to do something. We need to stand up and take power back. We have to start open up the package ourselves. Women and men need to walk together side-by-side."***

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## Yolngu women reclaiming their original internal power

**Yolngu still have power → still have strong identity – Balanda can't change us!**

**Yolngu women have power inside because of holy sacred birth**

- baby inside women's belly
  - when baby starts forming a part will stay on in women's belly
  - that is where baby gets strength & grows into a human
  - placenta comes out & goes into ground → land will feel blood of new born babies & tell them who they are
  - that is internal power
- ↓
- gives Yolngu women power & strength
  - women can use that to talk strongly on something



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## Yolŋu women leading truly working together two-way

### More Yolŋu women giving birth on country

Yolŋu women more confident & interested in what is happening

Yolŋu women standing up to Balanda, questioning & speaking out

- What are you bringing?
- What is in the package?
- Why are you doing this?

Yolŋu women getting more knowledge → research

- what makes us strong & what makes us weak
- need to understand the Western system/law → real story
- what is making it hard for Yolŋu & Balanda to work together



Source: Patrick Josse- Nhaltjan limurr dhu djäka miyalkku  
galŋa-ŋonungu limurrngiyingal wäŋanur  
CARING FOR MUM ON COUNTRY



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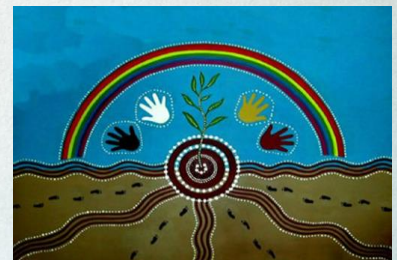
## Yolŋu women leading truly working together two-way

### Yolŋu women saying to Yolŋu men

- you have the power but in the first place women have the power,
- can you get ready and follow us
- let's do it together

### Yolŋu women saying to Balanda

- let's work truly together two-ways & communicate
- come with open hearts & minds
- listen carefully
- explain what is coming so we can be ready



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# Reviving Women's Knowledge Kanakanavu Women's Field

**Chin-ju Lin, Associate Professor**  
**Graduate Institute of Gender Studies, KMU, Taiwan**  
**Apu'u Kaaviana, Director**  
**Takanuva Recovery Station, Namaxia, Taiwan**

Graduate Institute of Gender Studies Kaohsiung Medical University  
高雄醫學大學 性別研究所



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Unfortunately, the power points for this part of the panel are not available at present due to the content being covered in a paper that is not yet published.  
We sincerely apologize.

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# Are disasters really transformative opportunities in remote/poor communities in Arnhem land and southern Africa

DRSI Panel Presentation

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## What is the nature of the transformation ?

Central Arnhem land, Australia

**"Living smart with hazards"**

The reason we can transform Ngaritjan, is we bin here for thousand years, we know country, we live with disasters. ....  
*Gamarang Otto Campion*

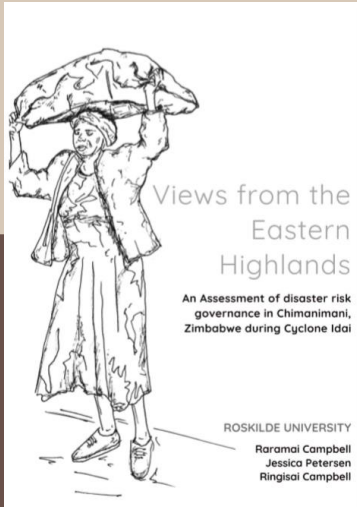
Eastern Highlands, Zimbabwe

**"when the rhythm of the drumbeat changes , the dance must change too"**

If you think you are too small to make a difference, you haven't spent the night with a mosquito

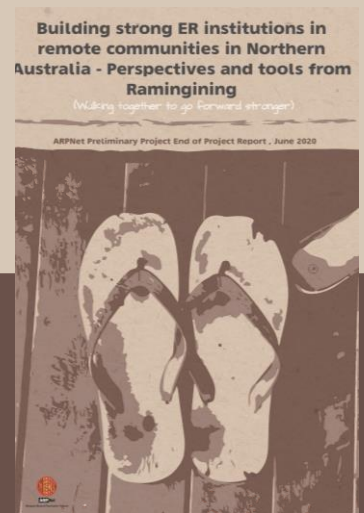
African proverb

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## Lessons from Cyclone Idai, Zimbabwe

Scope: Eastern highlands in Zimbabwe  
 Duration: 2 years  
 Approach: Participant observations  
 Research team: 3 undergraduate students and 2 local informants



## Lessons from a BNHCRC project

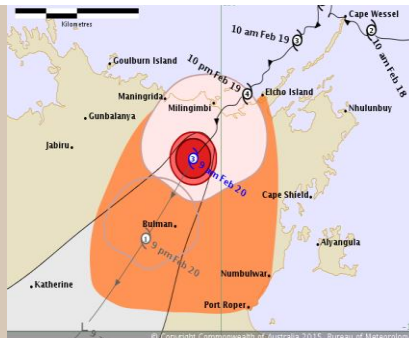
Scope: Ramingining, Arnhem land, NT  
 Duration: 5 years  
 Approach: PAR by ARPNet  
 Research Team: Aboriginal

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# Are cyclones a sufficient catalyst for transformative change?

1. Severity of the cyclones
2. Frequency of the cyclones



Cyclone Lam, Central Arnhem Land



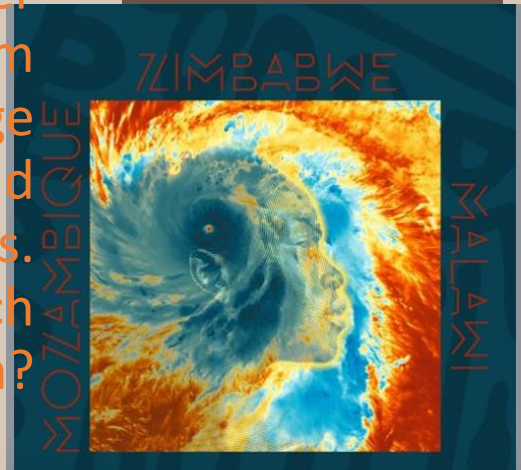
Cyclone Idai, Eastern Africa  
 (by Chaz Mawhiyane)

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The storm may be over  
but the storm  
continues to rage  
against women and  
girls.  
So women ask which  
storm?

- Transactional sex, dispossession, child/forced marriage.
- Domestic violence, overcrowding , and women's business in the face of patriarchy



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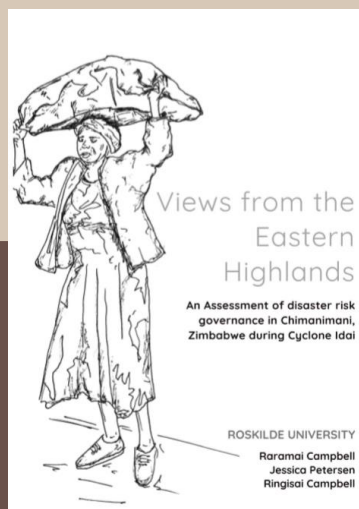
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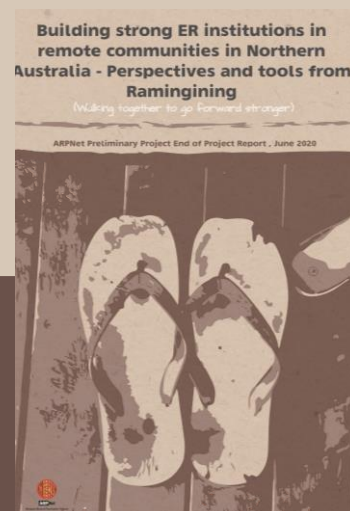


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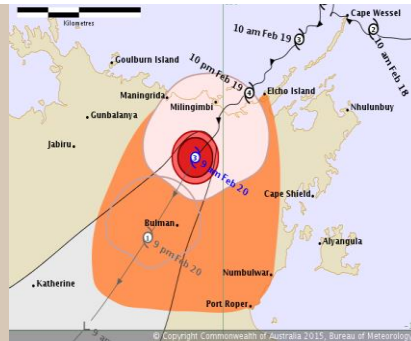


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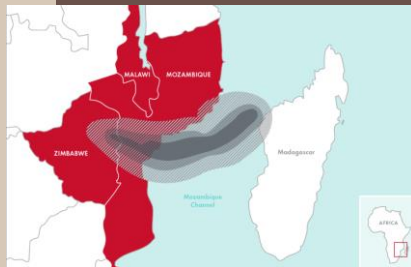
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Cyclone Lam, Central Arnhem Land



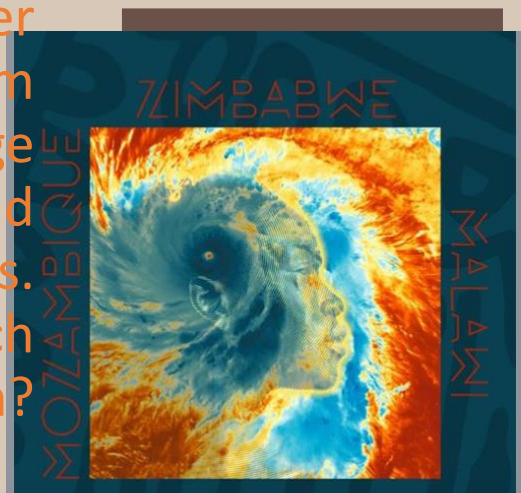
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What can you do when you are captured like im crocodile?

How much transformation is feasible WHEN government is the biggest hazard?



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You gotta give the elephant room to dance on?

African Elephant



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When is it **RIGHT** to talk about disasters as transformative opportunities?

What is the **responsibilities of governments/agencies**?  
How do we make sure there is 'no capture' of transformative action by outside agencies and that conducive spaces are safe?

Does the **increased frequencies and severity** of disasters allow for transformative opportunities?



Central Arnhem land, Australia



Eastern Highlands, Zimbabwe

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- When is it RIGHT to talk about disasters as transformative opportunities?
- What is the responsibilities of governments/agencies?
- Does the increased frequencies and severity of disasters allow for transformative opportunities?
- How do we make sure there is 'no capture' of transformative action by outside agencies and that conducive spaces are safe?

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# Sustaining transformation is really critical...

## Eastern Highlands, Zimbabwe

last year, during cyclone Idai, he lost his son, Tatenda. Tatenda is one of the hundreds still missing up to this day, he met his fate at Coppa. Mkoma Lican narrated to me how he took the long journey to Mozambique in search of the remains of his missing son to no avail, he told me he moved village to village, chief to chief and was shown pictures of pple who were buried there bt cld not find Tatenda, he had to find his way back home to Zim, after immediate family started searching for him. It was a painful story to listen, he told me he would not rest until he finds his son or where he lies. But today, mkoma Lican is gone and had an unfulfilled mission.  
May the Lord comfort his wife and remaining son Tapiwa. We will miss u Chirandu, Gono.

Pasi Hariguti.

Story of Mukoma Lican told by Lovex Kimbini

## central Arnhem Land, Australia

We started this BNHCRC project with 14 elders from west Arnhem and central Arnhem. 5 elders have passed on since the project started. They may be gone but they started something big. One of the remaining elders sat down in tears and said this.

Don't worry Ngaritjan, I will do it for old lady and them oldfellas, I am strong person now. I got space and I got my dillybag" O. B. Campion

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## Key take home stories...



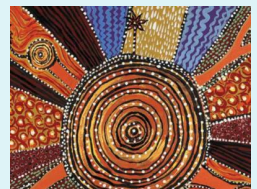
... in the midst of crisis lies great transformative potential for recovery & rebuilding



Disasters → wipe away old stories → make space for fresh stories  
reconnecting with country/land/nature & internal power  
reviving of Indigenous knowledges & practices  
recognizing power women & supporting them reclaiming their power  
supporting community initiatives & genuine two-way working together



Govt suppress that transformative space  
Govt needs to create conducive spaces for transformation to occur →  
- need to shift their worldview &  
- develop knowledges & capacities how to work together



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Thank you

