
12.A Appendix: Methodology matters

The following issues address some of the more technical evaluation lessons learned by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs from its policy analysis work in the Northern Territory. The paper has framed this around Banks' three essential ingredients of good evaluation.

Program logics

An important strategy for embedding evaluations into Indigenous policies is to ensure that a program logic is developed early, preferably at the same time as the policy is being developed. Generally programs have either an explicit or implicit program logic. A key task for evaluation is to make program logic explicit and draw connections to the measurement of outcomes.

The development of a program logic for an evaluation is the first step in defining the problem and working out the steps involved in getting from A to B. Program logic refers to causal models that link program inputs and activities to a chain of intended outcomes, usually represented as a diagram. Program logics can focus on intermediate outcomes to show how the activities and resources invested in particular areas are expected to contribute to longer term outcomes. Program logics also help in trying to define what evidence will be required in order to measure if intended outcomes are being reached, and what instruments will be needed to measure outcomes.

According to Banks (2009, p. 9) good methodologies have a number of features in common:

They test a theory or proposition as to why policy action will be effective; they have a serious treatment of the 'counterfactual'; they involve, wherever possible, quantification of impacts, they look at both direct and indirect effects (often it's the indirect effects that can be most important); they set out the uncertainties and control for other influences that may impact on observed outcomes; they are designed to avoid errors that could occur through self selection or other sources of bias; they provide for sensitivity tests and, importantly, they have the ability to be tested and, ideally, replicated by third parties.

Program logics for the NTER Evaluation were developed early and used over the course of implementation and evaluation (ARTD Consultants and Westwood Spice 2010)

For the NTER Evaluation six program logics were developed that were linked to six outcome areas. Two program logics looked at the causal assumptions and outcomes in improving service delivery (i.e. covering resetting the relationship and coordinating service delivery). Four further program logics focused on intermediate outcomes to show how the activities and resources in particular areas (creating safer communities; improving health and nutrition; increasing school readiness and improving educational attainment) were expected to contribute to longer term outcomes. While program logic diagrams often show vertical causal relationships, a more strategic approach is to depict some of the horizontal relationships, particularly where achievements in one outcome area, for example, community safety, may influence others, for example, health and nutrition. The NTER Evaluation strategy and the final report were informed by these program logics.

Good data, better data

The second ingredient identified by Banks as a pre-requisite for evidence based policy is good data. In the Indigenous area we are actually at a more advanced stage than many other areas of social policy. Considerable work has been done around the development of performance indicators. For example, we have the Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage reports, which describe progress being made in addressing Indigenous disadvantage across a range of key indicators. There is also the Indigenous Expenditure Report which reports transparently on expenditure on services to Indigenous Australians. A substantial range of material is also collected by the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse which brings together evidence-based research on overcoming Indigenous disadvantage.

Implementation

Gathering data about implementation is hard work and tools need to be developed to do this. This takes time. The NTER monitoring reports were developed from the very start of the NTER and refined each six months and published by FaHCSIA. That process allowed a substantial amount of information to be collected, reviewed and released on a regular basis.

For evaluation and monitoring of Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory, FaHCSIA is incorporating the lessons learnt from the NTER, in particular the

findings from the NTER Evaluation, in the development of an evaluation strategy for Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory.

Findings from the NTER Evaluation revealed there are some gaps in the available evidence. While many improvements were made in gathering data, the available evidence was not ideal to show where gains have been made in a number of areas. Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory will continue to seek to improve the policy and program evidence base so as to assess the impact of measures and underlying policy on improving the lives of Indigenous citizens in the Northern Territory.

Baseline data

There is a myth that baseline data or rather the lack thereof is always a problem for evaluation. Baseline data is basic information gathered before a program begins. It is used later to provide a comparison for assessing program impact. In Australia we have numerous administrative data sets covering hospitalisation data, school attendance data and crime incident data that are readily available to use to give us baseline data for previous years.

To focus the evaluation effort on collecting baseline data, much of which is actually readily available, can take effort away from identifying areas where we have no data and building tools to collect that data. It can also distract from the more important task of undertaking secondary analysis of the existing administrative data sets and making improvements in existing data collection methodologies.

In fact, there is a risk that focusing on having one year of data at the beginning of a program which can be compared with data at the end of the program can be misleading, as it will not capture changes that are due to long-term trends. Existing administrative data sets can provide us with multiple years of data so that we can see long-term trends. Without care, just analysing trends from a ‘baseline’ could lead to changes being identified that are merely part of existing trends. For the NTER Evaluation the aim was to collect information for at least five years prior to the commencement of the policy, in addition to focusing our efforts on secondary analysis of the data and identifying data gaps. The secondary analysis of the data can involve looking at differences based on age and sex or between remote and non-remote communities.

Existing administrative data

For the NTER, which primarily addressed the issue of safety, administrative data sets such as police incident records have been used to monitor increases in the number of police reports around key crime incident categories such as assaults, alcohol related incidents, domestic violence and child neglect. Since the commencement of the NTER there has been an increase in almost all these categories, which is a reflection of increased police activity due to the number of extra police that are based in the NTER communities. As such it does not tell us much about underlying crime rates.

Community surveys

A key goal of the NTER Evaluation strategy was to include the people's perspective in the independent evaluation. As noted above, the views of people living in communities about safety and community change were needed. Data on people's lived experience complement and inform the interpretation of crime and justice administrative data.

In 2010 and 2011, FaHCSIA commissioned a consortium of specialist consultants led by Bowchung Consulting to undertake a Community Safety and Wellbeing Research Study (CSWRS). Several methodologies were used to help triangulate research results and improve their robustness and credibility.

To understand whether the trends evident in administrative data are making a difference on the ground involves asking those people who are directly affected by violence and other social problems — local Indigenous people and service providers.

The Community Safety and Wellbeing survey interviewed 1300 local Indigenous people in 16 remote Northern Territory communities. A quantitative survey was complemented by tailored and systematic qualitative research. The project aimed to collect systematic and robust data to meet three objectives: a) allow for an individual assessment of current status and recent changes in each place through a standardised quantitative survey; b) aid understanding of place-based perceptions of safety and wellbeing through systematic qualitative evaluation research; and c) provide a resource for each community involved that can be referenced for future community development and planning.

The Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) was commissioned by FaHCSIA to design the questionnaire. The AIC examined various other survey tools used in community safety surveys, in particular surveys that were specific to Indigenous

communities, and, as such, were able to build on the existing knowledge in this area. The questions used in the CSWRS have improved on existing tools by including questions not just around people's attitudes to violence but about what they think should be done to promote change.

It was important for the questionnaire to be robust and repeatable so that it could be replicated in the future. The need for the survey to be repeatable takes into account the need for longitudinal data on community safety. The *Little Children are Sacred* report noted that it would take at least 15 years before we could expect to see any real change:

Are there simple fixes? Of course not! Our conservative estimate is that it will take at least 15 years (equivalent to an Aboriginal generation) to make some inroads into the crisis and then hopefully move on from there. (Anderson and Wild 2007, p. 13)

Service provider surveys

For the NTER Evaluation, service provider surveys were undertaken to assess changes that were taking place from the point of view of those delivering the programs. The NTER had a strong focus on increasing service delivery particularly in the area of safety (extra police, night patrols, safe houses, and Remote Aboriginal Family Community Workers). The Community Safety Service Provider Survey involved a survey of 699 government and non-government service providers in the Northern Territory in a range of sectors, including education, health, police, housing, welfare, coordination, justice and legal services. This was conducted on-line and had a good response rate due to a communications strategy directed at the organisations that employ potential respondents.

Consultations

The wider the impacts of a policy proposal, the wider the consultation should be. Not just with experts, but also with the people who are likely to be affected by the policy, whose reactions and feedback provide insights into the likely impacts and help avoid unintended consequences. Such feedback in itself constitutes a useful form of evidence. (Banks 2009, p. 14)

Feedback from the community is an important source of good data. In 2008, the NTER Review Board visited 31 communities and met with representatives of 56 communities, consulted over 140 different organisations, and received over 200 public submissions. The NTER Redesign consultations in 2009 involved community consultations with Aboriginal people in 73 NTER communities, as well as several other Northern Territory communities and town camps. In 2011, the Northern Territory Stronger Futures involved community consultation meetings in

over 100 communities. The 2009 and 2011 consultations also included one-on-one and small group meeting. There were over 440 such meetings in the 2009 consultations and over 370 in the 2011 consultations. Independent assessments of both the NTER Re-design and the Stronger Futures consultation processes were undertaken to determine whether they were open, fair and accountable (see CIRCA 2009, 2011a, 2011b; and O'Brien-Rich Research Group 2011). This brings us to the next ingredient identified by Banks: the need for transparency.

Transparency, debate and ownership

The need for transparency is the third ingredient identified by Banks. Publishing evaluation findings and making the evidence transparent can influence public discourse on an issue. It can encourage debate and be contested.

No evidence is immutable. If it hasn't been tested, or contested, we can't really call it 'evidence' and it misses the opportunity to educate the community about what is at stake in a policy issue, and thereby for it to become more accepting of the policy initiative itself. (Banks 2009, p. 14)

FaHCSIA makes evidence transparent and involves the community in the research process in a wide range of ways.

Participatory research

Participatory research methods help build relationships with communities and provide much needed jobs. They also provide an opportunity for the community to become informed about what other people in their community think and experience during implementation. They can generate discussions, debates and forward thinking about what needs to be done and how to do it. It can create a sense of ownership of issues, which in turn fosters community capacity in finding solutions.

For the NTER Evaluation, the Community Safety and Wellbeing Research Survey involved a participatory action research methodology to collect qualitative information. Community members took part in a participatory process that allowed them to tell their stories about their priorities and experiences in their own community. The participatory processes broadened the scope and allowed for a place-based analysis of survey results. The qualitative research was designed to be sensitive and locally relevant. It involved participatory methods such as assessments of the most significant changes, mapping exercises, ranking of major challenges and changes in each community and small discussion groups, tailored to each community.

The project design emphasised the employment of Indigenous researchers — individuals who may have some prior experience or training in data collection techniques and interpreting, or who were interested in gaining such skills — as part of the survey team. Over fifty local Aboriginal people were employed in work associated with the survey. The findings were sent back to each participating community in a community-specific report.

The NTER Evaluation noted the key importance of such a project:

The continuation of the practice of local people conducting research, owning it and feeding it back into their communities, should be included in all future evaluation strategies. (FaHCSIA 2011, p. 57).

The evaluations of the Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory approach will aim to incorporate participatory processes that involve communities as partners in assessing progress towards change. Participatory processes can help build ownership of evaluation findings.

Local research projects

Recent work at FaHCSIA has developed a network of local Indigenous researchers who can better inform a clear picture of community perceptions and communicate this to governments in a way that they understand. The projects provide multiple benefits, including part-time employment, training in research and evaluation, and strengthened leadership and engagement across all levels of the community. This work is occurring under the auspices of the Community Local Research Projects designed to implement the commitment under the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Service Delivery to develop ‘a research capacity to provide advice to government on local and systemic issues associated with cultural accessibility ...’ (NPA RSD, section 19(f))

In Ntaria (Hermansburg Northern Territory) this model has delivered real benefits to governments and community members. The researchers informed the selection of priority actions in their communities’ Local Implementation Plans through participatory action research methods. The community chose to research topics of ‘safer driving and vehicle safety’ and ‘community perceptions of governance’. Local Indigenous knowledge of language, cultural protocols, intercultural processes, community corporate knowledge and daily lived experiences strengthened the research results and these have informed local decision-making. The experience has also led to local Aboriginal researchers getting further employment to assist with the delivery of other surveys for the Northern Territory Government on topics as diverse as household information, business operations in Ntaria and natural resources.

FaHCSIA has a continuing focus on supporting growth in sustainable jobs as a result of the approach. Successful local research projects have also trained and employed local Indigenous researchers in other locations: in Tiwi — to measure potential economic benefits of carbon credits through changed fire management practices; in Groote Eylandt — to run a detailed population survey of Indigenous residents; in Yarralin — to develop a community action plan; and in Yuendumu and Lajamanu — to strengthen community research to inform outcomes under the Local Implementation Plans.

The approach has application beyond government. Because local people are often best placed to deliver culturally appropriate programs and services, they can assist organisations in addressing challenges faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities by helping them to genuinely understand local viewpoints and ways of working.

Monitoring reports

FaHCSIA has published six-monthly on-line progress reports since 2007, when the NTER first commenced. Under the Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory this will continue. All NTER measures are reported on under the Closing the Gap building blocks. The reports monitor progress on outputs for all programs under the building blocks; for example, the school nutrition program, night patrol, additional teachers, additional health workers, and playgroups.

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