

Evaluating a ‘Bold Experiment’: Whole of Government Policy Evaluation in Indigenous Affairs¹

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Abstract

On 15 April 2004, the Government announced sweeping reforms to the way in which services are delivered to Indigenous Australians. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) would be abolished and programs provided by ATSIC delivered by mainstream departments. New advisory and administrative bodies were also created including Ministerial Taskforce and Secretaries’ Group on Indigenous Affairs, the National Indigenous Council, the Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination (OIPC) and a network of Indigenous Coordination Centres. Dr Peter Shergold, Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, described these changes as a ‘bold experiment in implementing a whole of government approach to policy development and delivery’.

This paper outlines the ‘lessons learned’ approach that OIPC has adopted in its key role of evaluating these arrangements. The paper also raises a number of critical issues in Indigenous whole of government evaluation including the accessibility of performance data; attributing shared outcomes to particular initiatives; working with multiple agencies; the problem of evaluating processes such as ‘better coordination’; and the type of evaluation capability that is needed. Over time, the lessons learned from evaluating the new arrangements should contribute to broader discussion of evaluation of whole of government approaches to other areas of public policy.

¹ The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not represent those of the Australian Government. The authors would like to thank Thomas Mettenmeyer and Bryan Palmer for comments on earlier drafts of this paper. Errors and omissions remain the responsibility of the authors.

Introduction

Early to mid-2004 was a time of major change in government service delivery to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. In announcing the 2004 changes, the Prime Minister John Howard stated that his goal was ‘to improve the outcomes and opportunities and hopes of indigenous people in areas of health, education and employment’ (Howard 2004). The new arrangements aimed to improve outcomes for Indigenous people by simplifying their interaction with government agencies – both through better coordination of government programs and services, and by consulting directly with Indigenous people rather than through intermediaries such as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC). Another key aspect of the new landscape was the notion of governments and Indigenous people sharing responsibility for better outcomes (OIPC 2004).

In practice, this meant programs previously delivered through ATSIC and its administrative arm, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services (ATSIS), were to be delivered through mainstream departments, with a new set of administrative structures to ensure Indigenous programs remained connected and coordinated. On the ground, this was to happen through a regional network of Indigenous Coordination Centres. At the national level, the Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination (OIPC) was to take a coordination role with strategic leadership by a Ministerial Taskforce and Secretaries Group on Indigenous Affairs, both representing portfolios with Indigenous specific responsibilities. A National Indigenous Council whose members were chosen for their expertise and experience in particular policy areas was also formed to advise the Australian Government on Indigenous issues and strategies (OIPC 2004).

It was also part of a broader move toward ‘whole of government’ approaches both in Australia and internationally. A report by the Management Advisory Committee of the Australian Public Service, *Connecting Government: Whole of Government Responses to Australia’s Priority Challenges*, was due to be released at the time the new Indigenous Affairs arrangements were announced. In launching the report, the head of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet and highest ranking Australian public servant, Dr Peter Shergold, identified the new arrangements in Indigenous Affairs as a critical challenge for whole of government in the Australian Public Service:

Now comes the biggest test of whether the rhetoric of connectivity can be marshalled into effective action. The Australian Government is about to embark on a bold experiment in implementing a whole-of-government approach to policy development and delivery. It is an approach on which my reputation, and many of my colleagues, will hang. I refer to the abolition of ATSIC and the embrace of a quite different approach to the administration of indigenous-specific programmes and services.

It appears that by embarking on this ‘bold experiment’ the government has acknowledged that previous attempts to address Indigenous disadvantage needed to be transformed. Given the scale of Indigenous disadvantage, it is important that OIPC uses its mandate to evaluate the new arrangements in order to respond quickly and effectively to signals on

progress. However, the dominant contemporary framework for measuring policy performance, the program logic framework, presents several obstacles to evaluating the new arrangements. Notably, the program logic framework assumes silo-based service delivery and policy development whereas the whole of government approach to Indigenous Affairs extends beyond the silo-based program approach.

The whole of government policy framework encompasses a plethora of inter-related programs. It is reasonable to assume that these programs in time, place and subject need to be viewed in combination as they interact with each other, yielding outcomes that are more than simply the sum of individual program outcomes. In the same way, it can be hypothesised that interactions between programs need to be described using ‘non-linear’ models. This means again, the sum of the interaction effects is not simply the sum of individual interactions effects. When seen more generally within the reality of a dynamic policy and social context, a complex system emerges. Therefore, this new whole of government policy framework in Indigenous Affairs requires a system approach to evaluation.

The remainder of this paper will outline in more detail several of the key challenges in Indigenous whole of government evaluation.

Clarifying Objectives – What is Better Coordination?

The shift towards working in a whole of government manner is premised on the central belief that if governments at all levels, along with their departments, work together more effectively then outcomes for Indigenous Australians will improve. Whilst the concept of working together is commonly understood, a precise definition of what ‘better coordination’ is not immediately obvious, nor is the means of measuring such a phenomenon. Indeed, better coordination can mean different things to different people. Without first having substantive definitions of key concepts, evaluation activities can become challenging.

The whole of government environment with its multitude of players naturally involves varying views on what an intervention aims to achieve. Although global objectives are well defined for the new arrangements, at lower levels, objectives tend to become subject to interpretation and sometimes contested. More problematic for evaluators is that coordination among multiple agencies and stakeholders is likely to increase the number and nature of interactions that are difficult to qualitatively assess, especially when viewed in combination. Increased interaction suggests that costs as well as benefits need to be considered in evaluating better coordination.

Another key challenge is the fundamental need to determine the effectiveness and efficiency of government activities and to attribute outcomes to certain measures or combination of measures. Prior to the implementation of the new arrangements, individual departments were able to apply a program logic approach in evaluation of programs, which enabled reasonably clear identification of causation and responsibility. When numerous government programs are working in the same context and influencing

each other, it is far more difficult to isolate the consequences of each one. Humpage (2005) supports this in suggesting that early attempts to implement whole of government initiatives in Australia and New Zealand suffered from insufficient clarity on how outcomes might be reported and evaluated.

The definitions of key terms will take some time before being completely settled. OIPC addresses this issue by using qualitative measures that, whilst not absolute, will nevertheless provide a way of collecting information against specified objectives. These goals may be less tangible and include concepts such as community wellbeing and working in a whole of government way. Though individual measures (e.g. community perceptions of safety or community governance) may not tell a story on their own, in conjunction with other quantitative and qualitative information, patterns can begin to emerge. The resulting picture can be used to inform the intervention being undertaken, as well as provide a reference point to monitor progress against, and is supplemented by regular formal evaluations to reassess in light of the bigger picture. In time, we expect that these efforts will help develop more summative evaluative frameworks for whole of government endeavours.

Availability of data

Despite initial issues around specifying the objectives of whole of government evaluation outlined in the previous section, OIPC has continued to pursue data that will inform assessment of the new arrangements. There is currently a wealth of administrative data collected by various parties that can be applied to individual elements of the new arrangements. However, not all this data is useful when it comes to evaluating whole of government approaches.

For example, an education department may collect data on school attendance that would be useful for developing education policy. A housing department may do likewise in the context of a particular housing program. Traditionally these two sources of data would be considered quite separately and outside to a whole of government scenario. Taking the example further, a whole of government initiative to increase school attendance may have links with a program to improve overcrowding in housing – assessing the success of such an intervention means going beyond education data and considering the relationship with relevant housing data as well.

This simplistic example highlights one of the key issues confronting OIPC as it attempts to evaluate whole of government performance – the ability to access data that can shed light on how the various sectors are working together. For data users and providers determining what data is available and how to obtain it becomes complicated. Data used for evaluation needs to be representative of the breadth of activities across Commonwealth, State/Territory, and local government boundaries. The emphasis on locally targeted interventions in the new arrangements means data is required at small area level to track progress. This entails challenges including economies of scale in collection, the meaningfulness of measures given variance over a small sample size, and privacy issues.

Consistent improvements have been made over past years in obtaining reliable data for evaluation purposes but access remains a significant limiting factor in performance management. OIPC, and the Australian Government more generally, have adopted a number of strategies to deal with data issues in the whole of government context. There is considerable effort invested in improving access to existing data across jurisdictional and agency boundaries.

OIPC is looking to improve the frameworks in place that are used for measuring performance. Given the prominence of place-based approaches in the new arrangements for Indigenous affairs, creating more effective frameworks for reporting on small areas is a priority. OIPC has developed a strategy for collecting baseline data in individual communities where it plans to make a substantial investment, which combines quantitative and qualitative measures. The strategy involves ensuring that existing sources of data are fully exploited before collecting contextual information and addressing gaps through a research exercise in community.

Stakeholder Participation

Conducting evaluations within the new whole of government setting relies on the involvement of multiple parties. Engaging stakeholders appropriately is an important aspect of successful whole of government evaluation – particularly as the benefits of participatory evaluation continue to gain credence. Accordingly, OIPC has endeavoured as far as possible to embed performance monitoring and evaluation as an integral part to any government intervention. By treating evaluation in this manner and rather than as merely an ‘add on’ the ‘embedded’ approach ensures that the community and other stakeholders can contribute to evaluative processes, which can add considerable value.

Not surprisingly, conducting an evaluation guided by a number of different stakeholders is a challenge. Priorities of stakeholders occasionally do not align well and getting agreement to an evaluation framework and process can be problematic. However, stakeholder buy-in is vital, particularly when the aim of evaluation is continuous improvement of programs and activities. No improvements will occur unless the parties responsible for those improvements embrace the evaluation process.

Involving Indigenous communities is a key aspect of OIPC’s evaluation approach. While ensuring the burden on communities is as low as possible, OIPC seeks involvement of Indigenous stakeholders at various stages of the evaluation process, from the input into the design of evaluations to participation in the actual evaluation. The participation of all parties involved in the evaluation of whole of government measures is consistent with the new paradigm of sharing responsibility applied to Indigenous Affairs generally. Working with communities at a local level means that local issues and aspirations come to the fore. Such collaboration and consultation allows the areas of most need to be better identified and targeted.

The participation of whole of government stakeholders and Indigenous partners is a key factor to the future success of OIPC's approach to evaluation. The reviews of individual shared responsibility agreements (SRAs), for example, will identify lessons learnt by signatories and capture their perceptions of the SRA process regarding how it worked for them and how it could be improved. The reviews will also investigate the extent to which outcomes were achieved, taking into full account the circumstances in which SRAs were developed.

Evaluation Capability on the Ground

The issues discussed above provide an indication of some of the key challenges at the macro-level that OIPC faces in evaluating the new arrangements in Indigenous affairs. At the micro-level 'on the ground' evaluators encounter issues of a more hand-on nature. Addressing these successfully requires a very specific skill set. Evaluators need to be able gain the trust of Indigenous people and other stakeholders involved and to bridge the divide in culture, capacity and language (Clark and Cheers 2005). OIPC ensures that evaluators on the ground have the necessary skills and experience to operate in this environment. In selecting evaluators, OIPC selects consultants with demonstrated experience in working with Indigenous people.

Lessons Learnt Approach to Evaluation

Within this complex and dynamic policy environment OIPC has increasingly adopted a 'lessons learnt' approach to evaluation as the preferred way to overcome the challenges introduced in the previous sections. The aim of the lessons learnt approach is to identify where improvements have occurred and continually refine the intervention model through incremental steps. The approach is broadly consistent with the 'evaluative inquiry' model of evaluation. This model understands 'evaluation as the production of knowledge based on systemic enquiry to assist decision making about a program' (Owen 2006: 18).

OIPC's approach can be further described as a type of 'clarificative evaluative inquiry' as it is oriented towards clarifying program design and delivery by asking developmental type questions such as (Owen 2006: 193):

- What are the intended outcomes and how is the program designed to achieve them?
- What program elements need to be modified in order to maximise the intended outcomes?
- Which aspects of this program are amendable to subsequent monitoring or impact assessment?

Embracing the lessons learnt approach ensures that programs and policy development continually incorporate new information on the best methods of operation. In using this approach OIPC also applies other evaluative approaches where appropriate. In particular, summative approaches continue to be used and play a vital role in fulfilling the government accountability function. Indeed, summative evaluations can complement

evaluative inquiry of the new arrangements as it seeks to make judgements about how well individual programs are achieving their objectives. In using these two complementary approaches, OIPC is able to assess and account for individual components of the new arrangements as well as come to a judgement about the whole of government working.

OIPC created an evaluation plan that was shaped by the need to establish ‘transparency and accountability’ and to develop a ‘learning framework’. These objectives are two of the six principles for delivering services to Indigenous Australians as adopted by Council of Australian Government (COAG) in 2004. The plan has three broad, overlapping themes:

- Outcomes – a focus on approaches that have demonstrated positive outcomes for Indigenous people;
- Place – local arrangements and partnerships – the way in which governments and their programs work within local communities and how they can be made more responsive to the needs of those communities; and
- Process – implementation of the new arrangements – continuously improving the way agencies are implementing the Government’s policies and programs to ensure whole of government coordination and address policy gaps.

It should be noted that the focus of the OIPC evaluation plan is on whole of government activities and is just one element of the assessment and scrutiny of the new arrangements. Other elements include program evaluations by line agencies, audits and reviews by independent authorities, other government departments, academic institutions, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, COAG and the Secretaries’ Group.

Conclusion

This paper has described several challenges that confront OIPC as it embarks on the evaluation of the ‘bold experiment’ in Indigenous affairs. As it does so, there is a need to be pragmatic in dealing with the issues. Such pragmatism is embodied in the lessons learnt approach that based on the ‘evaluative inquiry’ model. In applying this approach OIPC uses other evaluation methodologies as required to complement its overarching approach, which is responsive to the experimental nature of many initiatives and will allow the government to learn as it proceeds. This is a particularly important characteristic needed for evaluation of Indigenous affairs as change will undoubtedly take time.

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