

Considerations for the draft Indigenous Evaluation Strategy

The following submission has been prepared by the Riverina Murray Regional Alliance (RMRA) with assistance from Think Impact. It draws upon the community experiences of RMRA and the experiences of RMRA and Think Impact in the context of the NSW Government Local Decision Making (LDM) process.

The RMRA position paper is provided as an addendum to this submission to share the stories of Aboriginal families from across the RMRA region.

About Riverina Murray Regional Alliance

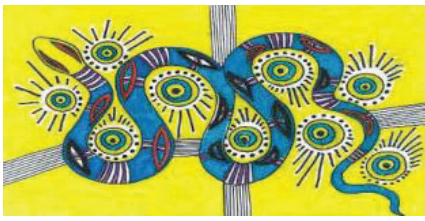
With the reduction of Government services, in particular, the Aboriginal Affairs office closure in Wagga Wagga, concerned community members saw the need for a regional governance structure to coordinate the provision of services across the Riverina Murray region. To meet this need RMRA began operating in 2015 and was formally launched in 2016. RMRA has become a vital regional mechanism through which Riverina Murray communities can collectively identify priority issues and engage with government and key service delivery stakeholders to develop targeted service responses and solutions, and directly influence how those services are delivered.

The establishment of RMRA also provides an opportunity for Riverina Murray communities to engage with, and benefit from, the NSW Government's OCHRE Plan (Opportunity, Choice, Healing, Responsibility, Empowerment) which provides a policy framework for advancing the capacity of NSW Aboriginal communities to participate in local decision making focused on improving education, employment, service delivery and accountability outcomes. For more information see rmra.com.au.

About Think Impact

Think Impact comprises a team of specialists in social impact measurement, evaluation, stakeholder engagement and Impact-led Design. Think Impact provides industry, government and for-purpose organisations with rigorous, independent analysis of social impact. Our goal is to support organisations and investors in developing, implementing, evaluating, communicating and enhancing activities that seek to create a positive impact.

Think Impact is a Certified B Corporation, a United Nations Global Compact participant and a GRI Community Member. For more information see www.thinkimpact.com.au.



Summary of recommendations

This submission includes responses to 15 recommendations across five key themes. A summary of the 15 recommendations are provided in the table below and each are further elaborated upon in subsequent sections. The response shares experiences of the Riverina Murray Regional Alliance and how the Indigenous Evaluation Strategy (“the Strategy”) could be strengthened in support of improving the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Section	Theme	Recommendation
1.0 - A restorative and healing process		
1.1	“A restorative and healing process” to be included as a guiding principle	This Strategy is an opportunity to drive evaluation practice that actively contributes to mutual understanding and healing. For this to occur there needs to be a consciousness and intentionality to the activity and mindsets – and this warrants a new guiding principle.
1.2	Acknowledge the historical truth and harm caused	To support healing and truth-telling, an evaluation should acknowledge and illustrate to the reader the evaluator's understanding of the local past – the stories, experiences and treatment of Aboriginal communities by white colonisers and later governments.
1.3	Habitually changing conversations (<i>Ngunggiyalali</i> in Wiradjuri language)	The Indigenous Evaluation Strategy is an opportunity to do more than evaluate program effectiveness. It should make an active commitment to seek understanding and bring about healing by fundamentally changing the ongoing conversations.
1.4	A strengths-based approach	Evaluations should be grounded in strengths-based rather than deficit models of wellbeing, in which communities define what a good life, or success, looks like for themselves.
1.5	An anti-racist approach	The Strategy must outline an active anti-racist approach to evaluation.
2.0 An equitable process		
2.1	Codesign – centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people	The Indigenous Evaluation Strategy should ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander communities are actively engaged in identifying program and policy needs and in the co-design and re-design of program and service responses based on the evaluation findings.
2.2	Valuing and remunerating community participants for their knowledge and	Evaluations must be adequately resourced and funded to meaningfully engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. However, there is a prevailing inequality in evaluation practice that sees community members contribute their time and knowledge as volunteers and people involved in program delivery and evaluation



Section	Theme	Recommendation
	experience (shifting the burden of research)	paid for their time. This perpetuates structural inequality. Evaluation practice should be an equitable process that includes remuneration of community members for their time and knowledge shared.
2.3	The power in language	Input on language used in evaluations being undertaken under this Strategy, as well as the Strategy itself, be provided from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders.
2.4	Understanding power and bias	The Strategy must highlight the need for evaluators to incorporate values theories and models into an evaluation approach. Evaluators should reflect on and clarify potentials for bias and power imbalance, and explicitly identify practices which will create equity in power within an evaluation approach.
3.0 Generating insights – ways of knowing what works		
3.1	Provide guidance and case studies on data sovereignty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i) Data governance arrangement should be based on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their right to data sovereignty. ii) The Strategy should provide more guidance and case studies to explain how evaluators can ensure data sovereignty of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
3.2	Truth Testing	The Strategy and supporting documentation should provide more guidance and educational resources to evaluators on how to gather, represent stories of lived experience in evaluation and integrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ “ways of knowing” into evaluation practice.
4.0 Creating meaningful connections		
4.1	Taking a holistic approach to community wellbeing and breaking down government silos	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i) The IES Guide includes proposed interim government-wide evaluation priority areas – that are by design, siloed. Program and policy evaluation must take a holistic approach. ii) It is absolutely critical that multiple agencies are sitting around the table to understand community experiences and their contribution to the holistic wellbeing desired by communities.
4.2	Connecting government funding	When planning for evaluation during policy and program design, and again when interpreting and verifying the results of the evaluation, evaluators should consider how well the findings might apply to other policies, programs or contexts. And following evaluations should consult all available qualitative and quantitative data, so as to minimise the burden of research on communities.



Section	Theme	Recommendation
		Closer co-operation between state and Federal governments will create efficiencies and reduce the burden of evaluations on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
5.0 Accountability – what is going to change?		
5.1	Correcting accountability and consequence imbalances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i) In the context of government program delivery and policy implementation, there is a clear accountability imbalance between government paid non-Aboriginal employees and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees and community representatives. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees, community representatives and leaders experience and live in communities that feel the direct consequences of government programs, policies and evaluations. Often, as the interface with government, they experience enormous community pressure and expectation. This accountability (and consequence) imbalance needs to be acknowledged and understood by non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the context of program delivery, policy implementation and evaluation. ii) Evaluations should outline how evaluation results will feed into policy decisions. This ensures that community consultation moves beyond a tick box exercise into genuine shared decision making. iii) Granting the Office of Indigenous Policy Evaluation(OIPE) decision-making power would allow it to hold the government more closely to account.
5.2	Long term accountability by government to communities	The Strategy should outline and mandate how government is holding themselves accountable to the people and communities which programs are intended to serve– while supporting and adequately resourcing Aboriginal communities to hold government accountable and to be accountable for their own success.



Glossary

Term	Definition
Anti-racism	The policy or practice of opposing racism and promoting racial tolerance. ¹
Dadirri	Aboriginal concept and practice of deep contemplation and listening. The word comes from the Ngan'gikurunggurr and Ngen'giwumirri languages (meaning 'listening').
Equitable	An equitable process is about fairness and being treated how you should be treated according to buyaa, lore, in Wiradjuri.
Local Decision Making (LDM)	LDM is an initiative of OCHRE (Opportunity, Choice, Healing, Responsibility, Empowerment), the NSW Government's community focused plan for Aboriginal affairs. LDM is about changing the relationship between Aboriginal communities and NSW Government by helping Aboriginal communities participate fully in decision making about services through regional Aboriginal governance bodies and NSW Government entering into agreements (Accords) committing parties to jointly address priorities.
Ngunggiyalali	Wiradjuri word meaning to exchange, to converse together always, as a habitual action. This is about habitually changing conversations with Aboriginal community and government.
Racism	One who is supporting a racist policy through their actions or inaction or expressing a racist idea. ²
Truth Testing	Truth Testing is about using community stories to monitor accountability and evaluate the impact that the services are having in the community. Truth-testing is about alignment of the experience of those living in communities with the data and evidence used by service providers.

¹"anti-racist" Lexico.com. 2020 <https://www.lexico.com/definition/anti-racism> (31 July 2020)

² Ibram X. Kendi, 9 June 2020, *Ibram X. Kendi defines what it means to be an antiracist*. Retrieved from <https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/2020/june/ibram-x-kendi-definition-of-antiracist/>



1. A restorative and healing process: a new guiding principle

1.1 Include in the Strategy a new guiding principle – “A restorative and healing process”

The Strategy would be strengthened with the inclusion of the guiding principle “A restorative and healing process”. At worst, evaluations can be harmful if undertaken and used in culturally unsafe and inappropriate ways. At best, this Strategy could be an opportunity to drive evaluation practice that actively seeks truth-telling, understanding and healing.

1.2 Acknowledge the historical truth and harm caused

To support healing and truth-telling, an evaluation should acknowledge and illustrate to the reader the evaluator’s understanding of the local past – the stories, experiences and treatment of Aboriginal communities by white colonisers and later governments. Displaying this understanding would provide two key benefits; it would provide a deeper context required to shape and understand the results of an evaluation and provide the opportunity to hear local stories and experiences to build understanding towards healing.

The process of understanding the experiences and treatment of local past is particularly important, for example, in the RMRA region of Albury Wodonga, which was a resettlement area. This means today that Aboriginal people living in Wiradjuri country are incredibly diverse. They are citizens of Wiradjuri, but not all Wiradjuri people. This diversity must be understood, acknowledged and considered in the context of undertaking an evaluation, generating insights and responding to these insights.

“Community will experience healing and wellbeing when they feel empowered by experiencing services that value and strengthen their Culture. At a minimum, the local history and experiences of Aboriginal families in the RMRA region must be acknowledged and understood by all Public Servants.”³

1.3 Habitually changing conversations (*Ngunggiyalali*)

“Dyiba wayagigu
Ngiyanhigingunha mayiny bala bagaraybang, murunwiginya duguwaybul,
RMRA dhuradhu ngunggiyalali”

We are transforming the conversation.

³ Riverina Murray Regional Alliance, *Ngunggiyalali Position Paper: Healing, health and family wellbeing – case studies from RMRA communities*, 21.



Our people are healthy and restored, living a complete way of life, through RMRA continuously conversing and reaching mutual agreements.

Ngunggiyalali is Wiradjuri meaning to habitually converse as a conscious action. This is about habitually changing conversations with Aboriginal community and government. For RMRA, this is what it means to centre Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's perspectives, priorities and knowledges. This Evaluation Strategy is an opportunity to make an active commitment to seek understanding and adopt ways to change the conversation that will bring about healing. This is a long-term journey that needs to be acknowledged and recognised as a guiding principle in this Strategy.

“No amount of money is going to help. Government need to **see** it differently and we need to work together differently.”

– RMRA delegate⁴

“Understanding the realities of what can happen and what is happening to families in our region is the first step to *ngunggiyalali* – transforming our conversation.”⁵

1.4 A strengths-based approach

To further support healing, truth-telling and self-determination, evaluations should be grounded in strengths-based rather than deficit models of wellbeing. Current government evaluation practice often frames findings in terms of gaps and problems, rather than the strengths and assets⁶ of individuals and communities. This perpetuates the ongoing, damaging and traumatising power dynamics of colonisation.

Importantly, to take a strengths-based approach also means that communities are able to define what a good life, or success, looks like for them⁷. The Strategy should provide resources to support strengths-based approaches to evaluation, without mandating what that looks like on a case-by-case basis. Indicators and findings should be developed and Truth Tested with communities (see 3.2 Truth Testing).

To conduct evaluations using a strengths-based approach means moving beyond merely “recognising the strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities, knowledges and cultures”⁸ and actively empowering and resourcing people and communities to leverage their own stories of strength for their own healing.

⁴ Riverina Murray Regional Alliance, *Ngunggiyalali Position Paper*, 10.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Productivity Commission 2020, *Indigenous Evaluation Strategy, Draft Background Paper*, Canberra, May, 99 (from the Independent Review of the Public Service)

⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁸ Productivity Commission 2020, *Indigenous Evaluation Strategy Draft*, Canberra, May, 8.



1.5 An anti-racist approach

The Draft Strategy states that “Evaluation — the systematic assessment of a policy or program's design, implementation and outcomes — is about understanding what governments are doing right, what they are getting wrong and where they can do better.”⁹ Fundamental to this is the adoption of an anti-racist approach. This means naming and taking ownership over what has been done wrong in the past, how that has caused harm, and what will be changed as a result, to take accountability in a process of healing.

Whilst the Strategy acknowledges the need to address racism as an across-system priority for programs and evaluation¹⁰; it does not address the harm that has been created, its causes, or outline how the Strategy will heal these wounds.

“[Dadirri] upholds Aboriginal world views so that the activity of learning introduces a responsibility to act with integrity and fidelity to what has been learnt.”¹¹

The draft Strategy identifies cultural capability as an aspect of building evaluation capability within organisational culture¹². While this is a necessary component of influencing behaviour change, it is insufficient to produce the desired outcomes in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Instead, a culture of anti-racism is needed; sensitivity to racism and the tools and licence to combat all expressions of racism in programs, evaluations, policy and action will lead to the changes in mindsets and actions needed to bring about healing.

There must be a fundamental shift in approaches that may – unwittingly or not – inhibit the process of healing. Suggestions throughout this submission include anti-racist perspectives necessary to create material change in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

2. An equitable process

2.1 Codesign – centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

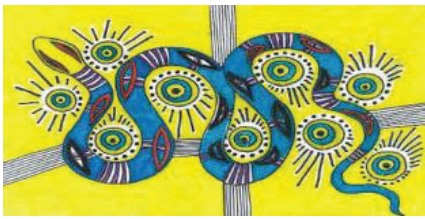
RMRA supports the guiding principle of centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, perspective, priorities and knowledges. In support of this principle, RMRA seeks the Indigenous Evaluation Strategy to create a connection, not just to what programs are evaluated, but involvement in the identification of program and policy needs and the co-design and re-design of program and service

⁹ Productivity Commission 2020, *A Guide to Evaluation under the Indigenous Evaluation Strategy, Draft*, Canberra, May, 1.

¹⁰ Productivity Commission, *A Guide to Evaluation Under the Indigenous Evaluation Strategy, Draft*, 10

¹¹ Atkinson, Judy. 2002, ‘Dadirri: Listening to one another’, *Trauma Trails: Recreating Song Lines*, ProQuest Ebook Central, 20; quoted in Productivity Commission, *Indigenous Evaluation Strategy, Draft Background Paper*, 28.

¹² Productivity Commission, *A Guide to Evaluation Under the Indigenous Evaluation Strategy, Draft*, 34



responses. And for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to meaningfully contribute to this process, there needs to be equity in resourcing, as outlined below.

“Since COVID, there have been no Men's or Women's Groups. There are no resources to do deep cleans. A lot of services are doing phone consultation, but that's not the same as in-person interaction. The government is hiding behind the pandemic.”

– RMRA delegate

2.2 Valuing and remunerating community participants for their knowledge and experience (shifting the burden of research)

The Guide to the draft Strategy suggests that when evaluators are identifying and engaging with those affected by the policy or program, they consider whether it is possible for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to participate in the evaluation on an equal footing with others?¹³

The Strategy also acknowledges within the centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, perspective, priorities and knowledges principle that “sufficient time and resources are allowed for meaningful engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people during evaluation.”¹⁴

It is, of course, essential that evaluations must be adequately resourced and funded to meaningfully engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Equally, they must also acknowledge and remunerate community members for their time and knowledge shared.

Historically, however, the labour of data collection has fallen to Aboriginal organisations, and community members who are engaged as volunteers.

... there are wide-reaching benefits from successfully implemented evaluations. However, much of this benefit requires adequate resourcing to engage with stakeholders, to effectively plan and implement the evaluation, to disseminate the results, to support the uptake of learnings and new evidence into the system, and to monitor and evaluate the implementation of this and measure impact.

(sub. 50, p. 9)

– Lowitja Institute¹⁵

Community members are passionate about making a difference in their communities. They must also be enabled and valued for their time and contributions. Community members should be remunerated at market rate for their participation in evaluations – to ensure there is equity in the process. Evaluators and government agency representatives are being paid for their time, and it would be prudent to acknowledge and value community members contributions.

¹³ Productivity Commission, *A Guide to Evaluation Under the Indigenous Evaluation Strategy, Draft*, 19.

¹⁴ Productivity Commission, *Indigenous Evaluation Strategy*, p. 11.

¹⁵ Productivity Commission, *Indigenous Evaluation Strategy, Draft Background Paper*, p. 168.



As acknowledged in the Strategy, RMRA supports the position that evaluation processes should seek to build capability among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander evaluators, organisations and communities. And to support this, RMRA want to see greater investment in building evaluation capability within Aboriginal organisations to minimise the need for external evaluation.

In focusing on how to engage with Aboriginal communities, the draft Strategy does not address how to reduce the over-analysis of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Remunerating community representatives and members for their time and knowledge, however, would go some way to redressing this inequity.

2.3 The power in language

Successful centring of the lives and perspectives of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples requires careful consideration to language as part of an anti-racist approach. References to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should support a strengths-based approach and re-enforce their dignity, pride, diversity and inherent value. Current practices often produce an “othering” effect that does not honour their lives and experiences.

For example, though the term “mainstream” has been accepted as common terminology to distinguish between entities that identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, it bears an inherent assumption that their normalisation is not possible. This terminology also continues to uphold a harmful “one size fits all” approach in understanding and interacting with a diverse group of peoples and cultures.

It is recommended that input on language used in evaluations being undertaken under this Strategy, as well as the Strategy itself, be provided from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders.

2.4 Understanding power and bias

“We want local Aboriginal families to experience culturally safe services - no racism or judgement.”¹⁶

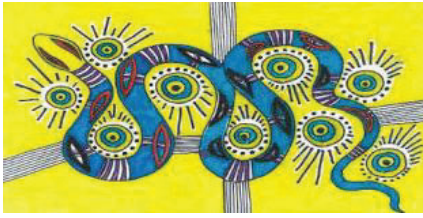
There is a long history in which programs affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been conducted and evaluated from a Western perspective. The Strategy refers to the need for evaluation approaches, methods and process to be credible and the importance of identifying any limitations to the analysis, data, results and research methods. However, the Strategy does not include the need within the statement of limitations to acknowledge the power asymmetry and reflexivity that is needed to balance the power dynamics.

Values play a fundamental role in the evaluation process; however, evaluators and evaluation training have tended to focus on research methodology. Much less emphasis has been placed on explicit attention to values and valuing, and the steps necessary to justify those aspects of evaluation conclusions.¹⁷ Values inform all stages of the evaluation process, including:

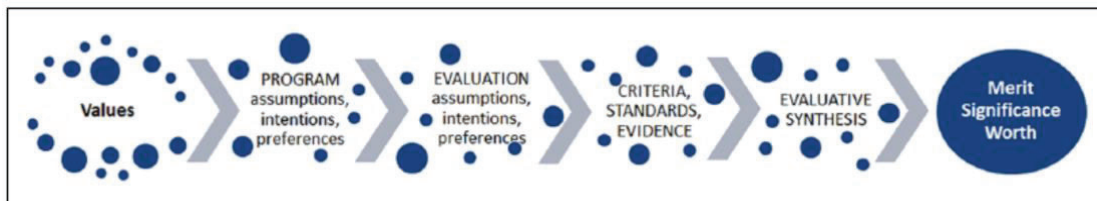
- which programming and evaluation efforts are deemed worth pursuing

¹⁶ Riverina Murray Regional Alliance, Ngunggiyalali Position Paper, 21.

¹⁷ Gullickson, A, M. and Hannum, K, M (2019). Making values explicit in evaluation practice. *Evaluation Journal of Australasia*, 19(4), 162–187.



- what kinds of programme and evaluative approaches are seen as credible and appropriate
- what kinds of criteria are deemed to best capture “value”
- what kinds of data sources and types of information will be perceived as credible to support evaluative claims, for example, what will be measured and how
- the most appropriate and accurate methods for combining information to reach an evaluative conclusion
- whose perspectives matter most in the valuing process and narrative when it comes to reporting and decision making.¹⁸



Values should be explicitly attended to throughout the evaluation process. (Source: Gullickson and Hannum, 2019)

Thus, it is important for the Strategy to highlight the need for evaluators to incorporate values theories and models. This will assist them to undergo the necessary activity of reflecting on their own underlying beliefs, values and positions in order to clarify the various places where values are integrated into the evaluation process and the resulting potentials for bias and power imbalance. Evaluators must be aware of social and/or cultural behaviours and norms in order to understand power dynamics and explicitly identify practices which will create equity in power within an evaluation approach.

3. Generating insights – ways of knowing what works

3.1 Provide guidance and case studies on data sovereignty

The principle of Indigenous data sovereignty asserts that Indigenous peoples have inherent and inalienable rights relating to the collection, ownership and application of data about them and their lands and lives. Whilst action 5 of the Strategy stresses the need for agencies to develop and/or use appropriate Indigenous data governance arrangement and appropriate data sharing and release protocols, data sovereignty goes beyond access to data, but ownership of data. Data governance arrangement should be based on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their right to data sovereignty.

¹⁸ Ibid.



The Strategy should provide more guidance and case studies to explain how evaluators can ensure data sovereignty of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. By doing so, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can use the information gathered about them for their own purposes.

3.2 Truth Testing

“Nothing will change until schools start teaching the truth. Until governments sort out what they report. A lot of the time, when they're reporting it, it all looks very good. [But we] need truth-testing and stories.”

- RMRA delegate

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture is one that is based on oral traditions, in which perspective and knowledges are received, preserved and transmitted orally from one generation to another. The Guide to the Strategy suggests that whilst qualitative methods are preferred in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander context and can help counteract power differences by giving voices to those with less power, they are not sufficient on their own as they rarely measure whether real change has happened.¹⁹ However, in stating the latter, the overarching principle of the Strategy around centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, perspectives, priorities and knowledges is disregarded.

"Dreaming is most important – that actually hurts – it is really damaging [for the value of our stories to be disregarded]"

Evaluators should ensure that research objectives, standpoints and methodologies are driven and guided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people take a holistic view on wellbeing, which can be poorly understood through discrete quantitative measures. Thus, taking a qualitative, storytelling and story sharing approach is important, as it captures Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander “ways of knowing”.

“To listen to our culture is to hear the experiences and understand the holistic person and families, not just individual voices. Listen to hear what our path is and understand how we can change it.”²⁰

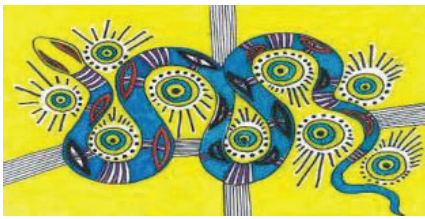
Riverina Murray Regional Alliance, Ngunggiyalali Position Paper, appended to this document, provides critical insight to the ways in which stakeholder experience needs to be reflected in monitoring program and evaluations accountability to the people receiving services.

“Getting stories from the children, their family and networks about the difference being made in their lives through Truth Testing will contribute to better service Accountability.”²¹

¹⁹ Productivity Commission, *Indigenous Evaluation Strategy, Draft Background Paper*, p.21.

²⁰ Riverina Murray Regional Alliance, Ngunggiyalali Position Paper, 27–28.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 24.



“Truth Testing and ensuring that “vulnerable people are no longer the commodity” is the only way to confirm that those who require support receive it. This is not about more money. It is about the redistribution of funds and qualitative, rather than quantitative reporting tools. Truth Testing is about using community stories to monitor accountability and evaluate the impact that the services are having in the community.

Success cannot be measured by the amount of funding provided to a community or received to deliver a program. It is also not just about the number of people serviced.

*Success is about the difference that is made from this funding and activity in the lives of the people it is intended to serve. **Truth testing is about ensuring those on the ground have the resources they need to effectively deliver services** i.e.: funds, education, tools and support and that these services are making a difference in the lives of the people it is intended to serve. **‘It is also about doing accountability differently. Unfortunately, there is an established dynamic in our communities where vulnerable people are blamed for their situation and for not engaging in services, which creates an easy scape goat for a lack of accountability within the service sector.’**¹*

The Strategy should provide more guidance and educational resources to evaluators on how to gather and represent stories of lived experience in evaluation and integrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's “ways of knowing” into evaluation practice.

4. Creating meaningful connections

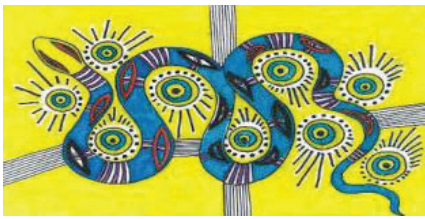
4.1 Taking a holistic approach to community wellbeing and breaking down government silos

“One cannot address one issue at a time ... Sometimes many issues need to be addressed simultaneously and in cohesion with each other for change to happen and endure.”²²

An evaluation needs to acknowledge how one program or policy, though designed for a specific purpose, can (and usually does) create impact in other areas as well. The IES Guide includes proposed interim government-wide evaluation priority areas – that are by design siloed. Program and policy evaluation must take a holistic approach. In the context of lived experience, you cannot for example, evaluate families, children and youth, without understanding the impact of housing, financial wellbeing, education and justice experiences: all of these contexts overlap and contribute to each other.

“[We] need to work in a holistic way, to address the multi-faceted, intergenerational and presenting challenges and trauma. It has taken hundreds of years to disrupt and damage family structures and create the experiences and

²² Riverina Murray Regional Alliance, Ngunggiyalali Position Paper, 20.



realities for Aboriginal families today. It will not be short-term solutions that create the enduring, long-term change that is sought by communities. There are also many stories of courage, survival and resilience that bring strength today.”²³

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies has noted:

*Evaluation of policies and programs and local outcomes have been undertaken in an ad hoc way, constrained by the parameters of a particular program or activity, such that there is no overarching logic that provides a picture of the impact that government is having in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' lives.*²⁴

– Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies

It is absolutely critical that multiple agencies are sitting around the table to understand community experiences and their contribution to the holistic wellbeing desired by communities. This approach is being applied in the context of Local Decision-Making in NSW, where RMRA is working with NSW Government on a whole of governing approach. There is a lot of learning that is occurring through this collaborative LDM process about different ways to work together to bring about lasting positive social value across the RMRA region.

“It's going to take re-investment, because it's a generational thing. If we can get into schools, instead of working in silos ... The under-10s need our help. We need to stop working in these tokenistic ways. The same thing's been done over and over and over, but it's not sustainable. Let's pick something and make that work. It needs concentrated and co-ordinated effort. Forget the political outcomes, let's make real outcomes.”

– RMRA delegate

4.2 Connecting government funding

The guiding principle on centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, perspectives, priorities and knowledges needs to consider the aggregated impact of government funded programs (including the work of NGOs) on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experiences. There can often be duplication of services and fragmentation.

There needs to be greater Accountability of the many services involved. They need to understand their role and how their activities are integrating with each of the organisations working with [families] towards better outcomes for the family.²⁵

The Strategy could more clearly link state and Federal government approaches to evaluation (beyond just identifying state governments as stakeholders and data collectors of the Federal government) and where appropriate, evaluation findings and recommendations should be shared between jurisdictions.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Sub. 72, p.6, Productivity Commission, *Indigenous Evaluation Strategy, Draft Background Paper*, 8.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 21.



Closer co-operation between state and Federal governments will create efficiencies and reduce the burden of evaluations on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

While “evaluations undertaken by state and territory governments ... also contribute to the evidence base on what works and what can improve outcomes”²⁶ evaluators must keep in mind that “what works” will vary depending on local context.

When planning for evaluation during policy and program design, and again when interpreting and verifying the results of the evaluation, evaluators should consider how well the findings might apply to other policies, programs or contexts.

5. Accountability – what is going to change?

5.1 Correcting accountability and consequence imbalances

In the context of government program delivery and policy implementation, there is a clear accountability imbalance between government paid non-Aboriginal employees and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees and community representatives. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees, community representatives and leaders are passionately and personally invested in local shared decision making, and in achieving good outcomes for their communities. They experience and live in communities that feel the direct consequences of government programs, policies and evaluations. Often, as the interface with government, they experience enormous community pressure and expectation.

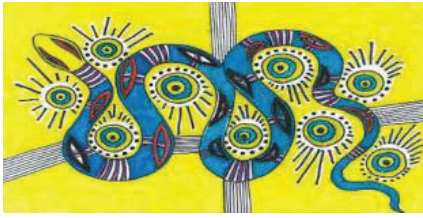
This is in stark contrast to the position of the external (most often) non-Aboriginal evaluator, who is performing the evaluation in the context of their paid, professional role, which they do not undertake outside of work hours. This is not to mention the impact of staff turnover on the communities, with whom trust, and relationships have been built. This accountability (and consequence) imbalance needs to be acknowledged and well understood in the context of program delivery, policy implementation and evaluation.

Chelsea Bond et al note that the Indigenous community-controlled sector and peoples "want to see government and mainstream agencies face the same level of scrutiny, reporting and evaluation, and be held to the same high standards" (sub. 40, p. 3).²⁷

Evaluations should also outline how evaluation results will feed into policy decisions. This ensures that community consultation moves beyond a tick box exercise into genuine shared decision making. The proposed Office of Indigenous Policy Evaluation (OIPE) is positioned as an “evaluation champion” for the Strategy, however, has only advisory, and no decision-making power. Granting the OIPE decision-making power would allow it to hold the government more closely to account.

²⁶ Productivity Commission, *Indigenous Evaluation Strategy, Draft Background Paper*, 106.

²⁷ Productivity Commission, *Indigenous Evaluation Strategy, Draft Background Paper*, 49.



5.2 Long-term accountability by government to communities

“It will not be short-term solutions that create the enduring, long-term change that is sought by communities.”²⁸

One of the functions of evaluation should be to hold governments and government-funded services accountable to the people and communities’ programs are intended to serve, but too often, recurrent funding is based on fudged reports that fail to tell full, truth tested stories.

It was also noted in the recent Independent Review of the APS, that the piecemeal approach to evaluation across the APS “diminishes accountability and is a significant barrier to evidence-based policy-making” (DPMC 2019e, p. 221).²⁹

The Strategy should outline and mandate how government is holding themselves accountable to the people and communities which programs are intended to serve – while supporting and adequately resourcing Aboriginal communities to hold government accountable and be accountable for their own success. Processes such as Local Decision Making (LDM) weave accountability into design, delivery and evaluation processes.

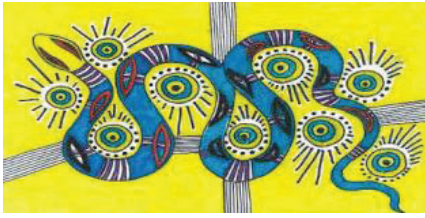
"The lack of guidance on these matters means that departmental staff interpret these restrictions in an ad hoc way and can be extremely restrictive and cautious depending on personalities. There have been situations where departmental staff have inserted clauses into contracts to restrict evaluators and peak Aboriginal representative bodies from sharing evaluation-related information" (Sophia Couzos, sub. 92, p. 4).³⁰

The following story is provided from the experiences of a RMRA delegate. Despite the evaluation demonstrating positive results, the program was not re-funded. From the community perspective, it is still not clear why this program was not re-funded. In this context, where is the accountability to the community? RMRA want to see government funded activities (both State and Federal) to be committed and accountable to communities for the long term.

²⁸ Riverina Murray Regional Alliance, Ngunggiyalali Position Paper, 20.

²⁹ Productivity Commission, *Indigenous Evaluation Strategy, Draft Background Paper*, 6.

³⁰ Productivity Commission, *Indigenous Evaluation Strategy, Draft Background Paper*, 92.



“Place Plan was a pilot program delivered by the NSW government over three years, with Wattle Hill, a suburb in Leeton, NSW, included in approximately the last eighteen months of the program. This came out of the SEIFA (Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas) report from the ABS which showed Wattle Hill as one of the most disadvantaged social housing areas in NSW.

Place Plan gave government a way to buy in, and the parameters to connect to community. It was a conduit for government departments (child protection, housing, all of them) to work together and to Truth Test their own services, by highlighting areas where services were receiving funding and highlighting what was and wasn’t working. It gave communities an opportunity to work with government without the usual compliance requirements.

The program was starting to streamline people’s access to and interactions with different services. It was connecting with people on the ground, and what they understand about the reality of living in a rural community.

The evaluation came back well, and the program looked like it was going to be funded, but it was not. It should have been rolled out in more communities. There were ample opportunities to do more.”

- RMRA delegate