Summary of roundtable discussions

'We will be equally harshly judged in the future if we don't act to drive change.'

On 22–23 October 2012, the Productivity Commission held a policy roundtable on the role of evaluation in improving outcomes for Australia's Indigenous peoples. It brought together key thinkers in Indigenous policy to discuss the particular challenges in Indigenous policy evaluation and the actions needed to ensure that evidence gained from evaluations is used in policy-making and program implementation.

At five sessions of the roundtable, the formal presentation of papers was followed by wide-ranging discussion. This summary of the discussions is structured to address the themes of:

- the mechanics of Indigenous evaluation
- institutionalising better evaluation practices and use of evidence
- international experiences
- evaluation and broader Indigenous policy
- where to from here?

While the summary refers to the presentations relevant to each theme, it does not identify the sources of comments made during discussions, as the roundtable was conducted under the Chatham House rule.

The mechanics of Indigenous evaluation

'Incomplete, non-systematic reporting of results undermines reliability.'

Relevant chapters

- **Les Malezer** (Chapter 4) argued that conventional evaluation methodologies used by government fail to include Indigenous people's expectations, perspectives and participation in the delivery of services. Any evaluation of Indigenous social policy should recognise the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to self-determination and empowerment (including the

provision of necessary technical and financial resources to assist their development).

- **Deborah Cobb-Clark** (Chapter 5) addressed the particular challenges associated with impact evaluation of Indigenous policy, including data limitations, lack of appetite for randomised control trials, difficulty establishing causation among multiple programs, and limitations imposed by time, budget and 'political' constraints.

- **Matthew James** (Chapter 7) provided some practical lessons for those undertaking Indigenous evaluations. He drew on work of the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, including the evaluation of the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) and the evaluation of Cape York Welfare Reform.

- **John Taylor** (Chapter 8) noted that the range and volume of data comparing Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians have grown substantially and can inform the high-level evaluation of the Closing the Gap agenda. However, he argued that the available statistics do not meet the needs of Indigenous people, who are increasingly seeking community-level information to inform local decision-making. He also argued that Indigenous groups need support to build capacity to compile and use customised data to meet their needs.

- **David Kalisch** (Chapter 9) noted that, where there are gaps in available information, the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse is considering using 'realist synthesis', which involves assessing types of evidence that may otherwise be discarded as they do not meet medical research standards, including observational studies, case studies, field visits, expert advice, lay knowledge and reports on interventions.

- **Michael Dillon** (Chapter 12) (paper presented by Matthew James) highlighted the importance of developing the evidence base through the use of administrative data sets, robust survey tools and community consultation. He noted that, as it can take a long time to build evidence, the program logic should be clear during policy development and open to change as monitoring and evaluation inform continual learning.

Discussion

Participants noted that the term 'evaluation' can have different meanings in different contexts, ranging from mechanisms designed to provide accountability (for example, for spending government money), through measures encompassing process evaluation and/or impact evaluation of either single programs or groups of programs, to broad reviews of system architecture. However, participants generally

agreed that evaluation is more than just providing accountability in the narrowest financial sense or checking boxes to ensure that prescribed processes have been followed, and that it should have a role in holding governments to account for outcomes.

Some participants argued that evaluation should identify whether programs make a difference — what works, and why — and contended that, if outcomes cannot be conclusively demonstrated, the value of continuing a program must be questioned. Other participants argued that problems in the underlying system architecture that make it difficult to isolate a program's outcomes do not mean that a program is not worthwhile.

There was general agreement that a lot of data are being produced about Indigenous Australians. However, there is a tension between the political imperative to develop and report data to measure achievement of the COAG targets (which focus on a limited range of social indicators) and the broader need to inform policy and program evaluations.

Several participants noted the difficulty of accessing data at the program or community level. Much of the available data is at a high level of aggregation, which makes it less useful for program evaluations, and of little use to Indigenous people themselves. Moreover, many administrative collections still lack appropriate geo-coding to produce meaningful local level data. It was acknowledged that the Australian Bureau of Statistics' new 'mesh block' methodology might allow greater disaggregation of some statistics (such as statistics from the Census of Population and Housing).

Other participants argued that it is possible to do meaningful evaluations, but that it takes time to build relationships and trust in order to access relevant quantitative and qualitative information.

Some participants argued that there is an over-emphasis on quantitative data in evaluations, particularly given the problems with availability of data at the community or program level. Other participants argued that the way in which qualitative information is used is often methodologically unsound, noting that 'data is not the plural of anecdotes'. However, it was agreed that well-designed evaluations can generate useful qualitative information — for example, surveys that code open-ended responses to a framework can transform qualitative information into quantitative data.

Many participants emphasised the importance of incorporating Indigenous perspectives into evaluation frameworks, with Indigenous people assessing the usefulness of the evaluation for their own communities. Some participants

advocated a community development or capacity-building model, where Indigenous people are directly involved in research and evaluation processes.

Participants acknowledged that evaluating the impact of specific Indigenous policies and programs can be challenging, because it is difficult to isolate the impact of a particular policy change from the effects of multiple, sometimes competing, social programs. In remote Indigenous communities, tens of programs may be operating, across three levels of government and across multiple sectors such health, education and employment.

Some participants argued that, as it is only possible to measure community level outcomes, it is only possible to assess the suite of programs operating in a particular community as a whole. Other participants argued for iterative evaluations (both summative and formative) during the life cycle of a specific program or policy, with opportunities to amend or change aspects of the program or policy being investigated. (Summative or 'impact' evaluations are usually undertaken after completion or during the later stages of a program, while formative or 'process' evaluations are usually conducted during the implementation stage.) Several participants argued that, although technical challenges can generally be overcome with sufficient planning and resources, program evaluation alone cannot resolve broader system issues (see the section below on 'Evaluation and broader Indigenous policy').

Some participants noted that, although much Indigenous policy focuses on people living in remote areas, there are also genuine issues for Indigenous people living in urban areas, which may require a different approach to evaluation. Similarly, evaluation often focuses on Indigenous-specific programs, ignoring the significance of mainstream services provided to Indigenous Australians.

Institutionalising better evaluation practices and use of evidence

'A litany of poor policies being recycled.'

Relevant chapters

- **Deborah Cobb-Clark** (Chapter 5) noted the need to include evaluation plans and funding for evaluation in the design of programs, a practice that should be regarded as 'a serious part of the policy process'. She also commented on the desirability of involving academics and academic publications to improve rigour, as the peer review and independent publication process acts as critical quality assurance. She argued strongly that evaluations of public policy should be made public, pointing to the value of clinical trials registries in medical research.

- **Jody Broun** (Chapter 6) discussed the role of the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples as an important mechanism for holding governments to account for the delivery of services to individuals and communities, including by ensuring that adequate monitoring and evaluation processes are in place.

- **Matthew James** (Chapter 7) noted that within the public policy sphere there is often a desire to 'just get on with it', but argued that this was counterproductive — programs and policies are developed and implemented not for their own sake, but to improve outcomes. Evaluation is the key to understanding whether outcomes are being achieved and to improving policies and programs over time.

- **David Kalisch** (Chapter 9) discussed the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's work on Indigenous health and welfare information, and the institute's role in the work of the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse. He acknowledged the lack of evaluations in many areas, noting that the cost of evaluations is often not built into program budgets and timetables, with the result that many programs or interventions have low-cost, partial or no evaluations. He also noted that gaining access to evaluations can be challenging; only 30 per cent of the evaluations listed on the Clearinghouse register of government-commissioned research are released publicly. This potentially creates a publication bias, if only studies that have positive findings or accord with the funder's views are released.

- **Helen Moewaka Barnes** (Chapter 10) discussed Maori evaluation approaches developed in parallel with Maori models of wellbeing. She noted that the effective application of a range of Maori theory and practice frameworks contributed to Maori engagement with and acceptance and use of evaluation.

- **Frances Abele** (Chapter 11) noted that, in Canada, program evaluation is an integral, mandatory function in all departments of the federal government, and established, extensive and comprehensive evaluation systems and policies are in operation. In addition, the Canadian Office of the Auditor-General can analyse public expenditure and provide commentary on policy implementation (although usually on a thematic basis, rather than program by program). Royal commissions have also played a role in large-scale policy evaluations.

- **Brian Gleeson** (Chapter 13) discussed how evaluation findings and evidence were (or were not) embedded in the approach of the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Service Delivery. He noted that previous interventions and experiences of place-based and community-strengthening approaches for remote communities had provided evidence of 'what works'. However, while some lessons have been firmly embraced, others have been left to languish. He also emphasised that institutionalising better evaluation practices necessarily means providing meaningful feedback on evaluation findings to Indigenous communities.

Discussion

Participants agreed that, as in social policy more generally, there is a lack of rigorous impact evaluation of Australian Indigenous policies and programs. Significant gaps exist in the Australian evidence base, due to lack of mandated evaluations. Evaluation of social policies and programs is more common in the United States, where rigorous evaluation has been incorporated in legislation as a condition of federal funding to the states.

Several participants noted a lack of basic information about how many local, state and territory, and federal programs are operating in communities. It was therefore not surprising that there was also a lack of evaluation of the impact of these programs. It was suggested that a good starting point would be a complete register of programs, to provide a holistic picture of what is going on in a community.

Several participants argued that, in at least some situations, we know 'what needs to be done' but there is no mechanism to ensure that policies and programs reflect that knowledge. Relevant available research included the NTER evaluations (2008–12); reports from the Coordinator-General for Remote Indigenous Services (2009–12); work by the COAG Closing the Gap Clearinghouse (2009–present); reviews of the COAG trials and Shared Responsibility Agreements (2002–07); Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage 'things that work' (2005–11); and the COAG service delivery principles (2004) that were incorporated into the National Indigenous Reform Agreement (2008).

Participants discussed the difficulty of ensuring that good program evaluations are embedded in the systems that govern the review and design of Indigenous programs and policies. Participants considered that implementation of evaluation recommendations is usually opportunistic. Practical issues such as the timing of evaluations affect their degree of influence — evaluations should be done while there is an opportunity to change a program or policy, not after a program or policy has ended and a new one has begun. Participants acknowledged that evaluations are often 'backward looking' and that, by their very nature, good evaluations take time. Matching evaluations to political–government schedules is complex and must be handled strategically.

Participants also noted that even the best evaluations can have limited influence if recommended reforms must overcome structural impediments. Evidence alone is not as powerful as people think it is. Genuine change takes effort and risk, and needs champions willing to upset the status quo.

International experiences

'Some good and bad examples ... in historical context and in light of specific political, economic and social circumstances.'

Relevant chapters

- **Les Malezer** (Chapter 4) argued that the starting point for an effective evaluation regime should be self-determination, as explained in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

- **Matthew James** (Chapter 7) and **David Kalisch** (Chapter 9) noted that Australia frequently relies on overseas studies, in the absence of quality evaluations of Australian Indigenous social programs.

- **Helen Moewaka Barnes** (Chapter 10) discussed an Aotearoa New Zealand perspective on the role of evaluation, premised on the right and need for Maori to be involved through collaborative and consultative processes at all stages: from policy design, through implementation, to evaluation.

- **Frances Abele** (Chapter 11) reflected on the Canadian experience of evaluation as a tool for social justice, reconciliation and control.

Discussion

The presenters from Canada and New Zealand identified strong evaluation cultures in their respective countries, which had led to the development of significant bodies of evidence on Indigenous policy and program effectiveness. Their presentations highlighted the different roles that evaluation can play in Indigenous social policy. Evaluation has been used not only to improve service delivery for Indigenous people, but also to influence relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. In particular, the Canadian Royal Commission on Indigenous Peoples (1992–96) had a long-lasting impact on the broad approach to Indigenous policy, recommending four fundamental principles: mutual recognition, mutual respect, sharing, and mutual responsibility.

Participants noted a tension between the accountability function of evaluations (especially from the perspective of federal or central governments) and Indigenous people's desire to use evaluation as a tool for community development. There was general agreement that evaluations in Australia tend to focus on program accountability, and that all levels of government and Indigenous people could learn from the distinctly Maori approaches to evaluation in New Zealand.

A number of participants argued that the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples should be the foundation on which an evaluation regime is built.

Several participants noted that gaps in Australian evaluations mean that policy and program developers frequently have to rely on overseas evaluations. It was generally agreed that the use of overseas studies requires careful consideration of the different political, economic and social circumstances of Indigenous people in different countries.

Evaluation and broader Indigenous policy

'Evaluation can be deeply political and dependent on context.'

Relevant chapters

- **Fred Chaney** (Chapter 3) contended that there are fundamental problems in the architecture of government approaches to Indigenous issues, which cannot be easily solved through piecemeal evaluations of individual programs. He argued that a broader approach must be taken to address systemic failure. He called for 'good governance at organisation, community and government levels', including greater devolution of decision-making to Indigenous communities, and alternative accountability mechanisms outside traditional agency silos.

- **Les Malezer** (Chapter 4) argued that the traditional evaluations that focus on disadvantage arising from historical dispossession and displacement fail to address Indigenous rights and perspectives. He argued that the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, developed to re-position Indigenous peoples in their own territories, should be the starting point for effective evaluation.

- **Jody Broun** (Chapter 6) argued that non-government and independent organisations have a valid and important role in evaluating government policy objectives, delivering programs, and holding government to account for outcomes.

- **Matthew James** (Chapter 7) explicitly linked evaluation to policy, and argued that evaluation should not be perceived as a separate activity conducted in isolation — if evidence is to inform policy, evaluation and monitoring need to be incorporated into policy processes.

- **Helen Moewaka Barnes** (Chapter 10) noted that, in New Zealand, evaluation historically was applied selectively to scrutinise Maori providers. However, this created an opportunity for the development of 'by Maori, for Maori' evaluation.

- **Frances Abele** (Chapter 11) noted that, in Canada, royal commissions are often used to resolve knotty and persistent problems of public policy. Virtually the full range of federal policies affecting Indigenous peoples were examined in the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1992–96).

- **Michael Dillon** (Chapter 12) (paper presented by Matthew James) noted that government agencies are increasingly involving local communities in the research and evaluation process (for example, under the community local research projects that are part of the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Service Delivery).

Discussion

Participants discussed the potential for evaluation (especially high-level reviews) to help frame relationships between Indigenous people and the state, even though evaluation outcomes may not be binding and their influence can fade over time. Participants considered that it is difficult for piecemeal evaluations of individual programs to have broad influence, although an accumulation of knowledge over time can be more influential than one-off program evaluations.

Several participants argued that, too often, evaluation is 'something that is done to Indigenous people'. Rather than gaining knowledge through effective evaluation of service delivery efforts, government programs seek political solutions without expert information. Indigenous engagement in research and evaluation can contribute to both improved program effectiveness and greater 'legitimacy' of policies and programs. Participants noted that:

- Indigenous collectivist identity means a different set of aspirations — joint as well as individual. It is also important to recognise Indigenous peoples' histories.

- All evaluations are implicitly or explicitly ideological. Using terms such as 'rights' and 'special needs' when referring to Indigenous evaluations overlooks the invisible rights and privileges involved in non-Indigenous programs and evaluations. Government-commissioned evaluations automatically cater to the mainstream but do not look at things that are important to Indigenous people.

- The priorities and aspirations of Indigenous people may have different to those of governments but, if Indigenous people have sufficient control over decision-making (with appropriate governance, based on the community's preferred governance model), this need not prevent Indigenous people and the state from coming together.

- Evaluations by Indigenous people tend to place greater emphasis on relationships with the community, especially established accountabilities to elders and local leaders.

Participants discussed Indigenous people's views of current evaluation approaches. Most participants agreed that there was 'enormous cynicism' among Indigenous people, citing issues such as:

- a focus on the closing the gaps agenda means that programs (and therefore evaluations) do not necessarily reflect Indigenous people's objectives and priorities, particularly in relation to community development and governance issues

- when Indigenous people are consulted in evaluations, their views are not always reflected accurately

- there has been a widespread failure to implement even straight-forward recommendations flowing from evaluations

- there has been a failure to communicate the results of evaluations and subsequent actions to Indigenous people

- evaluation reports are used to justify actions that do not reflect the report recommendations.

Participants noted that evaluations can also help to build trust, if they are used to inform 'learning by doing', and if government and local people work together to meet agreed outcomes. Governments can build trust by living up to their commitments.

Participants noted that there are some examples of evaluations involving Indigenous people (for example, community researchers under the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Service Delivery, primarily undertaking process evaluation work), but observed that few evaluations are driven by Indigenous people themselves. Several participants asked what was preventing Indigenous people from conducting more 'bottom up' evaluations of access to services or government implementation of agreed best-practice principles. There was a call for more empowerment or participatory evaluations (action research), particularly for community programs. Those types of evaluations focus not only on improving programs but also on working to build research or evaluation capacity within communities. This approach has proven to be fruitful in the New Zealand context.

Several participants argued that evaluation of Indigenous programs did not focus enough on 'government governance', noting that Indigenous policies and programs are affected by government silos, program duplication, compliance red tape, lack of

government staff competencies, piecemeal and short-term funding, and lack of flexibility. It was strongly argued that the current broader system was not 'fit for purpose'. There was general agreement that a high-level review of the way in which Australian governments interact with Indigenous people is required.

Where to from here?

'Do people feel like their lives are getting better?'

Relevant chapters

- **Fred Chaney** (Chapter 3) strongly suggested that governments could learn from private sector project managers with 'their feet in the clay'. Characteristics of effective social programs managed by corporations include program lifecycles of 10 or 20 years, the ability (and flexibility) of managers to deal with complexities as they arise, and 'learning by doing'.

- **Deborah Cobb-Clarke** (Chapter 5) suggested that social policy could be improved by making evaluations (and associated unit record data) public — potentially with an independent agency to commission all policy evaluations on behalf of the Australian Government.

- **Matthew James** (Chapter 7) emphasised that 'lack of knowledge should not be used as an excuse for inaction'. Evaluations and monitoring should be built into the policy design and be adequately resourced (including access to key data at policy commencement and conclusion) to properly assess whether there is a logical link between the policy action and the outcome.

- **Helen Moewaka Barnes** (Chapter 10) and **Frances Abele** (Chapter 11) provided some lessons from Indigenous evaluation in New Zealand and Canada respectively.

Discussion

Participants identified a number of fundamental system design issues that need sustained political leadership to drive change. There was a general call for a high-level review of the way in which Australian governments interact with Indigenous people, to address issues such as:

- the lack of basic information about existing programs, including their objectives and associated 'program logic', at the local, state and territory, and federal levels

- the lack of a coherent framework for the evaluation of Indigenous policies and programs, and a need to embed (and fund) evaluation plans in the design of programs
- the need for genuine partnership, between governments and Indigenous communities and organisations, in the development and evaluation of programs and policies
- the influence on Indigenous policies and programs of various aspects of 'government governance', such as government silos, program duplication, red tape, lack of government staff competencies, piecemeal and short-term funding, and lack of flexibility
- a failure to adopt known success factors and follow lessons painfully learned over many years of policy experimentation.

Basic information

Participants argued that a lack of basic information about current programs at the local, state and territory, and federal levels makes it impossible to establish what programs are operating at the community level, or to evaluate them individually or collectively. It was suggested that it would be useful to have a complete register of programs to provide a holistic picture of what is going on in a community.

Coherent framework

Participants argued that it was necessary to have a coherent framework for evaluating Indigenous policies and programs. The Closing the Gap framework is not enough on its own, as the COAG targets mean that most programs address symptoms and, consequently, most program evaluations assess whether symptoms have been reduced, rather than addressing deeper causal issues. Evaluations could look more broadly and deeply, and consider other factors that are important to Indigenous people and are likely to influence the underlying drivers of disadvantage.

There was general agreement that evaluation plans should be embedded (and funded) in the design of programs, a practice that should be regarded as 'a serious part of the policy process' but is more common in other countries than in Australia. The lack of assessment or evaluation has not only resulted in significant gaps in the Australian evidence base, but has also contributed to 'a litany of poor policies being recycled'.

Participants also noted the importance of truly independent evaluations, conducted at arms-length from government. It was suggested that social policy could be improved by making all evaluations (and associated unit record data) public — potentially with an independent agency to commission all policy evaluations on behalf of the Australian Government. Although these principles were strongly supported, participants struggled to identify a mechanism to encourage compliance. COAG agreement to list all evaluations of Indigenous programs on the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse's Research and Evaluation Register could be a good start.

Genuine partnership

Participants noted that many publicly funded evaluations of Indigenous programs (especially service delivery programs) are accountability-oriented 'audit and punish' exercises, and that the goals implicit in evaluations do not match the interests of Indigenous people. Participants argued that rather than the auditor–punisher model there are other models that enable government to work with service providers as a partner. The Productivity Commission report on the contribution of the not-for-profit sector set out a continuum of ways in which government could engage with the sector for different purposes, and noted that *how* a thing is done can sometimes be as important as *what* is done (PC 2010).

Participants agreed that it is crucial that governments work in partnership with Indigenous communities and organisations to ensure that the goals implicit in evaluations match the interests of Indigenous people. Governments need to move beyond the rhetoric of 'consultation' to grapple with genuine partnership that involves shared accountabilities and sustained involvement.

Government governance

Many participants argued that piecemeal evaluations of specific policies and programs will not address the broader influence of 'government governance': the way governments interact with Indigenous people and organisations.

It was suggested that COAG should rationalise the large number of Indigenous programs and their associated funding arrangements, reduce the disproportionate amount of red tape attached to Indigenous programs, and improve the capacities of public servants working with Indigenous people as well as the capacities of Indigenous organisations. It was also suggested that governments reassess data collection policies to ensure that data about Indigenous people are of use to Indigenous people themselves.

Known success factors

Despite general agreement that a more systematic approach to evaluation was needed, several participants suggested that many of the factors for success are already known and agreed. These include lessons from evaluations of the COAG Trials and Shared Responsibility Agreements, the work of the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse and the Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage 'things that work'. Evaluations should consider whether these factors have been applied and, if they have not, identify the barriers to their implementation.

Conclusion

In his final summary, Chairman Gary Banks noted that social policy is notoriously difficult to design and evaluate, and that Indigenous policy involves unique challenges. However, he emphasised the importance of conducting quality evaluations, and using the evidence gained from them to drive policy improvements that benefit Indigenous people and the wider community.

The Chairman thanked roundtable participants, particularly those from overseas, for their contributions to identifying ways to guide better use of evaluation in Indigenous policy in the future. He noted suggestions for improving the way evaluations are conducted, and for ensuring that the outcomes of evaluations are conveyed to both policymakers and 'those on the ground'.

However, he also highlighted participants' concern that piecemeal evaluations cannot address systemic issues. Political commitment to a broad policy review is required to address fundamental issues with 'government governance': the way governments work with, and in, Indigenous communities.