Indigenous Evaluation Strategy

Submission

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The Local Government Association of Queensland (LGAQ) is the peak body for local government in Queensland. It is a not-for-profit association setup solely to serve councils and their individual needs.   The LGAQ has been advising, supporting and representing local councils since 1896, allowing them to improve their operations and strengthen relationships with their communities. The LGAQ does this by connecting councils to people and places that count; supporting their drive to innovate and improve service delivery through smart services and sustainable solutions; and delivering them the means to achieve community, professional and political excellence.

While, membership of the Association is voluntary, all councils in Queensland are members of the Association. Those members include the sixteen (16) Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander councils who are responsible for their discrete communities. This submission is on behalf of those 16 councils and the Torres Shire Council where the vast majority of residents are Aboriginal or Torres Strait islander people.

1. Executive Summary

Each year millions of dollars are allocated to provide services to discrete and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Queensland; yet significant economic and social disadvantage remains. These Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander remote communities remain entrenched in the top 30 most disadvantaged communities in Australia.

History shows that for too long, the decision about service delivery has rested with government, more often than not, in isolation of any input from the communities into which these services are to be delivered. Often the first time a community hears that a new service has been funded is when a non-government organisation (NGO) knocks on a council's door seeking to rent office space.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander local governments in Queensland have been trying to determine the level of government funding allocated to their communities; importantly they have been trying to ascertain how much of that allocation actually is spent on the ground in those communities and leads to real change. Their efforts have met with little or no success at either the state or commonwealth level. For many years now they have been asking for major structural changes in how services are designed, funded and evaluated.

These locally elected indigenous leaders wish to ensure service delivery within their council area is co-ordinated, avoids duplication, is tailored to meet the varying needs of each community, maximises local economic participation and the percentage of each government dollar spent on the ground by minimising spending flowing to external agencies, external communities or externally located organizations.

In 2016 an approach was made to the Queensland Government seeking a review of the current arrangements with the objective of streamlining service provision and reducing Indigenous disadvantage. This approach led to a Queensland Productivity Commission's (QPC) *Inquiry into service delivery in remote and discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities*, and subsequent report.

The QPC Final Inquiry Report[1] provides a blueprint to guide future collaboration and co-design between the Queensland Government, remote and discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and other stakeholders, to improve service delivery outcomes within communities. Key to the blueprint is ensuring that communities have a say in the design, implementation and assessment of delivery strategies and that service providers are held accountable to the community and not just to the funding agencies. It also calls for better monitoring and evaluation of service delivery.

The Queensland Government's response[2] to the QPC Final Inquiry Report recognizes that reducing disadvantage will require a new approach and calls for long-term reform that will result in a different way of working with communities to

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[1] https://qpc.blob.core.windows.net/wordpress/2018/06/Summary-Report-Service-Delivery-Final-Report.pdf
[2] https://www.datsip.qld.gov.au/resources/datsima/publications/policy/qgov-qpc-response.pdf

deliver better outcomes for the state's remote and discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

The LGAQ emphasizes that a one-size fits all evaluation process to address indigenous disadvantage across Australia is fraught with risk. The challenges faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in remote and discrete communities are different to those faced in urban and regional centres and should be recognized in program design, implementation and evaluation.

It is in this context that the LGAQ welcomes the Australian Government's move to establishing a principles-based Indigenous Evaluation Strategy to be utilized by all Australian Government agencies, to improve design, delivery and accountability across policies and programs affecting Indigenous Australians.

2.   Introduction

In June 2017 the Local Government Association of Queensland (LGAQ) made a submission to the Queensland Productivity Commission (QPC) *Inquiry into service delivery in remote and discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities*.[3]

In November 2017 the LGAQ made a further submission responding to the QPC's Draft Report. [4]

The LGAQ saw a need to facilitate and enable greater involvement by Indigenous people in the setting of priorities, decision making and assessment in relation to government policies and programs that affect their communities.

This view is consistent with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDIRP). The rights within the UNDIRP should underpin the Indigenous Evaluation Strategy including the right of Indigenous peoples to:

- Participate in decision-making affecting them;
- Determine and develop priorities and strategies to exercise their right to development and be actively involved in developing, determining and administering programs;
- Promote, develop and maintain institutional structure for their own development and decision-making;
- The improvement of their economic and social conditions in the areas of education, employment, vocational training and retraining, housing, sanitation, health and social security.

The LGAQ argued for major structural reforms in service design, delivery and evaluation, such as:

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[3] LGAQ Submission: Inquiry into service delivery in remote and discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, June 2017
[4] LGAQ Submission: Inquiry into service delivery in remote and discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, Response to Draft Report, November 2017

- Placing communities at the center of service delivery design;
- Transferring appropriate accountability and decision-making to communities;
- Maximising economic participation and community development.
- Establishing a Leadership Group within each community to prioritise and co-ordinate service delivery;
- Establishing a Community Plan for each community;
- Seeking commitment by government agencies to achieving the outcomes specified with these Community Plans.

The LGAQ believes that in order to enable this reform:

- A major attitudinal shift is required at both the departmental and community level;
- Base line data on expenditure levels within each community needs to be established at the beginning of any reform process;
- A central agency be assigned responsibility for oversight of the reform process across all government agencies;
- An independent body should be assigned with appropriate expertise and ability to evaluate and report on progress against outcomes.

The LGAQ believes that this Independent Body should:

- Be a statutory body that reports directly to parliament;
- Be independent from political interference;
- Have continuity of tenure to enable oversight over a longer timeframe;
- Have powers to access information from government agencies.

In 2019, the Queensland Government has appointed the Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Partnerships to oversee these reforms.

If the purpose of an Indigenous Evaluation Strategy is to improve program and policy design, delivery and ultimately outcomes, particularly as they relate to reducing disadvantage then careful consideration should be given to the issues raised by both the LGAQ and the QPC in relation to service delivery.

These discussions and submissions calling for reform over recent years in Queensland provide some insight into the principles that could underpin a national indigenous evaluation framework for Australian Government policies and programs affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, specifically in remote and discrete Queensland communities.

3.   The Case for more Effective Evaluation.

The following section is taken directly from the LGAQ submission to the QPC Inquiry.[5] It gives a broad overview of why evaluation of service delivery is of

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[5] LGAQ Submission: Inquiry into service delivery in remote and discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, June 2017

particular importance to remote and discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Queensland.

Governments spend large sums of money addressing the high levels of disadvantage in remote Indigenous communities yet Closing the Gap targets are not being reached.

Despite the obvious need for evaluation and the large amounts of public moneys spent on delivering services within remote Indigenous communities little proper evaluation of these programs occur.

A recent review found that of the 1082 Indigenous program identified, only 8% had or were in the process of being evaluated and, of those 8%, most were not using methods that provided evidence of the program's success.

Evaluation of service delivery is of particular importance in remote Indigenous communities given the high cost and number of services provided and that residents often have very little choice in terms of the service itself or who delivers the service on the ground.

Evaluation should not be an afterthought. It should be an integral component of all service delivery programs and should be built into the program methodology at the design phase, to ensure accountability around service expenditure and that outcomes are achieved that address the needs of individuals and communities.

There is very little evidence available around program evaluation and reporting. When asked, service providers say that "the council or community are not entitled to access this information – that it is confidential" and that they are only required to provide this to their funding agency. Government agencies have also been reluctant in the past to provide information about funding levels or real time data on program progress.

A shift in thinking is needed at all levels of government around evaluation. Government agencies, personnel within government agencies and front-line service providers need to be held accountable. Effective evaluation should include community and client feedback and should adopt a continuous improvement approach.

What should be measured, should be considered at the program design phase and should be based around the program outcomes or deliverables desired. Outcomes that are not just compliance related like a tick in a box, or the number of clients seen, but rather outcomes which identify the impact that the service has made on individuals or the community.

For example, not only would you measure the number of new houses built within a community but also whether these houses were fit for purpose and improved overall individual and community wellbeing. Did they contain an adequate number of rooms to meet family needs and did the family have a say in the design of the house. Was the design of the house in line with local cultural and social requirements? Did the building of these houses generate broader social or economic outcomes – like increased local employment?

Evaluation approaches need to involve local people in the design and implementation of the service and or the policy framework in which the service sits to ensure that the outcomes are accessible and useful to communities and local organisations.

The development of an Evaluation Standard for program delivery within Indigenous communities should be considered.

4. An Indigenous Evaluation Strategy

The LGAQ supports the Productivity Commission's view that an Indigenous Evaluation Strategy should represent a comprehensive approach to ensuring evaluation is embedded in the development and implementation of Australian Government policies and programs affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The LGAQ supports in principle the Indigenous Evaluation Strategy (IES) as shown in Figure 1, which:

- Incorporates a principles-based framework;
- Provides guidance to agencies about planning for, administering and responding to evaluations at different points of the policy/program design and implementation cycle;
- Includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in all stages of evaluation;
- Identifies evaluation priorities for government;
- Identifies processes and institutional processes needed to promote the adoption and success of the IES – that is build capacity and capability in government agencies, data protocols for sharing and linking data etc;
- Applies to both mainstream and programs and services used by Indigenous people and Indigenous specific programs.

Figure 1: Elements of an Indigenous Evaluation Strategy[6]

| Principles-based framework | Evaluation priorities | Processes | Evaluation strategy |

In order to ensure that policy and programs affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are effective in delivering the outcomes needed, a participatory approach is needed at the design, implementation and evaluation stages.

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[6] Indigenous Evaluation Strategy: Productivity Commission, Issues Paper: June 2019

That is, community involvement has to extend beyond evaluation only. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people it is important that policies and programs are co-designed in partnership with government agencies. To ensure policies and programs have every opportunity to achieve their targets, it is imperative that participation includes representatives from those communities directly affected. For remote and discrete communities, representatives of those communities are the only ones who can authoritatively speak on their behalf.

Co-designing policy and programs empowers communities to shape programs and deliver better outcomes on the ground.

Under a co-design/participatory approach service providers should be contractually required to provide regular feedback to communities against agreed program outcomes. That is, service providers should be held accountable at the community level.

If a key objective of an evaluation strategy is to ensure that the programs/policies delivered are making a difference on the ground, are reducing disadvantage, then the IES could be used not simply to track specific program outcomes – eg the number of houses built – but could leverage additional benefits around maximising local employment and the use of local suppliers.
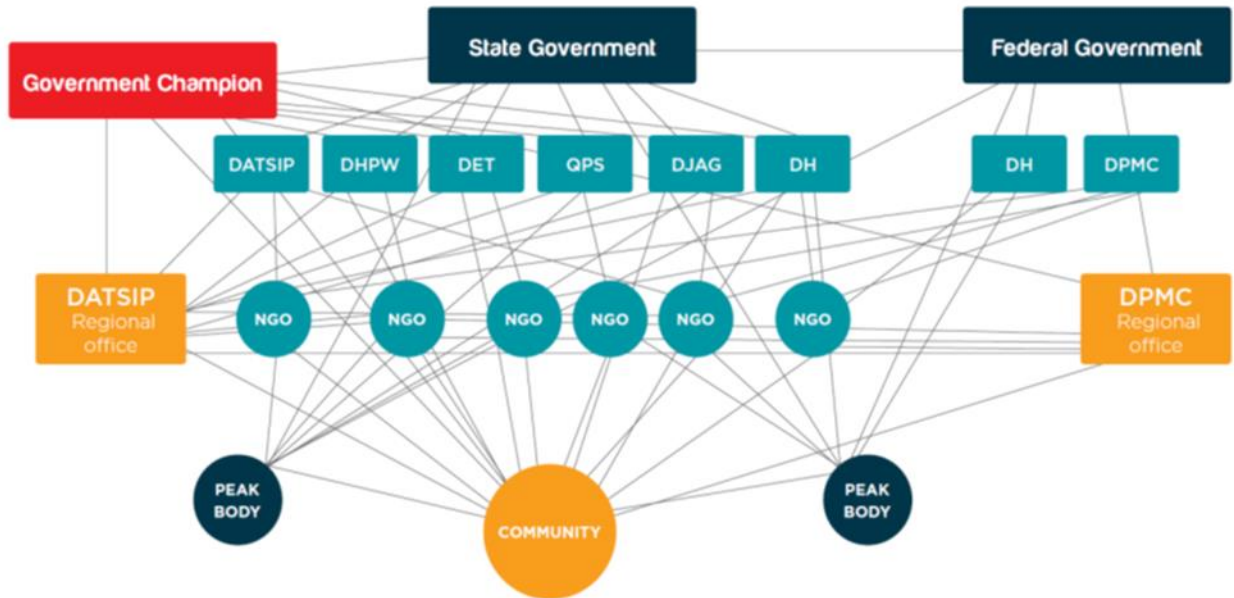
A principles-based approach allows the evaluation framework to be adaptable to different kinds of evaluations, such as strategic/cost cutting evaluations, evaluation of the effects of programs in a particular place or region, or evaluations examining common themes across multiple agencies for example.

Whilst the IES is designed to guide the actions of Australian Government agencies, using a principles-based approach could allow for the IES to be extended to cover other service providers – eg stage government agencies and non-government organisations.   This is particularly important to remote and discrete indigenous communities in Queensland, where a major concern is the overlap/duplication of services.

The QPC Report opines, that for any single community, at least 13 Queensland Government Agencies, as well as various Australian Government agencies are involved in coordination, policy development and service delivery. Numerous boards and statutory bodies also work with communities or develop policies that affect them.

Both levels of government provide funding for peak bodies and a range of NGOs working with communities. This has created a bureaucratic "maze" as the diagram below highlights.[7]

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[7] https://qpc.blob.core.windows.net/wordpress/2018/06/Summary-Report-Service-Delivery-Final-Report.pdf

Note: this map shows only a subset of the departments and NGOs involved in service delivery, design and coordination.

The QPC Report states that the service delivery system is characterised by overlaps in roles and responsibilities, unclear lines of accountability and a difficulty getting things done.

A principles-based IES is a key to enabling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to improve outcomes for themselves and to re-prioritise expenditure to where communities value it most.

In supporting the principle based approach, the LGAQ emphasises that equally important is the need (hence a designated oversight government body) to ensure government agencies required to implement any principle-based approach to program design and evaluation meet their obligations in spirit and intent and avoid any mere token adherence to the strategy.

5.   Principles and Processes to Consider

Table 3 and 4 in the IES Issues Paper provides some guidance to the frameworks and principles used for the evaluation of policies and programs affecting indigenous people from a range of countries (Australia, New Zealand, Canada, America and the United Nations).

Table 3 lists some guiding principles to consider such as:

- Ethical conduct
- Accountability
- Respectful
- Quality control
- Transparency
- Independence

Table 4 outlines frameworks and principles that have been developed to specifically address issues that may arise when evaluating policies and program affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. A number of these are supportive of a partnership/co-design approach. As listed below:

- Partnerships
- Shared responsibilities
- Engagement
- Empowerment
- Community ownership
- Community priorities
- Strengthen capacity
- Share results

Under the umbrella of a participatory, co-design approach mentioned previously, the LGAQ suggest the following processes be used to guide the IES.

1. Effective Planning for Evaluation:
   - Identify what outcomes are desired
   - Identify what evidence is needed – and how it will be collected and by whom
   - What evidence could be provided by service providers as part of their regular reporting arrangements
   - What level of resources and timeframes would be required for evaluation
   - What base line data exists against which to measure program outcomes
   - What gaps/inaccuracies exist in current base line data

   Under the **Local Thriving Communities** program proposed by the State for Queensland communities, a local Leadership Group will be formed and resourced within each remote and discrete community in Queensland. The Leadership Group in each community will play an important role in regard to overseeing service delivery. *Note: A level of resistance to the current proposal exists in some communities due to past experience with government-proposed structures and the lack of consultation on the role and make-up of the leadership group.*

2. Incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge, perspectives:
   - Include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives, (acceptable to the First Australian communities on whose behalf they will act) on program Steering Committees
   - Allocate adequate funding and time to ensure meaningful engagement with and involvement by community members in evaluation process
   - Provide regular progress reports to community/Leadership Group against agreed program outcomes

3. Establishment of Base Line Expenditure Data:

- The Australian Government should establish baseline estimates of expenditures made in each of the remote and discrete communities. This should include the proportion of expenditure spent on indirect or ancillary functions.
- Actual expenditures in each of the discrete communities and remote regions, including indirect or ancillary expenditures, should be estimated every two years and made publicly available to support transparency and decision making.

4. Reporting and Compliance:
The Australian Government should commit to an evaluation and reporting framework that supports adaptive practice, facilitates accountability and empowers communities by providing them with timely, useful and relevant information. To support this framework, the government should:
- Identify the outcomes communities are interested in tracking.
- Improve the availability of agency and other data to support local decision-making.
- Establish accurate demographic for each community – in particular accurate ABS population data.
- Develop evaluation strategies with communities for any new large reforms or programs, including how the findings will be shared with stakeholders.
- Make evaluation reports for services it funds publicly available in a timely way.
- Ensure that existing compliance requirements are necessary and proportionate to the level of funding and risk
- Streamline reporting and compliance requirements for areas of shared responsibility with the Queensland Government.
- Hold those responsible for programs accountable for results.

There is an absence of data currently available to support effective program evaluation. For example, the ABS recognises that their Census data considerably underestimates the population base in remote and discrete communities. In order to measure impact of programs, accurate base line data is critical.

5. Independent Oversight:
The Australian Government should assign an independent body to oversee and report on the operation of the IES for remote and discrete communities. The functions of the independent body should include regular, public monitoring and reporting on:

- Progress of reforms to the service delivery system
- Performance against the agreements between communities and government
- Outcomes being achieved in communities, relative to established baseline estimates
- The extent to which compliance, monitoring and evaluation efforts are supporting innovation and improvements in service delivery.
- These functions may be allocated to an existing organisation but should be established in legislation and include appropriate expertise and Indigenous representation.

6.   Role of State Government Agencies

The establishment of a principles-based Indigenous Evaluation Strategy that incorporates the rights contained within the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDIRP) is being suggested.

Such a strategy embeds the concept of a partnership or co-design between government, service providers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

In order to address the disadvantage that exists in remote and discrete Indigenous communities in Queensland, reform is needed in how governments fund and evaluate service delivery. It requires a closer working relationship between all parties to ensure the maximum benefit can be achieved on the ground in communities from the finite government resources available.

Incorporating the key Indigenous Evaluation Strategy principles in all Australian Government funding programs would be a good start. That is, the IES can be used solicit change to reform how the parties involved in service delivery interact.