

Australia May Stop Providing Water and Power to Remote Aboriginal Communities

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Up to 200 indigenous communities in Australia could lose access to power and water because the government says it can no longer afford to deliver the basic services.

The remote communities are mainly located across the northern tip of Australia and the Kimberley in the country's northwest. The federal government [announced](#) late last year that it would stop paying for the utilities, making states responsible for the communities. The Western Australia (WA) state government says it can't afford to cover the costs.

Rodney Dillon, an indigenous advisor at Amnesty International Australia, told VICE News that some members of the indigenous communities might not survive a move.

"It would be a complete culture shock, a complete mental shock," Dillon said. "This is their homeland. It's where they belong it's where they are proud. They are the keepers of the land. Some might stay and die on the land. The older individuals won't manage it — it might kill them."

While some communities stay on the land permanently, others live in the region seasonally, making population numbers small, variable, and sometimes difficult to [measure](#).

An [audit](#) in 2009 found that only 7 percent of the communities measured met basic infrastructure and service standards.

"The state government is concerned that the drinking water is generally not treated nor monitored in more than 180 small remote communities and outstations," Housing Minister Bill Marmion said in a statement late last year.

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[Initial hopes](#) of establishing a \$1 billion "Royalties for Regions" fund, which would have used 25 percent of the state's mining royalties to cover the cost of power and water for the communities, were quashed this week by WA Premier Colin Barnett, who [stressed](#) that the government has not yet reached a solution.

Minister for Regional Development Terry Redman originally floated the "Royalties for Regions" idea, but has since said he was "misunderstood" by the media. He stressed to

VICE News that it was simply one option.

“There have been no decisions made about closing communities or what services in a particular area get resourced by government,” he said.

Asked if communities had been contacted about the potential closures, the state’s Aboriginal Affairs Minister Peter Collier said last week that a consultation that involved “going out to all the communities” would be “just nonsensical,” and that “consultation in a general sense will continue” instead.

Dillon said such a consultation has been non-existent so far.

“The communities haven’t been contacted, no one’s asking anything,” he said. “This is going to be done without consultation, it will be a couple of blokes with a coffee in Perth making these decisions.”

The government will decide which communities stay open and which are “not viable” for investment, Dillon added.

“All we’re asking for is for someone to say, ‘Here’s a timeline, here’s when we’ll know more and when decisions will be made,’” Anthony Watson, chairman of the Kimberly Land Council, told VICE News.

Watson said the dialogue should have occurred last year, and that it now needs to be done as soon as possible.

“We’ve been talking about making these communities sustainable for a long time,” he said. “We would welcome firsthand engagement, and would only ask that the government respect our decisions.”

The criteria that determines whether a community is viable has not been released, but both Redman and Barnett have stressed the likelihood that at least some of the 274 communities in the state will have to close, perhaps as many as 200.

Lauren Pike, a spokeswoman for the Kimberley Land Council, described what happened in 2011 when the government shuttered an indigenous community in Oombulgurri, a community in the eastern Kimberley, and relocated the residents to Wyndham, about 45 kilometers away.

“The result was just devastating,” Pike said. “They literally told these people to get out of their homes and that they couldn’t stay or come back, and then dumped them in the mangroves around the town.

Barnett said in a statement to VICE News that the government can’t stop people from living in their communities, even if they lose access to power and water.

“Communities will not be ‘closed,’” Barnett said. “There is nothing to stop people going on to land, but there are going to be issues about the continuing provision of power and water and other services to 274 communities.”

He also stressed the need for governmental process, and said that, “any reform will not happen overnight.”

Dillon believes any future living conditions in the remote communities would consist of the bare minimum.

“They would be moved to very poor conditions,” he said. “They’re frightened and scared and they speak a different language. Now they’re all possibly going to be moved into slums and shanty towns in the city.”

Groups campaigning against the closure also believe moving the indigenous people into new towns would cost the government more in the long run than if they just maintained the status quo.

“If you move these people, out into this total state of disillusion, away from their entire way of life, you can’t wonder why so many are at such high risk of turning into drunks, paupers and beggars,” Dillon said.

Watson agreed, noting the government could also end up being forced to pay significant legal costs if the closures are challenged in court.

“WA generates a lot of royalties, and the cost of litigation, of forcing these people out... It’s hard, takes a lot of time and would be a very messy process,” he said.

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