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Using Visual Outcome Mapping for Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation

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Abstract

World Vision Australia, in a participatory monitoring and evaluation project with Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) providers, has used an adapted Outcome Mapping process. The approach, which is outlined in this paper, supported us to better understand the work of each provider, whilst also supporting participation, learning and reflection. Our adaptation of this approach, using images and language tailored to the context of our project, has been important for making monitoring and evaluation accessible, participatory and interactive. It allowed us to move away from technical evaluation language or formal documents, and allowed people to describe their understandings of successful project outcomes using language that is meaningful to them.

Introduction

This paper examines the use of a modified Outcome Mapping approach using visual tools and everyday language, in a remote Indigenous community development context in Australia. World Vision Australia has used this approach with CDEP (Community Development Employment Projects) providers in a participatory monitoring and evaluation project funded by the federal Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA).

Background

The Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) Scheme

The CDEP (Community Development Employment Projects) scheme operates in remote and very remote locations across every State and Territory in Australia except Victoria and the ACT. CDEP is a key Indigenous employment program of the Australian Government, with the aim of providing Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander job seekers with appropriate access to training and support in order to move into sustainable employment, whilst improving the social and economic wellbeing of their communities¹. In 2011 there were 81 CDEP providers receiving funding from the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA).

¹ Following an announcement by the Australian Government on 26 April 2012, the CDEP program, together with the three other programs currently delivering employment and participation services and community development in remote Australia (Jobs Services Australia, Disability Employment Services, and the Indigenous Employment Program) will be rolled into a new integrated service called the Remote Jobs and Communities Program.
(<http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/indigenous/progserv/families/cdep/Pages/default.aspx>).

World Vision Australia – FaHCSIA CDEP Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation Project (2011-13)

In June 2011, the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) contracted World Vision Australia (WVA) to work together with five CDEP providers and their respective Indigenous Coordination Centre (ICC) colleagues on a participatory monitoring and evaluation project. The aim of the project is for the selected CDEP providers to develop participatory approaches to monitoring and evaluation that are suitable for their context and reflect their priorities. The focus and parameters for monitoring and evaluation activities, and the identification of preferred data collection methods in this project are determined by the providers themselves. WVA's role is to provide training and technical support in the creation of monitoring and evaluation processes that meet the needs of each provider and their primary stakeholders.

The Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) and the CDEP providers involved in the program have all emphasised the importance of gathering further qualitative information about CDEP and the impact of programs at an individual, family and community level. Current systems for CDEP reporting place a strong emphasis on reporting against three key performance indicators (KPIs): the number of people who move into non-CDEP employment; the number of people who move into training; and the quality of the service. While these KPIs are important for monitoring and maintaining contract compliance, these indicators can provide only limited information for the purposes of identifying the range of outcomes being achieved and the approaches that are working or not, in order to inform policy and program changes at either the local or federal level.

Understanding the providers and their context, and setting up the participatory approach

CDEP providers include a mix of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, local councils, private corporations and training centres. The projects, priorities, operating environment, skills, experience, and resources vary amongst providers and a “one size fits all” approach was likely to fall short of meeting the training and support needs of each provider. The initial stages of the project required that we understood the work of each of the providers, what they want to accomplish, with whom and how; whilst using processes that would reinforce participation, and establish our role as facilitators and partners, rather than external evaluators or experts. This would then form the basis for selecting, with providers, the monitoring and evaluation methodologies and tools they wanted to use.

Central to this phase of the project were four main considerations. A primary objective of the project was that it would be participatory and would **support both participation and learning** in monitoring and evaluation. Related to this was the fact that the language of monitoring and evaluation can be daunting and exclusive, so we needed to **find a common language for describing program theory** that was meaningful to everyone.

Thirdly, ‘outcomes’ in the CDEP program are described in terms of employment placements, which tend to be long term. A focus on these in reporting means that providers cannot easily capture the progress towards outcomes, nor the experiences of CDEP participants and communities. For this reason, we needed a method that recognised **intermediate outcomes and progress towards the desired change, and that identified the actors and relationships involved.**

The final consideration was that in describing the program theory, we wanted to reflect the complexity of the development process; without focusing too heavily on the problems or challenges that need to be addressed in remote employment. Informed by a combination of action research (Dick 2002), utilisation-focused evaluation (Patton 2008) and strengths-based or appreciative inquiry approaches (Preskill and Catsambas 2006), as well as Outcome Mapping principles, we wanted to focus the monitoring and evaluation on obtaining **feedback and results from within a program’s “sphere of influence”**(Earl, Carden et al. 2001); **linked to what providers could take action on, or influence.**

Using and adapting Outcome Mapping

Given the considerations outlined above, we selected the International Development Research Centre’s (IDRC) Outcome Mapping (Earl, Carden et al. 2001) approach as a key activity in the

assessment phase of our project. Outcome Mapping facilitates a conversation about what people are working towards, what will indicate progress towards their goal, and the processes, strategies and relationships involved. Its focus on relationships and behaviour change, underpinned by an appreciation of the complexity and dynamism of social change, makes it well suited to the evaluation of community development programs. Outcome mapping offers an alternative to more traditional monitoring and evaluation frameworks through the way in which it assesses the contributions of a program rather than attempting to attribute linear cause and effect relationships; and its focus on people and changes that are within an organisation's 'sphere of influence' (Earl, Carden et al. 2001).

Rather than use the Outcome Mapping approach in its entirety, we selected the 'Intentional Design' stage (see Figure 1 below) to support our work with CDEP providers in the assessment phase of our project. As many others have done (Smith, Mauremootoo et al. 2012), we also made a number of adaptations to the Intentional Design approach defined in Outcome Mapping. The approach was also facilitated differently and to some extent, further modified at each site. Depending on the number of people involved, their interest and enthusiasm, their preferred working and communication styles, and time limitations, the approach was varied slightly in each of the four sites. This process of constant modification and adaptation was an important factor determining the success of the activity.

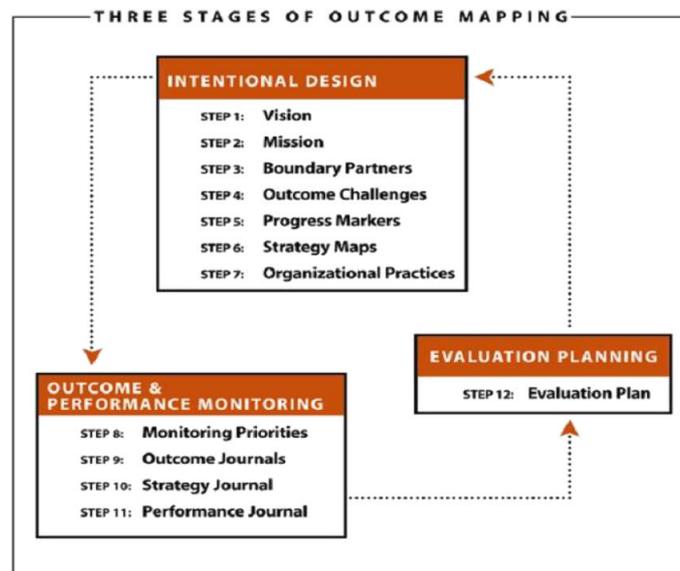


Figure 1. The Stages of Outcome Mapping (Earl, Carden et al. 2001)

Conversations with providers had highlighted their preference for more oral and visual methods for working, so, influenced by the idea of using road maps to visually represent a journey towards development goals (for example, Little Fish 2007) we set up the Outcome Mapping activity as a road map – where various partners were represented by different vehicles, each on their own road towards success, with three signposts along the way for the 'progress markers' – of what they would 'expect to see', 'like to see' and 'love to see', and fuel pumps by each signpost; for the strategies or support that needed to be 'put in' at each stage of the journey, to move further along towards the goals (see Figure 2 below).

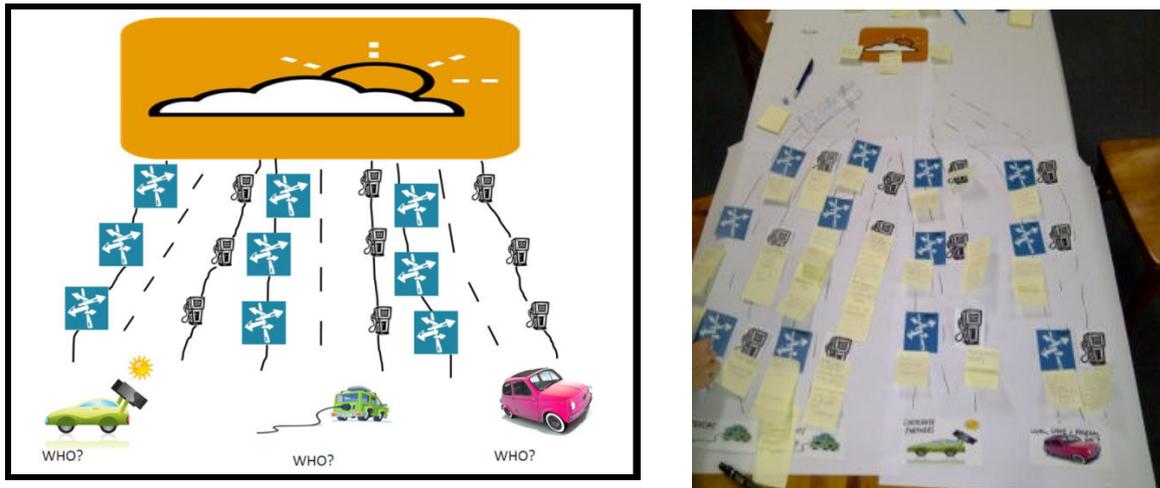


Figure 2. Visual tools used for the 'Outcome Map'

Rather than defining an agreed vision, mission and outcome statements, which we felt would create a focus on precise wording of statements that conflict with our aims for participation, we used visioning activities to brainstorm, discuss and document the multiple understandings of the program vision and mission (Figure 3). Likewise, we omitted creating agreed 'outcome challenge statements'. We still sought to describe "how the behaviour, relationships, activities, or actions of an individual, group, or institution will change if the program is extremely successful" (Earl, Carden et al. 2001), but rather than create a single statement summarising the ideal outcome for each stakeholder group (boundary partner), we focused instead on the progress markers; what providers would 'expect to see', 'like to see' and 'love to see' for the various stakeholder groups. In this way, we were still able to effectively describe the short and intermediate-term outcomes leading towards bigger outcomes; which sat at the 'love to see' level.



Figure 3. Brainstorming for the vision and mission

Instead of a separate activity for describing the strategies and organisational practices required to effect the desired behaviour change outcomes (Steps 6 and 7), we placed the provider on the map, together with the other 'boundary partners'. Progress markers were articulated for the provider organisation, and strategies (at the fuel pumps) were identified for all progress markers – both those for the provider and for other groups. In this way, the providers joined their 'boundary partners' on the journey towards "success" and strategies were placed at each progress level; effectively describing the multiple supports required at different stages of progress (rather than typical representations in program logics or outcome maps, of a single level of activities giving rise to a whole chain of results).

What we found

We found the modified Outcome Mapping activity facilitated input from a wide range of staff, was understood and owned by providers, and served to support learning and insight within teams of staff or across stakeholders, as well as set up a participatory dynamic within the project and in our

relationships with providers. The process also provided a range of benefits and challenges and CDEP providers also tested the strengths and weaknesses of this process.

Benefits, what worked well

We found that participants quickly picked up on the language of 'expect to see', 'like to see', 'love to see', the images of the road, the concept of each group being on a journey, and the fuel pump to represent 'inputs', strategies or support required to continue the progress. In many instances staff assumed ownership of the Outcome Mapping process, and in some cases reinterpreted the terms again as they explained the process to other staff members. This ownership of the activity assisted in setting up a basis for equal and collaborative relationships with the providers, that went some way towards countering the initially assumed 'researcher – informant' relationships or roles.

The way we introduced and facilitated the Outcome Mapping activity was also critical to it being accessible. We explained the components of the activity at the beginning, and then let staff re-explain the process as others joined. In instances where we captured the contributions of participants, these were recorded in the way they had been described, with their language and terms respected. The identification of boundary partners, progress markers and strategies was up to the group. Sometimes we asked questions to better understand these choices, but we did not believe it was our role to challenge or correct. In this way, we sought to act as facilitators and partners, rather than experts who had the answers, or would validate the ideas and information.

The modified Outcome Mapping approach we used also supported a conversation that drew on the knowledge, skills and experience of a range of staff; a conversation that was in many ways more valuable than the information or the particular map it produced. Staff members and stakeholders were able to share multiple versions of the development journey and in some instances, management gleaned new insight into the ideas, experience and opinions of their staff; for example, a CEO of one provider organisation commented that it "was useful for me to see what my staff were thinking about the new project". In other situations gaps in knowledge or differences of opinion emerged, sometimes triggering further discussion and debate. Where multiple stakeholders were involved in the process, the activity also provided an opportunity to share and discuss different expectations or understandings about a new project:

"We didn't really know that much about the actual project used for the Outcome Mapping activity, but listening to the project staff talk about their work as they went through this activity helped improve our understanding. We think this would be really useful process to help us review and reflect on our other projects we manage" CEO, CDEP provider organisation.

In some ways, the value of using a modified Outcome Mapping approach to determine the logic of a program was also that it was new and unfamiliar. The process asked for different information and therefore required people to move away from previously articulated program outcomes and activities and to think critically about what they hope to achieve, what will indicate progress and what strategies need to be in place to support this. This supported fresh thinking as well as articulation of providers' rich experience and knowledge of what works in practice, what the factors are affecting change, what is realistic and what is needed along the way towards getting employment outcomes – knowledge that is not captured in the current quantitative, indicator-based reporting system.

Some of the CDEP providers also indicated that they could further modify the language and tools themselves to best suit their operating context and for future use in design work and planning. One of the managers observed:

"I think using the Outcome Mapping process is worthwhile, as it can help us identify what we hope to achieve in the short, intermediate and longer time frames. I will change some of the pictures, but I think I can use this for planning activities in the communities."

Challenges and limitations

One of the main challenges of the modified approach outlined above was managing the information and the size of the map. While the process is difficult if there are too few people or organisations/boundary partners present and involved in the activity, too many people involved also created challenges, and heightened the need for skilled facilitation of the activity. The maps and

accompanying discussion therefore represented varying levels of input from relevant actors and were stronger or weaker depending on this input.

Our approach relied on the group doing the interrogation and improvement of one another's ideas. Our desire not to impose our understandings, and to allow participants in the activity to determine what went into the map, and at what level, meant that sometimes all contributions were included, without critique that could have identified whether desired outcomes or strategies were realistic. For example, in some instances, the progress markers identified at the 'expect to see' level may have been more intermediate or longer term outcomes, and some of the strategies included may not have been feasible.

We also note that while the activity was valuable at the time, both for our understanding and for fruitful reflection and discussion for CDEP providers, we do not suggest that this has created extensive changes in provider practice or planning.

Implications for evaluation practice

Effective participatory evaluation approaches require skilled adaptation of tools and methods that are appropriate to context. Our use of a modified Outcome Mapping process has demonstrated that simply reconsidering the language we use and how this can include or exclude people can seriously influence whether a method is extractive or participatory. Establishing a common language in monitoring and evaluation impacts powerfully on the formation of partnerships as opposed to "teacher-student", "expert-beginner" or "evaluator-informant" relationships and can significantly influence the quality and extent of participation.

The use of visual tools and maps also helped generate interest from people not usually involved in program planning or strategy, and helped facilitate conversations with staff across the organisation. By adapting tools and methods to make them more widely accessible, participation across an organisation can be better supported, thereby revealing divergent ideas and improved group understanding.

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