

Submission to the draft Indigenous Evaluation Strategy
Institute for Human Security and Social Change
31 July 2020

The Institute for Human Security and Social Change

The Institute for Human Security and Social Change¹ (the Institute) is a not-for-profit initiative, located within the College of Arts, Social Sciences and Commerce at La Trobe University. We work for inclusive social change by undertaking research, monitoring and evaluation (M&E), support of practice, and, outreach and engagement. We seek both to learn from practice and share that learning in Australia and internationally; and to inform practice by bringing to bear the latest thinking in international development and social change. We currently work primarily in international development in the Pacific and in Indigenous Australia. We have supported monitoring and evaluation practice with both the Central Land Council and the Northern Land Council for more than 10 years. We have also worked with other indigenous organisations including the Healing Foundation, and the peak group for Northern Territory Aboriginal Organisations (APO NT), supporting their development of monitoring and evaluation systems.

The Institute welcomes the opportunity to provide commentary on the draft Indigenous Evaluation Strategy.

Support for the Strategy

The Institute supports the intention of this draft Strategy, commitment to evidence-based improvement in the policy and programming that supports Aboriginal people's well-being. We concur with the observation in the Strategy that despite decades of developing new policies and programs directed at development for Aboriginal people, very little is known about the impact or outcomes of most of these activities, in large part due to failure to include accountability mechanisms including monitoring and evaluation. We also agree with the aspiration of the Strategy, to support better policy and programs and ultimately improved lives and well-being for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

There is much to be commended in the Strategy, in particular the principles-based approach which provides for a high degree of adaptation and flexibility in evaluation approach and implementation. Giving priority to the overarching principle of centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's perspectives, priorities and knowledge is also to be commended and we believe, if correctly implemented, could support the Strategy to make a substantial contribution to meaningful assessment of Australian government programs and policies.

Further development of the Strategy

Drawing from its experience in evaluation with people from different cultures and worldviews, the Institute offers the following for consideration to further strengthen the Strategy.

Evidence to policy

The Strategy articulates four reasons for an Indigenous Evaluation Strategy, including enhancing the use of evaluations to inform policy and program design and implementation. It also notes that policymakers admit in practice they *do not rely heavily on evidence or past experience when formulating or modifying policies and programs*. This suggests the Strategy as it stands is unlikely to achieve one of its core intentions.

¹ <https://www.latrobe.edu.au/socialchange>

Wider experience indicates that the connection between good-quality evidence and influence on policies and program implementation, is one which is determined by several factors such as political will, opportunity and timing, communication and personal interests, as well as evidence-based information². While the intention to produce regular and rigorous evidence from evaluations is one that should be supported, without equally rigorous attention to other factors likely to limit or impede the use of evaluation information in future policy and programming, there is a considerable risk that these evaluations will simply waste the time and resources of both the Australian government and Indigenous people.

The Institute proposes that it is essential that the Strategy should be expanded to consider knowledge and evidence management in Indigenous policy-making and programming and how those responsible for managing evaluations can best manoeuvre through the ‘political’ process of ensuring the take-up of evaluation outcomes. This is likely to include clear governance structures for each evaluation, which include the representation of Indigenous people, able to hold policymakers and program implementers accountable for reasonable utilisation of evidence.

Overarching principle

It is the experience of the Institute that centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s perspectives, priorities and knowledges in the evaluation process will raise considerable challenges to traditional evaluation practice. The worldviews and values which are encountered in consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are often different to the values and worldviews of government and other white Australian stakeholders, creating inherent tensions and challenges for evaluation framing and implementation³. This has implications for the other principles outlined in the Strategy together with the ideas included in the Strategy guide.

If the Strategy is serious about centring Aboriginal people’s worldviews as best quality evaluation practice, then it should acknowledge these challenges and provide some direction about the sophisticated evaluation and management practices that will be required to support this approach⁴.

Indigenous directed research and evaluation

There are examples both within Indigenous communities in Australia and various other countries, where local researchers and evaluators are now leading and managing assessment and inquiry processes⁵. This has led to a much broader understanding of the concept of evaluation and ways of knowing and making sense of the world. Very little attention is given within the Strategy to the concept of Indigenous people managing their own evaluations and/or utilisation of Indigenous researchers.

² Parkhurst J. (2017), The politics of evidence: from evidence based policy to the good governance of evidence, Routledge, UK http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/68604/1/Parkhurst_The%20Politics%20of%20Evidence.pdf

³ Katz, I. et al (2016) Evaluation theories and approaches; relevance for Aboriginal contexts. Prepared for Aboriginal Affairs, NSW Department of Education, Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales. <https://www.aboriginalaffairs.nsw.gov.au/pdfs/conversations/Evaluation%20theories%20and%20approaches%20-%20relevance%20for%20Aboriginal%20contexts.pdf>

⁴ There is considerable information from which to develop more sophisticated methodological support. See for example: <https://helenkara.com/2020/07/29/decolonising-methods-a-reading-list/> <https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/themes/evaluation-practice-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-settings>

⁵ See for example the innovative evaluation approaches developed by the Northern Institute of Charles Darwin University (https://www.pc.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/244840/sub062-indigenous-evaluation.pdf) and the important work around evaluation of well-being supported by the Kimberly Institute in cooperation with the Australian National University <https://bcec.edu.au/media/indigenous-wellbeing-best-measured-ground/>

The Strategy would be considerably strengthened by reference to these resources and opportunities. We recommend that this might be considered as the starting point for best quality evaluation and included as part of the core first principle.

Analysis and sense making

The Strategy fails to identify the analysis and sense making step in the evaluation process in its tables and guidance. While data collection methods and approaches are important, as is the wider process of who manages the evaluation, further additional consideration is who makes sense of the data and thus shapes subsequent recommendations and findings? The Strategy needs to identify this as a step in the evaluation process and provide appropriate guidance⁶.

In addition, evaluation which is cross-cultural and where different worldviews and values are likely to encounter each other, needs to carefully consider the analysis processes, which build dialogue and connection between different worldviews⁷. While this may not be a simple process, it is if handled well it is likely to lead to more active attention to solving problems and working together for improvement.

If the Strategy is serious about wanting evaluation evidence to influence programming in practice, then it should promote good practice for analysis, in particular analysis which supports active critical dialogue between stakeholders.

Conclusion

Guidance for evaluation is most often presented as technical lists of supposedly neutral tools, steps and processes. This draft Strategy for Indigenous Evaluation has avoided this simplistic approach taking the bold step of focusing on principles and highlighting the centring of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's perspectives.

This informed approach ought to frame the whole document, and inform guidance for the Strategy. This includes attention to the implications of this first principle for evaluation implementation as well as attention to analysis and utilisation of the evaluation information.

⁶ See for example, discussion in Tyrrel, L. et al (2020), 'Uncertainty and COVID_19, A turning point for monitoring, evaluation, research and learning', Governance and Development working paper series. <https://abtassocgovernancesoapbox.files.wordpress.com/2020/05/200514-uncertainty-and-covid19-a-turning-point-for-merl-final-1.pdf>

⁷ See for examples the discussion in Batliwala, S. & Pittman, A. (2010), Capturing Change in Women's Realities, AWID. https://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/capturing_change_in_womens_realities.pdf