Evaluation of the SA Component of the National Suicide Prevention Strategy: A PAR approach across four Project sites.

Paul Aylward[1].

Spencer Gulf Rural Health School.

1.0 Background.

The following paper describes work in progress concerning the evaluation of the South Australian component of the National Suicide Prevention Strategy (NSPS). The NSPS has involved four multifaceted community based Initiatives in different regions across South Australia. The localities and corresponding project initiatives are:

- Port Augusta / Whyalla (ComPAS – 'Community Partnerships in Suicide Prevention');
- Murray Mallee ('Planting the Seeds of Hope')[2];
- Northern Metropolitan Adelaide ('KIT-Keeping it Together');
- Pitjantjatjara (AP) Lands, Nganampa ('Young Men and Women Choosing Wisely')

The Projects have been funded over three years by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing which adopted a 'non-competitive' funding approach whereby selected auspicing bodies invited a range of relevant partnering agencies (addressing a common client group) across their regions to contribute to the Projects rather than offering the Projects up for competitive tender. Each Initiative has an Indigenous component, with the Nganampa Project being focussed entirely on young Indigenous men and women.

There are six priorities agreed for the Community Initiatives Stream of the NSPS that are consistent with the six action areas of the national LIFE framework. These are:

- Promoting well-being, resilience and community capacity
- Enhancing protective factors and reducing risk factors for suicide and self-harm
- Providing services and support within the community for groups at increased risk
- Providing Services for individuals at high risk
- Partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities
- Progressing the evidence base for suicide prevention and good practice

The Spencer Gulf Rural Health School was contracted to conduct the evaluation using a participatory action research approach to both develop regional capacity to conduct evaluation of project activity, and to provide on-going regular feedback to inform the development and improvement of each Project. Capacity building in evaluation and research methods was integral to this process. The evaluation was also to address the approach of the State of South Australia as a whole in relation to the LIFE framework criteria, providing a comprehensive assessment of the Community and Indigenous Initiatives against the state priorities.

The evaluation of the South Australian component of the NSPS community initiatives has been informed by the principles underlying the 'Life framework' which highlight the primacy of a partnership, collaboration and multidisciplinary approach to the complex problem of suicide prevention. The projects therefore embraced the engagement of a variety of agencies and organisations many of which being recruited to the initiative through the steering and reference committees.

The evaluation has been designed, established and conducted by the Evaluation Officer (EO) Paul Aylward from November 2002 – July 2004. The evaluation has necessarily involved the EO working

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[1] Paul Aylward is currently a Senior Lecturer for the 'National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction', at Flinders University.
[2] The Murray Mallee Indigenous Initiative for young Nungas has evolved as a separate Initiative and has been evaluated separately.

closely inclusively with each project initiative in order to collectively develop their evaluation plans, refine strategies and develop data collection procedures to meet each project's objectives. The EO was therefore actively engaged as a member of each Initiative's 'Steering' or 'Reference' group and established 'Evaluation' as an on-going agenda item for every meeting. The Evaluation Plans incorporated a program logic that integrated and sequenced objectives and strategies for each initiative clearly. The inclusion of the plans is beyond the scope of this paper, but a schematic map of the Project objectives and strategies appears in PDF format with this paper. This approach to the design of the plans was purposely adopted in order to include the contribution of the project officers, none of whom had much previous experience with planning evaluation, and mirrored the approach designed by the evaluation officer for the 'Planning and Evaluation Wizard' (PEW)[3]. This paper will discuss the approach used thus far in evaluating the SA NSPS before summarising the findings from the formative evaluation. The nature of the qualitative feedback obtained and the benefits of the approach to identifying strengths of the Project approach and areas for Project action to facilitate improvement will be revealed by taking one project example (section 4.2).

2.0 Participatory Action Research Approach to the Evaluation

The PAR evaluation approach used has purposely encouraged the various Initiatives to share knowledge and support between projects so that each could benefit from each other's experiences. The EO has organised four meetings of the NSPS SA Project Officers over the course of the evaluation (which have included the representatives of the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing), taking the opportunity to link the projects up with invited speakers from related projects and Organisations. Through these processes capacity building and sustainability was enhanced with strong linkages having been fostered between the Initiatives.

The EO has delivered ten formal capacity building evaluation workshops for the Project Officers and other service providers across the State who were engaged in the many NSPS Project activities. In addition there have been numerous 'one-to-one' informal training sessions around the development of the evaluation plans (strategies, indicators and data gathering). In these ways, rigorous evaluation plans have been drawn up for each initiative, and the project officers have been able to report to the Commonwealth using these as guides. Given the evolving nature of initiative activities (this being collectively informed by the partnerships in the reference and steering groups), it was envisaged that these plans would modify as the initiatives developed to include newly adopted strategies or discard those that proved less effective in the light of experience.

A formative evaluation has also been conducted for each Project using in-depth interviews and e mail survey approaches, and the findings from this has been 'fed back' to each Initiative for on-going development (as part of the PAR approach).

Street (1995)[4] describes PAR as interventionist and change orientated. The approach is critically concerned to identify issues and to enhance collaboration so as to reflect upon practice in order to systematically reconstruct it. This design also fits with the collaborative and partnership approach of advocated for the NSPS:

"*PAR is not just research which we hope will be followed by action. It is action which is researched, changed and re-researched within the research process…it is active co-research, by and for those who are to be helped*," (Street 1995:xxi[5]).

The formative evaluation formally employed this approach and specifically addressed the issues of project establishment and partnership, this process constituting the first action cycle of the PAR approach. This is represented diagrammatically in fig 1 below:

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[3] PEW was designed to help project officers to plan and conduct their own project evaluations. A copy of the PEW CD was given to project officers to help guide them through the process. See: Murray, Aylward, Cooke and Martin 'PEW: The Planning and Evaluation Wizard', www.sachru.gov.au

[4] Street, A. (1995) 'Nursing Replay: Researching nursing culture together', Melbourne: Churchill Livingstone.

[5] ibid

Fig 1: Formative Evaluation Cycle for the SA NSPS
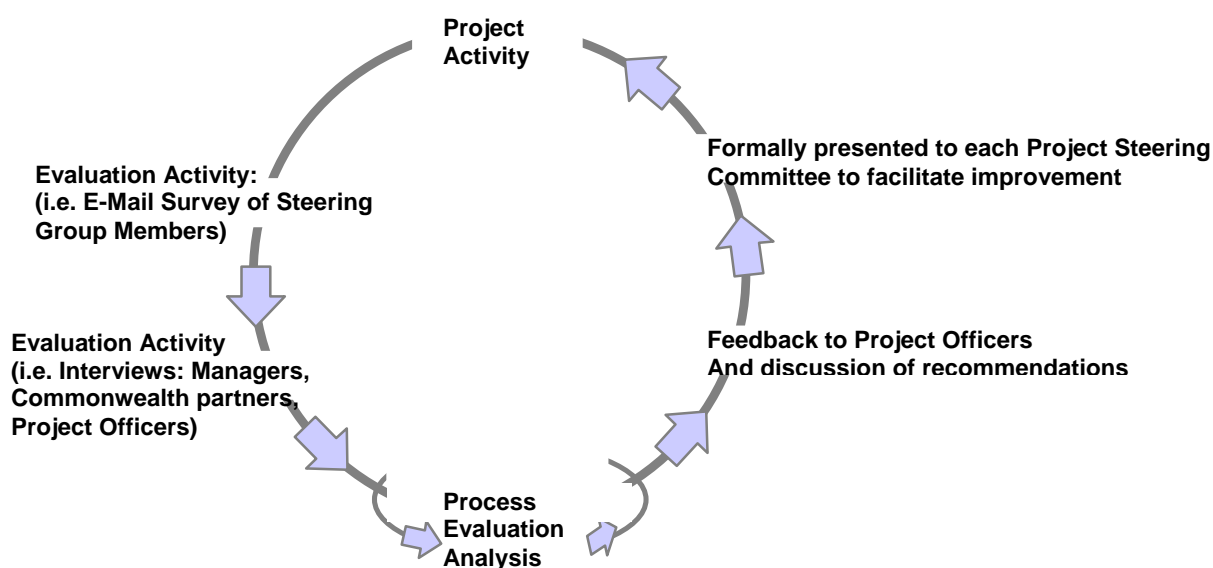
PAR is therefore a dynamic process allowing the interaction of ideas between researchers and researched. There is the expectation that the situation, or in this case community projects will change and that process evolves with the reformulation of research questions to meet the changing context. This is not a linear process as it involves action cycles to be implemented concurrently with the development of the projects. The direction and focus of study can change in response to unexpected findings. This is integral to "action research":

"Plan, act, observe and reflect more carefully, more systematically and more rigorously than one does in everyday life and to use the relationship between those moments in the process as a source of both improvement and knowledge" (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988:9)[6].

3.0 PAR and the NSPS Community Initiatives Evaluation

The PAR approach here has been adapted by the evaluation officer to the circumstances of the NSPS initiatives. The four projects were geographically dispersed and each multifaceted in nature. The initiatives were also initiated at different times, engaged in different strategies, targeted different 'at risk' groups, were subject to a variety of different issues and progressed at different rates. It is also the case here that the evolution of the four Project activities was responsive to opportunities and developments as they arose, particularly with regard to the myriad activities of new project partners and the new related initiatives which the NSPS Projects subsequently embraced. These factors coupled with the limited resources at the disposal of the Evaluation Officer (who worked on a part-time basis for the project) made the application of PAR in its most 'participatory' sense highly problematic. These difficulties extended to logistical problems of implementing the formal action research cycle across all initiatives whilst retaining participatory involvement in the often rapidly evolving project activities.

Following the implementation of the action research cycle in the formative evaluation therefore, the Evaluation Officer decided to tailor the approach to each individual Initiative using the established evaluation plans as a 'flexible' guide, and to 'feed-back' findings as they arose directly to the project officers and steering groups on a continual basis. This 'flexibility' required the EO to monitor activities and regularly adapt the evaluation to the adoption of strategic changes in the Projects. The project officers were also encouraged to keep reflexive journals of their work, a practice that the evaluation officer has also applied to his activities. Since the formative evaluation and capacity training therefore, the PAR approach has moved more toward 'partnership' and individual project consultation. The evaluation plans were subsequently refined on a number of occasions to more closely reflect Project activity.

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[6] Kemmis, S. and McTaggart, R. (1988) 'The Action Research Planner', Victoria: Deakin University

4.0 The Formative Evaluation

The formative study approached 43 stakeholders (including managerial stakeholders), who had been involved in one of the Steering, Reference or Advisory groups in South Australia. The project officers for each initiative provided the lists of stakeholders. A total of 34 responses were obtained from NSPS Steering /Reference Group members and managerial stakeholders across the initiatives in South Australia. This represents a response rate of 79% that was obtained after three reminders were sent over a fieldwork period of two months from October – December 2003.

The formative evaluation was essentially to provide feedback regarding the processes enacted in the establishment and early operationalisation of the project initiatives across the State. The feedback was subsequently presented back to each individual project steering or reference group to inform future action. Of primacy here was the need to identify the strengths and weaknesses for each project to inform the action research cycle. The evaluation officer for each project identified potential areas for action or consideration, and these were discussed with each initiative project officer prior to presenting the findings to the steering groups. Summaries of the findings were also distributed to steering and reference group members via e-mail. The findings for each initiative and accompanying action areas are presented below.

The quantitative findings include 'flash card' responses obtained from semi-structured interviews with managerial stakeholders, stakeholders from the Commonwealth and the Project Officers (a total of ten 'face-to-face' interviews – see: Appendix 1), and these were amalgamated with the quantitative findings from the e-mail questionnaire sent to the other stakeholders (see: Appendix 2). The face-to-face semi structured option was used for 'managerial stakeholders' to encourage open in-depth discussion about the myriad difficulties and successes specific to each project. This also allowed the evaluation officer to become more familiar with the inter-relationships and history of the various agencies involved in collaborative activity. The e-mail questionnaire option for other stakeholders was chosen due to their geographical dispersion across SA and efficiency considerations. Being a self-completion method of surveying, the e-mail survey also allowed busy stakeholders to ponder their responses and complete the questionnaire at a convenient time.

4.1 Overview of Quantitative Findings across the State initiatives.

The majority of stakeholders who had responded had attended a Steering or Reference Group 4 times or more (50%, n=17), with 12% (4 respondents) having attended two or three times, and 12% indicating they had only attended once. Eight people did not respond to this question, with one indicating they had never attended.

4.1.1 Support for the 'non-competitive' approach

The 'non-competitive' approach to the selection of agencies for the project was widely supported, with 24% (8 respondents) having no reservations about the approach. However, 44% (15 respondents) indicated 'yes, I would recommend this approach but with some reservations'. The reservations tended to focus on problems with defining the respective roles of collaborating agencies at the beginning of the project, particularly for those who had a history of competing for tenders.

4.1.2 Understanding the roles of stakeholders and nature of the project initiatives

The role of the project officer was fully understood by the large majority of stakeholders (79%, n=27). Slightly less well understood was the role of the Steering Group although 77% (n=26) still fully understood this. The role of the auspicing body and that of the funders was fully understood by 75% (n=25) of respondents. It was encouraging that the role of the evaluator was fully understood by 82% (n=28) respondents. The aims and objectives of the projects were also generally well understood (74% fully understanding this, n= 25).

However, less well understood was 'my role in the project' with 68% (n=21) fully understanding this, 21% (n=7) indicating 'I need a little more clarification', and 9% (n=3) indicating 'I need much more

clarification'. Similarly the strategies used in the projects were in need of greater clarification, with 62% (n=21) fully understanding these, 21% (n=7) needing a little more clarification and 12% (n=4) needing "much more clarification". The overall purpose of the project was however made clear to the members of the reference or steering groups, with 53% (n=18) strongly agreeing this was the case, and 32% (n=11) agreeing. The 9% (n=3) of respondents with no view on this matter had attended less than two meetings.

4.1.3 Partnerships and Collaboration

The stakeholders upheld the view that partnerships should be an important feature of community projects generally with 79% (n=27) strongly agreeing with this, and a further 12% (n=4) indicating they agreed. 91% (n=31) agreed that collaboration between agencies leads to an efficient use of resources, an almost unanimous finding.

The collaborative approach between agencies was largely viewed as increasing the impact for the community, with 24% (n=8) strongly agreeing with this, and 47% (n=16) agreeing. A minority held no view here (21%, n=7) with only two respondents disagreeing. 56% (n=19) strongly agreed, and 29% (n=10) agreed with the statement "I fully support the collaborative/non-competitive approach to protect development".

When asked specifically about the sense of partnership in their own project steering or reference group however, the findings were more equivocal. 41% (n=14) either disagreed (15%, n=5) or had no view (27%, n=9) with the statement "there is a strong sense of partnership in the reference/steering group". 29% (n=10) agreed with this statement and 8 (24%) strongly agreed. This varied across the different projects and this is reflected in the feedback delivered to each initiative.

Respondents were also asked about the extent to which the objectives and activities of the project "harmonize with those of your organization". 52% (n=20) of respondents indicated 'fully' or 'mostly' to this question, with 12% (n=4) indicating "to some extent". There were 9 missing responses to this question, which reflected the need for greater clarification regarding the strategies of the projects.

4.1.4 Active Collaborative Involvement in the NSPS initiative

The majority of stakeholders thought there was enough opportunity to discuss their views in the reference and steering group meetings. In relation to the statement "there is not enough opportunity to discuss views in the reference/steering group", 29% (n=10) strongly disagreed, 35% (n=12) disagreed, 24% (n=8) held no view, and 9% (n=3) agreed. Again, this varied across different initiatives and is addressed in Section 3.0 below.

The NSPS projects have increased the level of cooperation between organizations and agencies. 18% (n=6) strongly agreed that the project increased cooperation between their and other agencies and 53% (n=18) agreed. This was not universal however, with 18% (n=6) having no view, and 9% (n=3) disagreeing.

4.1.5 Increased Understanding of Suicide Prevention

In response to the statement "being involved in the project has helped each agency develop a better understanding of suicide prevention", 29% (n=10 strongly agreed with this and 35% (n=12) agreed, with 27% (n=9) holding no view. This is perhaps surprising given that many of the agencies are engaged with the higher risk groups. It also highlights the importance and need to raise awareness of suicide prevention across the service sector.

Moreover, 32% (n=11) strongly agreed and 44% (n=15) agreed that being involved in the project had positively influenced their work.

4.1 Example of Qualitative Findings and Action areas identified (feedback cycle).

The following information from the formative evaluation of the NSPS was presented to stakeholders for feedback for one of the SA NSPS projects. Having identified a number of issues and following a PAR approach, the Evaluation Officer consulted with the Project Officer to collaboratively compile a number of actions for incorporation in the Project. These have been listed systematically.

4.2.1 Initiating the Project

- Stakeholder expectations of the Project focused on its collaborative and coordinated nature with great optimism expressed for the integrated approach and establishment of new partnerships. This enthusiasm has been retained with many indicating that their expectations have been exceeded.

- The need for the Project was strongly asserted due to the multiple compounding problems in the Project region (including specifically suicide). The coordination of various services for the common target group was widely applauded in terms of enhancing quality of service and time/resource efficiency. Clearly 'resilience' was viewed as broadly benefiting the target group across a range of suicide related issues. The need to raise community awareness of both resilience issues and services in the area was also stressed.

- The relevance of the Project to the stakeholder organisations was widely acknowledged. Whilst working practices of organisations not generally changed as a result of participation, several stakeholders emphasised that they had strengthened; the Project had informed their own practice and harmonised with the ethos of participating organisations.

- After a slow start (which was largely viewed as unavoidable given the diversity of organisations involved), the Project has gathered momentum and clear shared understandings of the Project aims and objectives are now established. These are valued and seen as realistic.

- The personal enthusiasm and skills brought into the Project by the Project Officer were praised by a number of stakeholders.

4.2.2 Benefits of Participating

- A wide range of organisational and professional development benefits from the collaborative nature of the Project were identified by stakeholders including:

  - Reduced duplication of workload;
  - Collaboration and pooling of experience, skills and resources enabling synergy leading to greater efficiency and quality and the potential for stronger outcomes for the Project;
  - Raising awareness of services, organisations and personnel engaged in related activities across the region;
  - Professional skills development and knowledge acquisition and understanding of suicide issues;
  - Formation of new linkages, evolving partnerships and increased level of cooperation between organisations ramifying beyond the boundaries of this particular Project;
  - Generation of new Project ideas and positive input to existing projects: A range of specified Projects have been enhanced ('value added') by access to new resources, new contacts, new ideas and information sharing. Examples were provided of collaboration through working groups, resource development, and the development of new projects, strategic planning, and awareness raising activities.
  - Symbolic significance of the Project demonstrating how the ethos of a collaborative approach can work in practice. The Project was also seen as

providing a practical example or model for partnership establishment procedures (MOUs, Job Descriptions etc).
- o Kudos for each stakeholder organisation being involved in a national strategy;
- o Profiling of region;
- o Strengthening of community youth participation.
- o Freedom of expression of ideas with all stakeholders indicating they have a good opportunity to discuss views during meetings;

4.2.3 Understanding the project and the nature of Partner Contributions

- The Project would have benefited from more clarification of the various roles of stakeholders and the nature of the contributions and commitment required at an earlier stage. However, this has been largely rectified, although (notably for those who have engaged with Project more recently) 'a little more clarification' was sought regarding the following:

  - Role of funders
  - Role of Auspicing Body
  - Role of Evaluator
  - Role of Project Officer

Action 1: The Project Officer continues consulting with new partners individually to clarify the roles and contributions of participating stakeholders.

Action 1.1: Develop a standard presentation that specifically addresses clarification of all roles in the Project.

Action 1.2: Include description of roles and responsibilities in the Project description kit.

- A number of stakeholders were initially unclear about the strategies for the Project but these are now generally well understood. However, 4 respondents expressed the need for 'a little more clarification' of strategies. This was also related to developing projects that are being embraced by the Project.

Action 2: Future Reference Group meetings to include presentations of work plans for each emerging initiative embraced by the project including their objectives, strategies and evaluation plan.

- The need to clarify 'the nature of partnership' was also specified by some stakeholders, this being related to both the clarification of contribution required, and also the need to prioritise and organise workloads and attendance at meetings in consultation with respective organisational management. The need to raise awareness of the Project at a managerial level was emphasised in order to optimize involvement with the Project.

Action 3: Strategies to raise awareness of the Project across the service sector at a management level for the region should be considered, this to include clarification of the collaborative approach adopted by the Project and the commitment required from partners.

4.2.4 Issue of Sustainability

- The sustainability of the Project was identified as strength and largely related to its collaborative nature. The Project has:
  - o Cemented relations/partnerships and generated new ones both directly and through further networking;
  - o Enhanced understanding of services and organisations across the region (knowledge of who to contact in future and greater awareness of issues);

- o Built capacity (raised knowledge and awareness of services and suicide issues and approaches);
- o Directly impacted on existing Projects;
- o Generated new Projects and ideas
- o Helped to establish and/or retain suicide on the agenda of participating organisations;
- o Increased consumer participation;
- o Provided encouragement for more collaboration.

- That the project has been funded for three years was recognised positively by stakeholders as enhancing the likelihood of sustainability. There were some concerns regarding sustainability after this period has elapsed however, and it was requested that the steering group give consideration to this.

Action 4: That the Reference group considers project sustainability further in future meetings, by revisiting existing plans for sustainability and altering the work plan as required.

4.2.5 Additional Issues Raised

- Concerns were raised concerning the level of resources for all of the strategies to be embraced by the Project and the manageability of the range of potential activities;

Action 5: Reference Group to consider resourcing in future meetings and address concerns raised utilising existing regional resources and external resources where required.

- A number of issues were identified as being partially or not resolved at the time of the survey:
  - o Attendance at Project meetings: whilst the Project harmonised with current practice, there were still difficulties with competing workload that affects the regularity of attendance. Finding suitable times for all Steering Group members was also viewed as problematic.
  - o The perception of the Project belonging to one host agency was raised as an obstacle to its collective ownership and the possibility of co-location of the Project Officer postulated.

Action 6: Dates for future Reference Group meetings be collectively planned for the following year with meetings to be hosted by different partner organisations across the region.

Action 6.1: Formal requests in writing to be sent to management in organisations with workers actively participating in Project initiatives detailing level and types of support required from workers.

Action 6.2: Provide opportunity for organisation managers to indicate relevant community of interest (eg GayLesbianBisexualTransgender Intersex) and make commitment to relevant Project initiatives.

Action 6.3: Clearly and publicly present all relevant organisational logos together, to promote the widespread partnerships involved in the Project development, implementation and evaluation.

Action 6.4: Explore and clarify the proposal to "co-locate" the project officer with the reference group, update the group on the current partnership approach utilised in project management.

  - o On-going commitment was problematic in some cases and difficulties in gaining managerial permission from respective organisations to prioritise the Project were asserted. The need for greater liaison activity to seek wider support and to

further raise the profile and understanding of the Project and its collaborative nature were also advocated.

Action 7: Develop and implement strategies for raising managerial awareness of, and commitment to the project - enabling greater managerial support of workers involved across the sector.

Action 7.1: Raise the profile of the project through an open service / organisation attended forum which enhances widespread understanding of and commitment to the project and provides an opportunity for 'peer encouragement' between organisations to get involved.

- o The need for more 'hands-on' collaboration with established groups and projects was suggested as a means of helping to secure youth involvement in the Project. The Project Officer has liaised extensively since this survey was administered and is actively seeking involvement from a diversity of Projects addressing the target group in the area.

Action 8: Project Officer to further: liaise with service providers, act as a resource of suicide prevention information to existing projects in the community, and encourage these project groups to actively collaborate with the Reference Group.

- o One stakeholder suggested that consideration be given to family involvement in the Project;

Action 9: Project initiatives incorporate family involvement as appropriate and relevant to the topic or theme identified by young people (Eg: creative pieces are presented to families opening discussion on the topic or theme).

- o More training for workers in suicide issues and its prevention was requested.

Action 10: Project Officer to continue to support the development of 'safe discussion of suicide training' as part of the Regional Youth Services Plan initiative which identifies the delivery of training as one if its strategies.

5.0 Conclusion

Clearly there have large benefits accrued from adopting a PAR approach to the evaluation of the SA component of the National Suicide Prevention Strategy. The evaluation approach has mirrored the participatory nature of the projects, facilitated information exchange, built capacity and identified a range of benefits and areas for improvement. The collaborative partnership approach has yielded a range of benefits, whilst the PAR approach has allowed difficulties to be identified for collaborative action. Despite the logistical difficulties involved with the diversity of Projects and activities across a broad geographical area, the approach has encouraged collaboration and Project improvement.