
12 The use of evaluation in Indigenous policy and program development: the case of Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory

Michael Dillon¹

Abstract

This paper outlines the use of evaluation and other policy development analysis tools in the development of the Government's Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory policy and program arrangements. It also explores lessons learnt about methodology, building good evidence and transparency. The paper highlights the importance of developing the evidence base around administrative data sets, designing robust survey tools, undertaking community consultations and achieving community ownership of the issues and solutions. The value of taking a long-term perspective on building evidence, timing the development of program logics within policy development and undertaking evaluations that support continual learning are also discussed.

12.1 Introduction

Policy and program development is shaped by ideas, evidence and political and budgetary feasibility and, in many cases, opportunity, serendipity and fortune. Banks in 'Good evidence can "neutralise" political obstacles' (Banks 2009, p. 7) suggests that if we get the first two right then the 'politics' will play a less significant role.

Ideology arguably plays a disproportionately large and significant part in Indigenous affairs given the deeply passionate opinions that people have on

¹ Deputy Secretary, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA). This paper is the product of the work of a number of contributors. Kim Grey, Margaret Henderson and Beth Abraham all made significant contributions. Ultimate responsibility for any errors must be attributed to Michael Dillon.

Indigenous issues. Thus the challenge facing policymakers, to match good ideas with evidence, is even more important. To develop good policy, policymakers must persist, giving citizens and stakeholders certainty, allowing time for lessons to be learnt and policy to be refined and improved.

On the influence of ideology and politics, Banks (2009, p. 4) puts it this way:

Policy decisions will be typically influenced by much more than objective evidence, or rational analysis. Values, interests, personalities, timing, circumstance and happenstance — in short, democracy — determine what actually happens.

In his paper ‘Evidence based policy: what is it and *how do we get it*’, Banks identifies three essential ingredients in answering this question — the first is that ‘methodology matters’, the second is the pre-requisite for good data and the third is transparency. Transparency relates to the sharing of information not just with other experts in the field, but with the people who are going to be affected by the policy. Public consultations and community feedback play an important part in ensuring transparency (Banks 2009, p. 14).

This paper takes as its focus of discussion the policy transition from the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) to the Australian Government’s recently announced policy and program framework for the Northern Territory, *Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory* (Australian Government 2011) and outlines the significant role of evaluation and policy analysis in shaping that transition.

In an appendix, the paper draws an explicit line of sight between the relevance of the three ingredients of evaluation identified by Banks to the day-by-day, month-by-month practice of policy development undertaken over recent years by the Australian Government in relation to the Northern Territory.

12.2 Setting the scene — from the NTER to Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory

The development of Stronger Futures derives from a complex array of factors not well understood even amongst those deeply involved in Indigenous affairs. It has its origins in the 2007 NTER which was initiated in response to the widespread social dysfunction in many communities that was undermining the quality of life of women and children and reducing their life opportunities. The original focus of the NTER was primarily to ensure community safety, the catalyst for which was the release of the Report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse, titled *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle: ‘Little Children are Sacred’*.

The NTER quickly became known as ‘the intervention’ because it involved, inter alia, the deployment of the Australian Defence Force, the enactment of legislation with a five-year sunset clause which compulsorily acquired five-year leases over some 70 remote communities, introduced universal welfare quarantining for all persons on income support in those communities, and removed the legislative protection of the Racial Discrimination Act in relation to those policy changes. Many Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory were distressed and angry about key aspects of the NTER policy and its implementation. There was also a large degree of confusion as, simultaneously, the Northern Territory Government took action to reform local government across the Northern Territory, replacing some 80 community councils with larger shires. In the minds of many Aboriginal people this too was part of the ‘intervention’.

Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory is a policy framework which is aimed at building on the achievements of the NTER as well as redressing the hurt and distress caused by the way the NTER was implemented, re-aligning policy settings to be more respectful and to take into account the potential role of local organisations in service delivery, increasing employment opportunities arising from government investment, while retaining a focus on addressing the drivers of disadvantage and dysfunction.

Accordingly, Stronger Futures is informed by policy and program evaluations. Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory is built on a foundation of policy-relevant evidence, community consultation to ascertain community preferences, and is moving methodically and steadily to transition to sustainable and widely accepted policy settings that will underpin the Government’s broader policy objectives of closing the gap in remote Northern Territory communities

Stronger Futures involves new and complex legislation, significant long-term investment by the Government totalling \$3.4 billion over 10 years, complex inter-governmental partnerships and negotiations, an array of interlinked service delivery arrangements, and a commitment to strong, effective and meaningful engagement with local Aboriginal communities.

The evidence base drawn on by the Government in designing the Stronger Futures policy involved many different sources and types of information. It has been about building up a reasonably sophisticated picture of the impact of multiple, coordinated measures and using evaluations to help build that evidence base.

In 2008, the Government commissioned the Northern Territory Emergency Response Review Board, chaired by Peter Yu, to review each of the key measures that made up the NTER.

Following the review, policy changes were introduced to refocus and realign the NTER with community expectations. Income management was reformed to remove its universal application, and to target it to vulnerable people, people who had been on specific payment types for an extended period and to income support recipients who requested it, and placed on a non-discriminatory basis. The Racial Discrimination Act was reapplied to the NTER policy arrangements.

The Yu review included very solid research that gave a statistical picture of the Northern Territory Emergency Response communities. John Taylor (from the Australian National University's Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research) undertook this research and showed that the population of remote Northern Territory communities was growing and would continue to grow for at least another decade by around 20 per cent.

This demographic research also busted some myths — or misperceptions. What it told us was that there was no uniform drift away from remote communities. In fact, in some places like Wadeye, the population increase was urbanising remote communities — creating Aboriginal towns. The research also highlighted that, given around 36 per cent of the population of these communities were children, as time passed there would be an increase in the working-age population. That meant that, if the current circumstances continued, there would be another, but larger, generation of people who were largely dependent on welfare, poorly educated in comparison to most Australians, and needing better access to government services.

This evidence told us that we had a long-term strategic issue — as well as an immediate and continuing emergency. This evidence is the fundamental rationale for the 10-year time frame adopted for Stronger Futures.

Over the course of the NTER, individual measure evaluations and reviews, and the six monthly monitoring reports, delivered information that we have used to put together a picture of trends over time, what was working, what was not, and what needed doing differently.

When it came to asking the policy question — what should happen when the NTER ends in 2012? — there was already a substantial base of information to inform decision making.

The demographic information showed that the Northern Territory was fundamentally unique. Some 80 per cent of the Aboriginal population in the Territory live in remote or very remote areas. Almost 30 per cent of the Territory's population is Aboriginal (not 2 or 3 per cent as in other states).

Reports from the independent COAG Reform Council have shown that each of the six Closing the Gap targets, the gap between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians, was widest in the Northern Territory by a large margin. There were very poor outcomes for education and employment (CRC 2009, 2010).

The evidence was clear that additional investment was required if the gaps in Aboriginal outcomes in the Territory were to be narrowed and brought closer to outcomes in other jurisdictions.

Significantly, the Government undertook successive and extensive consultations with Aboriginal people in remote Northern Territory communities between 2008 and 2011 (Australian Government 2009, 2011). The consultation comments from thousands of people at hundreds of meetings in over 100 communities were systematically documented against measures (or priorities).

The qualitative information from the consultations provided insights into Aboriginal people's lived experiences. Three rounds of consultations (for the Yu review in 2008, the NTER Redesign in 2009 and Stronger Futures in 2011) provided the Government with a strong picture of the wide diversity of views and experience, and some consistent common themes.

Alcohol was a consistent theme. The 2011 consultations gave us the clearest indication yet about what local people thought about alcohol. Not only did it harm people's health, people were saying it was the reason houses were damaged, children were neglected, and children were not being sent to school. The Stronger Futures alcohol measure has a strong focus on reducing harm and minimum standards, based on non-negotiable criteria, being set for local alcohol management plans.

The consultations consistently indicated that many people, particularly women, wanted income management because it helped them manage their money and feed their children. People wanted continued investment in houses, they wanted jobs and they thought their health service was good, but they wanted a wider range of services, especially alcohol rehabilitation, dental services and mental health care.

The Community Safety and Wellbeing Research Survey of over 1300 Aboriginal residents of 16 remote Northern Territory communities was published in 2011. The results showed that several NTER measures — in particular, police and night patrols — had helped to make remote communities safer. The majority of community residents (72 per cent) thought that their communities were safer (Shaw and d'Abbs 2011). Stronger Futures continues the police and night patrol funding.

There were also individual measure evaluations, like the Community Stores evaluation which provided a strong indication that the community stores licensing was having a positive effect on the supply of fresh, healthy food and the quality of stores management. Stronger Futures includes a food security measure that continues and fine-tunes stores licensing.

The NTER Evaluation pulled the many threads together to give a more complete and comprehensive picture to inform the policy development process.

So tackling alcohol misuse, education, housing and jobs are top priorities for Stronger Futures. The specific measures to deliver on these priorities have been shaped by the evidence. Most of the NTER measures have been modified, some have ceased, and there are new measures such as the Communities for Children initiative.

Stronger Futures is now in an implementation phase and evidence and evaluation continue to be important and an integral part of the Stronger Futures policy and program arrangements — there are legislated, independent reviews; there will be six monthly monitoring reports; and measure evaluations. We will continue to improve the quality of the data and evidence.

The Government will continue to assess emerging evidence to gauge whether policies and programs are on track. The latest results from the 2011 Census indicate that while there is much work still to be done in the Northern Territory, improvements are being made.

- Across States and Territories the greatest improvement in Indigenous Year 12 completion since 2006 is in the Northern Territory — where attainment of at least Year 12 or an equivalent level of qualification for 20 to 24 year olds, rose by 10.4 percentage points, from 18 per cent in 2006 to 29 per cent in 2011. The Northern Territory also experienced the greatest reduction in the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous attainment over this period — 6.7 percentage points.
- Median household income for Indigenous households in the Northern Territory rose between 2006 and 2011.
- Data from the 2011 Census shows that the Indigenous employment rate in the Northern Territory (the proportion of all Indigenous people aged 15–64 who are employed) declined from 39 per cent in 2006 to 37 per cent in 2011; however, this includes participants in Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP).
- The proportion of Indigenous Territorians aged 15–64 who were employed in a non-CDEP job, rose from 21 per cent in 2006 to 30 per cent in 2011. This 9

percentage point increase is more relevant than the data that includes CDEP participants as the policy goal is to increase non-CDEP employment not to increase the number of people in CDEP positions

Since the NTER Evaluation, 2010 data have been released showing a statistically significant 8.8 per cent decline in Indigenous infant mortality from 2007 to 2010 in the Territory.

In June 2012 the COAG Reform Council released its latest report on progress against the six Closing the Gap targets. The report indicated that, if trends to 2010 continue, the Northern Territory is on track to close the gap in Indigenous life expectancy by 2031.

The gaps are still very wide but the evidence is that improvements are being made.

Undertaking whole-of-government evaluations such as those undertaken in relation to the NTER involves looking at the macro level and rising above individual programs with the aim of creating a strategic learning framework. Working in partnership with other Commonwealth agencies and State and Territory governments requires transparency and a commitment to sharing data. Although there are significant challenges, working in partnership provides significant opportunities to improve the evidence base through collaboration, comparison across jurisdictions and sharing of lessons learnt from one place to another.

12.3 Conclusion

The shift from the NTER to *Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory* is a clear example of the successful use of evaluation and policy analysis, based on a broad suite of evidence to transform and reshape policies and programs in the Indigenous policy domain.

Australian Government policy makers are relying on a broad evidence base to understand what works, and what does not, to ensure better outcomes for Indigenous Australians.

Evidence is sought and utilised in a variety of different forms, at a number of different points in the policy development and implementation cycle.

Formalised evaluations certainly have a key place in this process — but so do other mechanisms. These include investing in building intellectual capital within the public service, drawing on the expertise and experience of policy makers and stakeholders, incorporating institutional capacity and knowledge, and using

feedback loops between people directly impacted by policies, the policy makers themselves and other stakeholders. As tools in the development of strategic policy, evaluations are necessary, but not sufficient.

The use of a broad and flexible evidence base is particularly important when dealing with significant and entrenched disadvantage. Evidence from the NTER show us that overcoming disadvantage is likely to be addressed only through intergenerational shifts in behaviours, due to a variety of interrelated measures across a broad spectrum of issues, including health, housing, land, governance and education. This knowledge has been central in developing the Stronger Futures policy and program agenda.

Successful transformational policy reform uses a set of methods that inform the policy process over time and acknowledges that evidence is not the only factor which influences policy making. Policy development is not objective or neutral; but inherently involves value judgements. To recognise this reality is not to devalue the importance of strong and robust policy analysis and evaluation. The inevitable value judgements applied by governments as they shape policy will always be better formed if they are underpinned by robust analysis and evaluation.

The real value of evaluations in Indigenous policy development is the fundamental contribution it makes in helping to establish a broader understanding of how to best address and overcome disadvantage.