

A Roadmap through the Spinifex: Constructing an Outcome Hierarchy of

This paper takes a difficult journey across the spinifex desert country incongruously equipped with nothing but a map and a ladder. Here the 'desert' symbolises the harsh contemporary social reality of remote Indigenous communities, while the 'map' represents the desperate need to find a pathway to more sustainable Indigenous futures i.e. the need to understand 'what works' and why. And the 'ladder' is an outcome hierarchy, an analytic tool which enables evaluators to see beyond the immediate terrain.

In this paper I will describe my understanding of what a strong community is, construct an outcome hierarchy (i.e. one possible representation of the process steps towards strengthening remote Indigenous communities) and reflect on the usefulness of the outcome hierarchy technique for this purpose.

What is a strong community?

Indigenous Sustainability

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Introduction

For the purposes of this paper the terms 'strong community' and 'sustainable community' can be used interchangeably, but in my lived experience Indigenous people generally prefer the former. In a strong community the continuity and persistence of values, activities, structures, processes, ways of working, services and eco-systems are all evident. People have the ability to adapt and constructively respond to changing circumstances and emerging opportunities. Strong communities have the capacity to 'bounce back'. There is resilience in the face of periodic setbacks.

Indigenous community strength (sustainability) has multiple dimensions:

- social strength e.g. close bonds, sound family and community relationships;
- economic strength e.g. employment opportunities, a viable economy, access to finance and other resources, essential infrastructure, income, wealth.
- environmental strength e.g. clean water, biodiversity, protection of eco-systems;
- psychological strength e.g. esteem, sense of social and emotional well being;
- physical strength e.g. good health, longevity;
- institutional strength e.g. good governance practices, appropriate decision-making institutions;
- cultural strength e.g. felt connections to kin and country, a positive sense of cultural identity, spiritualism.

The degree of sustainability that a community displays is not only derived from the sum total of its strengths, but also from the balance that comes from 'walking' on many legs. This is a holistic conception of community strength that extends way beyond a 'triple

bottom' line understanding that only seeks to balance social, economic and environmental outcomes.

Describing the Community Strengthening Process with an Outcome Hierarchy

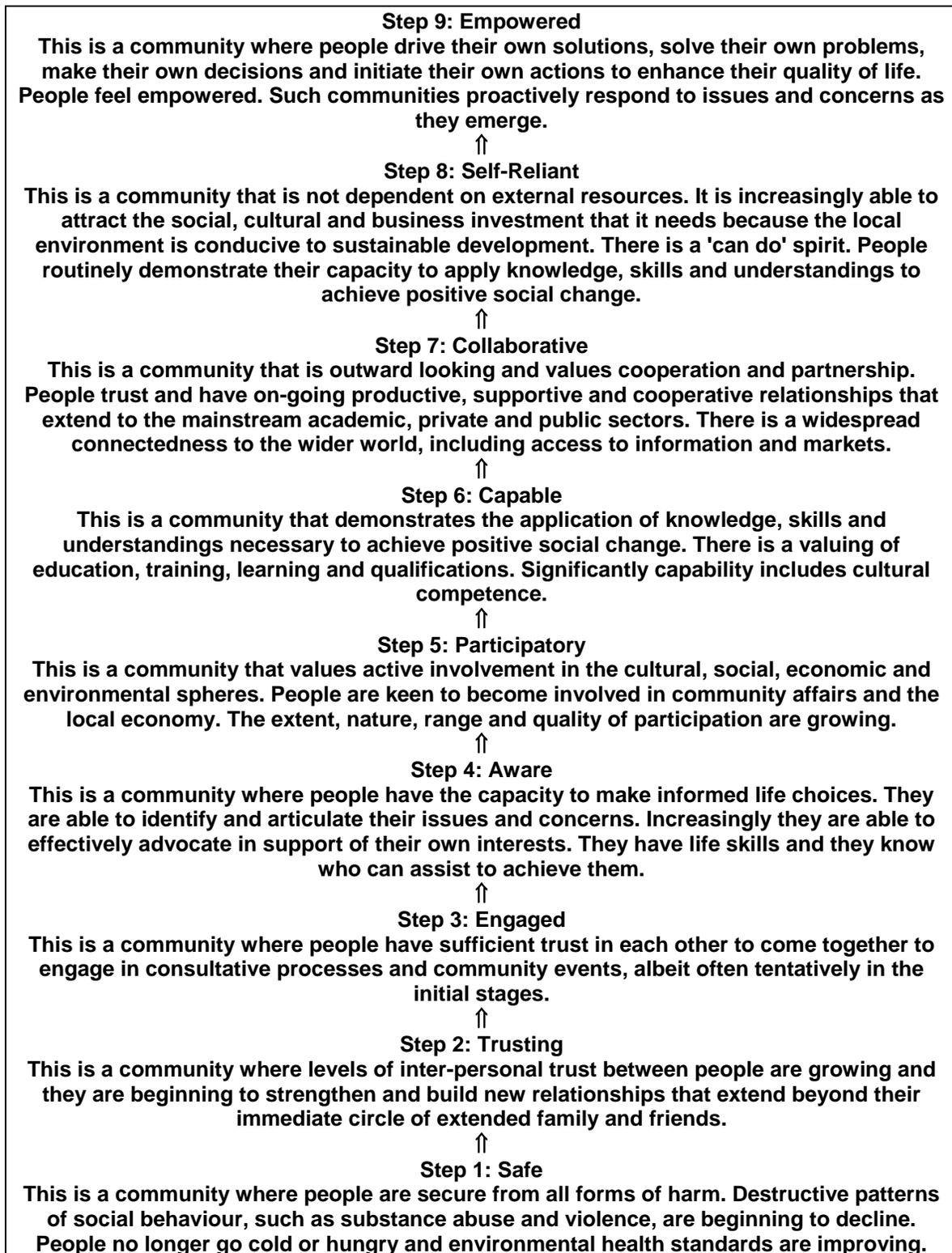
I now wish to explain how the outcome hierarchy technique can be applied to issues of Indigenous community strength. An outcome hierarchy is a tool for describing and making explicit a theory of change (see Funnell, 1997). It sets out the logic of how short-term outcomes lead to longer term ones, with achievements at one level providing the foundation upon which those at the next can be built. It is characteristic of a hierarchy of outcomes that its development is informed both by practice and social theory, and further that the hierarchy is subsequently used to spark new theory building.

Figure 1 is an example of an outcomes hierarchy that I call the 'Ladder of Indigenous Sustainability'. It is my conception of one pathway to that seeks to encapsulate the key elements required for a sustainable quality of life in remote Indigenous Australia. The purpose is to explain, theoretically, how the goal of 'strong communities' might be reached. In policy circles the term 'black box' is used to describe the void that often exists between change strategies on the one hand, and the achievement of bold and ambitious policy outcomes on the other (Kushner, 2002). In Indigenous affairs the crucial mechanisms that are meant to transform policy actions into sustainable outcomes are still largely hidden from view; *"the nation is yet to find the policy solutions required"* (Westbury & Dillon, 2006: 3). An outcome hierarchy provides a mechanism to respond to black box thinking by explicitly spelling out the assumed causal connections.

An outcome hierarchy is a model and therefore is, by definition, an oversimplification. The purpose is not to fully describe the world in all its murky complexity. Rather it is a theoretical device to see the 'wood for the trees'. A less linear (mechanical) and more iterative (complex) depiction of Indigenous sustainability, replete with multiple pathways and feedback loops would in this instance, I suggest, not achieve this end. Arguably whatever detail might be lost is more than made up for in the form of clarity and shared understanding. I agree with Fraser (2001, 58 – 60) that *"arguably there is currently no real option but to work from models that treat the causative process as linear"*. Nevertheless I readily acknowledge that the style of representation depicted in the ladder doesn't work for everyone.

In recent years much progress has been made on measuring Indigenous disadvantage (SCRGSP, 2007), but governments are still light on when it comes to knowing which strategies to employ to overcome it. Of course it is important to measure progress towards desired outcomes, but it is also necessary to understand the process of how to get there: *it is not sufficient to measure the various aspects of disadvantage as we need to understand the pathways into disadvantage and the evolution of more sustainable positive outcomes*" (Hunter, 2007a: 1). Without an underlying theory of change there is no firm basis to guide actions. *"I am not arguing that measurement of Indigenous disadvantage is unimportant, rather that it needs to be informed by more sophisticated theoretical and empirical analysis of behavioural inter-relationships"* (Hunter, 2007a: 29). At present Indigenous policy is all 'destination' with no 'map'.

Figure 1: Ladder of Indigenous Community Strength



The internal logic of the ladder, as communities progress up from the bottom is as follows.

Step 1: To be safe and secure is to be protected from harm. In a safe community the most vulnerable (especially children) feel loved, nurtured and healthy. They are well fed and clothed and free from deprivations such as cold, hunger and the worst consequences of abject poverty. People are protected from preventable environmental health diseases and illnesses and there are measures in place to ameliorate the more destructive forms of social behaviour, such as substance abuse and all forms of violence. A community where anxieties about personal safety are beginning to diminish provides an environment that is more conducive to the development of trusting interpersonal relationships.

Step 2: Inter-personal trust is about the quality of our relationships. Trust is the firm belief that another person or group of people can be relied upon. It involves having faith and confidence in others. As trust grows we extend it outwards to encompass those beyond our immediate circle of extended family and friends. People increasingly have quality relationships, bigger networks and, as a result, more diverse sources of support when they need it. Trust is vital to building strong communities, for without trust there can be no engagement, no communication, no cooperation, no participation, no collaboration and no partnership.

Step 3: Engagement is the process of attracting initial attention and interest. Engagement can only happen in what people deem to be 'safe and trusting spaces'. The process of initial engagement is often a tentative one for groups of people lacking in confidence and esteem. They need to feel psychologically secure before they will come together around shared interests and concerns. This is especially the case for those seeking to heal from the impact of past trauma in their lives, such as those who have been institutionalised or abused.

Step 4: Awareness raising is an early intervention strategy that seeks to prevent problems before they become serious by ensuring that people are better informed. It only becomes possible to raise people's awareness of their life choices after they have first chosen to engage. As a result of education and effective communication, people become more knowledgeable about the services and programs that are available to them and more able to make more informed decisions. Being more aware also means being more conscious of opportunities for greater social and economic participation.

Step 5: Participation is the capacity (motivation, willingness, knowledge and social skills) to interact and work effectively alongside others. It encompasses involvement in cultural, social and economic spheres. Participation can take various forms such as active membership of a local organization or joining the workforce. Participation contributes to the success of project activities, not only because it harnesses local knowledge and capacities, but also because it creates a sense of local ownership. Participation is a step towards becoming more capable because being involved with others creates new opportunities to learn and develop human capital.

Step 6: Being capable means not only having the knowledge, skills and understandings required for a particular project, but also the ability to apply these

to issues and concerns as they arise. People who are capable are increasingly able to meet their own needs and to apply their capabilities to take advantage of opportunities. A capable community is one that can achieve positive change in a diverse range of areas. In Indigenous settings cultural competence is a crucial capability.

Step 7: Collaboration is the mechanism that connects Indigenous people to the wider world beyond their region. Collaboration adds value to a community's own efforts by enable access to new sources of advice, resources, knowledge and skills, as well as providing high level access to external decision-makers that would otherwise be denied to people on a local level. Partnerships are one manifestation of a willingness to work with bodies such as governments, businesses, NGO's and academic institutions to achieve positive social change. Where there is a high level of public trust, Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and organisations can work side-by-side to achieve positive social change. Collaboration is a pre-requisite to the achievement of a truly sustainable community because of the social, economic and other opportunities that it can open up.

Step 8: A self-reliant community is one that is not dependent on external resources. Increasingly it is able to attract the social, cultural and business investment it needs because the local environment is now conducive to sustainable development. There are employment and business opportunities for local people. People display a 'can do' spirit and they are increasingly able to effectively represent their own interests on a broad range of issues. This is crucial because empowerment cannot be negotiated from a position of dependence.

Step 9: In an empowered community people are able to make informed decisions, determine their own strategic direction, solve their own problems, make their own choices, and initiate their own actions to enhance their quality of life. Such communities possess all of the characteristics described at Figure 1. People feel safe, they are willing to engage with others, they are aware, they value participation, they are capable, they know how to build and apply their capacity, they enthusiastically collaborate, and they are self-reliant. Cultural, psychological, physical, social, economic and other strengths are all much in evidence. These are the markers of a strong or sustainable community.

For me the construction of this ladder has been an inductive process because it is influenced by what I have learnt from my involvement in various studies such as the national evaluation of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (Scougall, 2007) and the Munjurla Study of the Tjurabalan-Kutjungka COAG Trail in the East Kimberley (Lingiari Foundation, 2004). But the development of the Ladder also reflects a deductive approach because it draws on ideas and concepts from the literature of social capital, capacity building, governance, early intervention and prevention. Broadly this literature describes how sound social investments can strengthen communities (Rogers et al, 2004; Funnell et al, 2004; Libesman, 2004; House of Representatives, 2004; Fish, 2002; Falk, 2002; OECD, 2001a; Cullen & Whiteford, 2001; Woolcock, 2001; Veenstra, 2001; Gauntlett et al, 2001; Collier, 1998; Leeder, 1998; Brehm & Rahn, 1997; Cox, 1995, Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2002; Scott, 2000; Hunter, 2007b: 24). It is important to note, however, that very little of the literature about 'what works' is specific

to Indigenous Australia (see Sullivan, 2006) and there is scepticism about some of the claims that have been made (see DeFilippis, 2001). This gives cause to be cautious.

The ultimate test of the model I have presented here is not whether or not it 'sounds right' (logical), but rather whether or not it has the explanatory power to help make sense of where Indigenous communities are now at and assist them to find a way forward. At present understandings of the phenomena of Indigenous community strength are still very much in their infancy.

Some Useful Applications of the Ladder

The Ladder has at least three practical applications; as a communication device, as an aid to sustainability assessment and as a guide to sustainability strategy. Each is considered in turn.

Firstly, like all outcome hierarchies, the ladder aids communication by making a complex process easier to understand. On a single page it is possible to set out the logic of how the process of strengthening communities is understood to work. In this way it is possible to bring different understandings and assumptions to the fore (Funnell, 1997: 15). For there are always multiple conceptions, each reflecting the different values, interests, perspectives, training and understandings of stakeholders (Kushner, 2002: 17). For instance a criminological perspective would appear to underpin the current emergency intervention in the NT (Hunter, 2007b: 12). Furthermore, if the nature of Indigenous disadvantage is different from the mainstream experience (see Hunter, 2007a&b), then such differences ought to be reflected in the outcome hierarchies that are constructed. The ladder is a deliberate attempt to make explicit and take account of the uniquely disadvantaged starting position of many Indigenous communities on the path to a more sustainable future.

The ladder reflects an understanding that many Indigenous communities are not yet ready to meaningfully engage, participate and collaborate. Rather it recognises that the journey to sustainability might well begin in a far away place with people's need to firstly heal from trauma and re-build trusting inter-personal relationships (see for example Ozols, 2001). Colonised and disposed people are especially prone to turn the loss of meaning and the pain in their lives inwards in self-destructive behaviours. Recognition of the reality of post-traumatic stress and the need to 'heal' from such experiences came sharply into focus in the 'Bringing Them Back Home' report (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997), in Western Australia's 'Gordon Inquiry' (2002) and, most recently, in the 'Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle Little Children are Sacred' report (Wild & Andersen, 2007). This body of work highlights how pain, distress, despair and social alienation too often find expression in destructive forms of social behaviour. It also highlights the degree to which security anxieties restrict the life choices of many Indigenous people.

The ladder is built on a premise that healthy relationships based on empathy, trust and rapport are vital to building strong communities. At their core many of the problems that beset Indigenous people are about the quality of relationships. Bonds that have always held community members together have been damaged by substance misuse and violence

(including family violence, child abuse and self harm). In many instances relationships between various Indigenous interests such as traditional owners, language groups and residents now need to be reconciled to ensure that all of their rights are respected and they can once again live together in harmony. Relationships between communities and governments have been damaged by an historic pattern of unequal power relations and difficulties associated with communicating effectively across linguistic and cultural divides. And for the most part constructive relationships between communities and the philanthropic and business sectors of mainstream Australia are still yet to be built (notwithstanding some progress). The logic of the ladder is that repairing and nurturing all of these relationships is a pre-requisite to stronger communities.

Secondly the ladder may contribute to the development of social indicators that seek to measure progress over time within a particular context (OECD, 2001b; Stone & Hughes, 2002). Without them how would we know whether or not Indigenous communities were becoming stronger? (Mark, 2001). The Indigenous sector is still pretty much in the formative stages when it comes to the development of criteria of community strength and methodologies. The ladder helps in this respect because it breaks the process of strengthening communities into a series of interim steps that can be more easily measured. Each step is a benchmark against which progress might be evaluated and the effectiveness of strategies gauged.

Figure 2 (below) provides some examples of possible indicators of Indigenous community strength. In this paper I have chosen to focus on measuring 'lower order' outcomes relating to safety, trust and engagement. In a situation where a community is becoming safer, a trend decline in violent crime and related hospital admissions through casualty might be expected. A high incidence of violence is indicative of poor quality relationships, particularly where family violence and child abuse are concerned. A decline in substance abuse, a social practice closely linked to violence, would also be expected. A safer community would also be less prone to preventable environmental diseases. Life expectancy would be on the increase. It might also be expected that increasing levels of awareness and social engagement would be reflected in improved school attendance and reduced truancy. Examples of possible indicators of Indigenous community strength are set out in Figure 2. Some writers have developed useful criteria to guide the design of 'good' indicators (Pope & Grace, 2006; Armstrong and Francis, 2003; Rossi and Gilmartin, 1980).

Figure 2: Some Indicators of Indigenous Community Strength

<p><u>Indicators of Higher Order Outcomes (such as partnership, self reliance)</u></p> <p>No. of partnerships No. of negotiated regional agreements Diversity of funding sources No. of viable Indigenous businesses Home ownership</p> <p><u>Indicators of Middle Order Outcomes (such as capability, participation)</u></p> <p>Educational achievement levels (primary, secondary, tertiary and vocational) % of pop. with qualifications Labour force participation rate</p> <p><u>Indicators of Lower Order Outcomes (such as safety, engagement, awareness)</u></p> <p>Literacy rates (reading, writing and computer) 'Life skills' development e.g. number with driver's licences School attendance, truancy and retention rates Contact with the legal system e.g. incidence of violence Mortality, morbidity, incidence of preventable disease Admissions to casualty due to violence</p>
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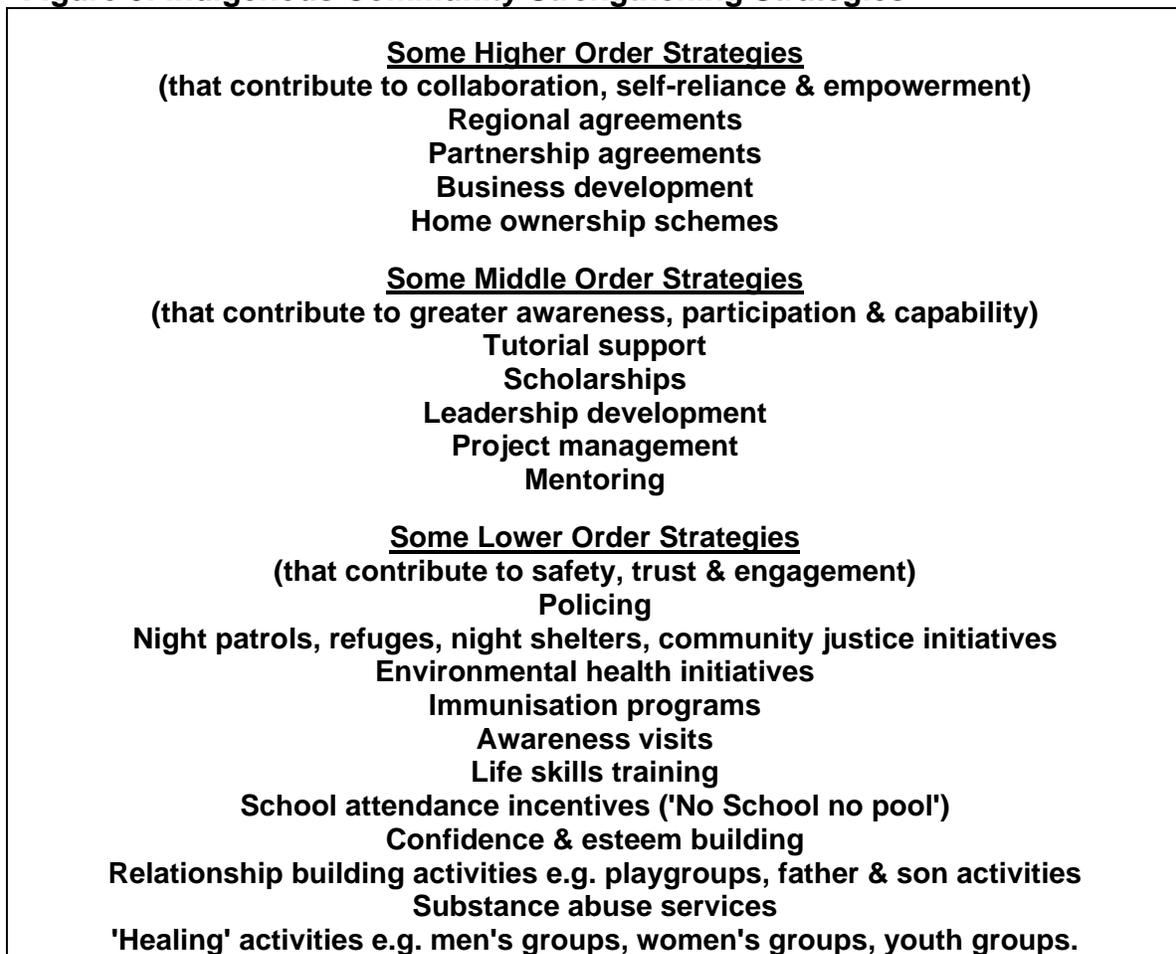
Thirdly, the ladder is meant to serve as a guide to effective strategy. It is already the case that every two years the Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (SCRGSP, 2007) reports against a set of Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage (OID) indicators. However, a criticism is that *"These reports do not contain any policy recommendations merely focus on collecting and publishing better statistics on Indigenous disadvantage"* (Hunter, 2007b: 2). Hunter (2007b:2) notes that *"evidence can only be interpreted using theoretical models"* and reflects that the OID framework does not give policy makers a good sense of the interaction between variables. *"Should policy makers give more weight to certain indicators because they are further back or more prominent in a causal chain?"* (Hunter, 2007b: 11 - 12).

Again I think that the ladder might help in this regard because it enables explicit links to be drawn between desired outcomes and the strategies necessary to achieve them. Strategies that strengthen Indigenous communities can be conceptualised as working on the transition points between each of the steps on the Ladder outlined at Figure 1. They can be thought of as 'levers' that enable people to lift themselves from one rung of the ladder to the next. Breaking Indigenous community strength down into a series of nine measurable outcomes, as shown in Figure 1, provides a better understanding of which policy levers to pull. Figure 3 (below) illustrates the kinds of strategies that might be appropriate at different stages of sustainable community development.

The appropriate strategies to employ in any particular instance will vary depending on local circumstances. In places where the indicators suggest that safety and social cohesion are the main issues, an emphasis on policing and environmental health initiatives would seem warranted. Arguably much of the early community strengthening work also needs to be about building inter-personal trust and self-confidence. This can be enhanced by strategies that are effective in repairing relationships between generations,

families, genders and language groups. But it may be that, in a community positioned much higher up the ladder, it is strategies that deliver better access to education, employment and training that are required. Arguably one reason why some strategies don't work is simply that they are not well calibrated to where a particular community 'is at'. For example I would posit that 'higher order' strategies such as negotiated agreements and enterprise development are ill matched to the more immediate needs of some communities.

Figure 3: Indigenous Community Strengthening Strategies



An understanding of Indigenous sustainability set out in terms of multiple sequential steps makes it clear that community building is necessarily a long haul and that, first and foremost, it is necessary to deal with people's trauma, insecurity and disengagement. Re-building relationships of trust is especially crucial. The literature gives no good reason to expect that outcomes commensurate with the upper rungs of the ladder can ever be reached in the short to medium term. Rather a substantial, holistic and sustained long-term commitment to community building is required (see Cullen & Whiteford, 2001: 13). The implication is that policy-makers need to end their pre-occupation with finding 'silver bullets' (quick fixes) - such as more houses or more police - and strive for more holistic, broadly based, sustained and longer-term responses.

Conclusion

This paper has used a 'ladder' (outcome hierarchy) to 'map' a pathway (strategic direction) to better sustain life in the 'desert' (remote communities). It has set out a simple theoretical model of the steps to Indigenous community strength, one that can inform better practice and serve as an aid to the development of useful strategies and indicators. But my purpose here has not been to persuade the reader that my conception is right. Rather it has been to demonstrate how an outcome hierarchy framework can be a valuable tool in laying bare underlying assumptions and causal logic, thereby providing a 'common language' (framework) for discussing different understandings of the pathways to Indigenous community strength.

In a policy field like Indigenous affairs, pervaded as it is by the dismal sense that many initiatives simply 'don't work', tools are desperately needed to guide more strategic action (Hunter, 2007b: 30). The ladder is an analytical tool that can assist in determining how to act strategically in a particular instance. My conclusion is that the outcome hierarchy technique is a much needed and under utilised technique in Indigenous affairs.

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