Author's response to reviews

Title: From targets to ripples: Developing a multi-sector food group capacity building appraisal tool with remote Australian Indigenous communities

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Executive Editor
Natalie Pafitis
BioMed Central

Dear Executive Editor

Re: From targets to ripples: Developing a capacity building appraisal tool to tackle food security in remote Australian Indigenous communities

Thank you for the opportunity to address the reviewer’s comments. As a result of this review we have made substantial changes to the manuscript and believe this has strengthened the way we have presented the study and its findings.

Reviewer 1

Discretionary revisions
(1) Would it be possible to include some brief information about the distinction between domains and sub-domains in the methods section? This would have helped me understand how ‘sustainability’ wasn’t discussed in step 1 or 2 of the findings, but appeared in step 3.

We have addressed this through substituting use of the terms ‘domain’ and sub-domain’ to the term ‘construct’ as suggested by reviewer 2.

(2) I’m possibly being a pedant, but would the authors consider dropping the word ‘inherently’ on p.19 – I have concerns about people’s beliefs or values being so described.

We have done so.

(3) Is the information in Additional File 1 to be included in the article? It is a bit messy.

We believe this table to hold valuable information to support the text. We agree that it was not presented well and have now separated the information and presented as two tables (Additional file 1 and 2)

Reviewer 2

1. It would have been useful for the introduction to discuss capacity building a bit more. The term is used so differently that it would have been useful to have some more discussion on this. For example, capacity building can refer to growing the size of a workforce or developing the skills of a workforce or the capacity of a group overall. The capacity typically relates to addressing a health issue and so there is some measurement of how that issue was addressed. I think this is important because it impacts on what a
measure will look like. The introduction talks about “capacity to address food security” but also “health leadership capacity”.

These were very important points made by the reviewer and based on this we have rewritten the introduction to provide background information on the concept of community capacity building in relation to addressing health issues and in the case of the study reported here, food security. We have also changed the title of the manuscript to refer to food security specifically.

2. The results talk about the language of existing models changing. I wonder if in the introduction or in the discussion it would be useful to clarify if the authors were motivated to conduct the research because they thought existing measures failed to identify important constructs of capacity building or if the language used to describe these constructs was inaccessible to community members.

We have now addressed this in the introduction. A number of researchers (who have contributed importantly to the area of community capacity development) have referred to the need to modify community capacity constructs based on the social and cultural context in which capacity development efforts are supported. In the introduction we have now referred to the unique context of remote Indigenous Australia and have explained that through a larger project, the Good Food Systems: Good Food for all project, we had the opportunity to assess the relevance and meaning of the capacity development constructs commonly used in other contexts in the context of the perspectives and worldviews of community members in remote Indigenous Australia; and through this, develop a tool for the purpose of multi-sector groups to foster capacity development to tackle food security. We have also stated that this study is important as it contributes to the very limited published literature on the way in which capacity building models may need to be modified.

3. Method: Please provide more detail of the recording of observations. Were these looking for particular behaviours? Did each author do them independently and then how were the results compared? Blindly? What was the authors relationship to the people they were observing?

Thank you for this comment. We now realize that through stating ‘recording of observations’ we have incorrectly inferred the use of participant observation as a methodology. We have corrected this to state that the actual data used to augment the data collected through activities organized primarily to test the relevance and meaning of the literature-derived community capacity constructs were meeting minutes and workshop reports from the food group meetings that were held throughout the project period in each of the communities. These additional data were used in step 4 when all data were scanned to identify references to community capacity characteristics which were then cross-checked against the literature-derived constructs of community capacity. Step 4 was carried out together (rather than independently) by three of the authors (JB, CB and SL). Two of these authors (JB and CB) at various times had facilitated the food group meetings together with the community co-ordinators. All decisions made in the last step were discussed and checked with the community co-ordinators, as is explained in the manuscript in step 4.

4. Method: study setting. Is the information about the stores relevant to this study?

No, it is not directly relevant and has therefore been removed in the setting section of the method.

5. Method: participants. Please provide more detail about the number of times the groups met. 3-10 seems very variable – is there a median number of times? Eg did most meet only once a year? Were meetings the main way the group interacted or were there other interactions eg emails, phone calls? Was the project community co-ordinator from the community?
We have now included in the methods section of the manuscript and as a footnote in additional file 2 specific data on the number of times that the food groups in each of the participating communities met over the life of the Good Food Systems: Good for all project. Three if the food groups met an average of 10 times and the forth community met 3 times. It has now been made clear in the manuscript that the community co-ordinator was a local resident of the community. It has also been made clear in the manuscript that as part of the larger good food systems: good food for all project the food groups were supported to meet during each year for an annual planning meeting and quarterly review meetings. Meetings were the main way that the group interacted, however other additional communication involved emails and face to face contact between the facilitator and community co-ordinators and food group members (to provide meeting minutes and reminders of upcoming meetings) and there was ongoing additional contact made between the community co-ordinators and the facilitators. This detail with regards to additional communication however was not included in the manuscript as although it is relevant to the operations of the food group, we believe it is not relevant to describing the process involved in modifying the literature-derived community capacity constructs and assessing their relevance and meaning.

6. Method Assessment and development: step 1: why was only one community chosen and why this one?

We have now made it clear in the manuscript that the one community where the community capacity constructs were tested at two different times in the study was conveniently selected as the field site for testing of the evolving community capacity development tool due to its close proximity to Darwin compared to the other communities and as the food group in this community had been meeting regularly over the entire project period (this food group met 12 times in total) and had a relatively stable group of people participating in meetings.

7. Step2. What further analysis happened? Were data coded independently and then cross checked? What was the process here?

The data in this step were coded together by two of the authors (JB and CB) and then discussed and cross-checked with the participants before the participants then used the community-derived constructs to appraise their community capacity.

8. Figure 2. If step 1 happened before step 2 and informed step 2 then the diagram should be modified to reflect this.

We have more clearly outlined in the methods section of the manuscript the different steps that were used to assess the relevance and meaning of the literature-derived community capacity constructs in the context of remote Indigenous Australia, and believe as a result of this that figure 1 is no longer required.

9. Step 3. Was the observational data from the group meetings another method? I’d understood step 3 to be more about the group feedback.

To make the process clearer, four steps have now been described (the 2 parts to step 2 have now been referred to as step 2 and step 3). Step 3 is now about each of the community’s appraisal of their own community capacity and step 4 refers to the cross-checking of all available data against the literature-derived constructs and the final process that involved the community co-ordinators considering each construct and making recommendations to then produce the final construct model.
10. Results and Discussion: Please provide more information about the limitations. Particularly regarding the participation by groups. The implications of why some communities participated in all aspects and others didn’t? Who is in the groups?

The limitations section has now been expanded to:
““There are other potential limitations to this model that could be addressed through further research. We developed this model with the involvement of four remote Indigenous communities and a diverse group of stakeholders with various roles in the food system that to some extent represents the diversity observed across communities. Community capacity however is a complex concept that has many dimensions and it is likely that we have not fully captured these – for example, the views of community capacity from the other Indigenous group in Australia, Torres Strait Islander communities, have not been captured. We tested the appraisal process in-situ with a food group that had been meeting at least every three months for nearly two years. Further testing with community groups could provide insight into the relevance of different constructs at different stages of capacity development. Whether the model when operationalized to evaluate community capacity picks up on the most important aspects of community capacity pertinent to what is needed to support improvements in food security and nutrition needs to be tested. The robustness of the constructs over time to support capacity development also need testing in addition to the reliability of the ripple scoring process with involvement of different people in the food group. This later point is particularly pertinent as the composition of the food group, which we found to be relatively fluid, can easily change the power balance and impact on the active engagement of different people. Research is also warranted on the benefits of assessment of capacity building over the long-term and the extent to which capacity development can be associated with positive outcomes”.

11. Discussion. Provide more data in the results to support the first sentence in the discussion.

The discussion has been modified substantially to reiterate and discuss the key finding, as stated “we found through this study that the constructs commonly used to appraise community capacity development were well accepted by those involved in planning and service provision in four remote Indigenous Australian communities and could be used to identify areas needing strengthening. The specifics of each construct however differed from those derived from the literature yet were similar across the four communities and had particular meaning for those involved”.

12. Discussion: the fourth finding: this finding needs more explanation.

The discuss point in relation to relationships has been modified to:
““There are very complex rules around relationships in the Indigenous Australian context that determine processes of engagement, and relationships are prioritized and viewed as the cornerstone to working effectively as a collective. A common thread to each of the constructs was the relationships between the people involved both with each other and with the wider community. It was clear that participants recognized that improving food security and nutrition in the community required the involvement of different players representing both the community groups and community services. Who exactly these people should be was a focus of each of the four community groups and often a sticking point when it was felt that the “right people” were not yet involved. Bound in the “who”, are those who can provide the leadership, knowledge and know-how to support the group to realise its goals. This is synonymous with the view of Butterfoss (2006) that “the key asset of any coalition is its members, and the role of the coalition is to mobilise effectively members’ commitment, talents, and assets to effect change” (p 328). Investing time in identifying the roles and responsibilities of the group, mapping these with key group members and how they relate among themselves, and keeping the rules of engagement transparent are
likely to be paramount to forming a solid structure on which capacity can be further developed in the study context.

13. Discussion: final finding. This paragraph refers to “did not attempt to place priority on different measures” however throughout the article the relative value of measures is discussed.

Thank you for bringing this to our attention. We agree that we have referred to the relative importance that participants placed on different constructs. We have deleted the sentence “did not attempt to place priority on different measures”.

14. Discussion: The discussion talks about different stages in the lifecycle of groups. The methods should discuss when this study took place eg year 1 in the project year 3 etc.

Reference to the time frame and the various years that different aspects of the study took place have been added to the method section.

15. Discussion: limitations: sentence which begins “for example, many models of capacity development…” refer to comments made at about the introduction. Capacity building measurement is often criticised to be not focused enough on the outcome ie the food group was formed to address food supply. Is this paper saying that changes in the food supply do not need to be measured if the capacity of the group has shifted? Is a change in the capacity of the group a reasonable enough end point in itself? I think the article needs to talk about the position of capacity building in measuring the success of a program/investment.

We have included more in the introduction and discussion on the issue of whether community capacity development is an end in itself or a means to an end. We have built on the concept proposed by several experts in the area of capacity development (Penelope Hawe, Robert Labonte and Glen Laverack) to say that not only should community capacity occur in parallel to achieving program goals, but that it should be included as an integrated and incremental approach to achieving health goals and that it is likely to set the conditions for being able to achieve more effective and sustained change.

16. Also consider use of the terms “assessment” and “measurement”. The article seems to be about constructs that should be considered when measuring capacity rather than the development of a measure. For example, how would the group determine if it had successfully built on strengths? In this regard I think what has been produced is a model

We appreciate this point being made and agree with the reviewer. We have removed all mention of the terms ‘assessment’ and ‘measurement’ and have used the term appraisal to describe the subjective process used to support stakeholders to reflect on their community capacity and identify areas in need of strengthening. We have also referred to the areas of community capacity as constructs and to the set of constructs that we have proposed as a model.

Thank you for this opportunity to respond and make modifications to the manuscript. We hope it meets your approval.

Yours sincerely,
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Senior Research Fellow