

Participatory evaluation is the Sea Eagle: looking “long way wide eyed”: Building an evaluative culture in remote Aboriginal and urban contexts using participatory and developmental approaches

Presenters:

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Abstract

The Federally funded Communities for Children (C4C) program functions as a brokerage model where the majority of the funding is held by the Facilitating Partner for distribution to contracted service providers (Community Partners) to deliver a range of community determined activities. The mini workshop shared the developmental and participatory evaluation strategies of the Tiwi Islands and Palmerston C4C Program which has been fundamental to the success of the NT model over a five year period. This resulted in the Tiwi Islands and Palmerston C4C Program evaluation being awarded the 2012 AES Award for Excellence in Evaluation – Community Development.

The workshop shared the outcomes of embedding a participatory and developmental evaluation into a complex program in vastly different contexts and the results of building an evaluative culture. It used a world café type format and provided an opportunity for presenters and participants to discuss the range of strategies presented and the learnings that resulted from a long-term participatory evaluation process.

The title, “Participatory evaluation is the Sea Eagle: ...” describes a Tiwi Island Elder’s view of the evaluation approach, a “long term, wide eyed view”, adopted by the Red Cross and embedded into the community program.

The mini workshop incorporated three sessions:

1. Embedding evaluation as a community strengthening tool and good governance strategy;
2. Participatory evaluation methods and tools; and
3. Utilisation of evaluation findings and outcomes

Introduction

“We want to tell you how we used evaluation to change the program to make it a strong program that meets the needs of the Palmerston and Tiwi People”.

Since 2006 Australian Red Cross in the Northern Territory (ARC NT) has functioned as the Facilitating Partner for the Communities for Children (C4C) Program for Tiwi Islands and Palmerston in the Northern Territory (NT), working in two distinctly different and complex environments, one urban the other remote.

Palmerston is a satellite city situated 20 kilometres south of the Darwin CBD. Tiwi Islands are 80 kilometres north of Darwin by air or boat and have three townships, Wurrumiyanga (formerly known as Nuigu) on Bathurst Islands and two small communities in Pirlangimpi and Milikapiti on Melville Island.

The role of the C4C Facilitating Partner is to contract local service providers (Community Partners) to deliver family support programs for families with children aged 0-12.

To order to understand, work through and address the complex target group differences, between 2010 and 2014, the ARC NT established a comprehensive participatory evaluation process for the Palmerston/Tiwi Islands C4C Program. The ARC NT contracted a consultant evaluator to work with them for four years to:

- Conduct a participatory evaluation of the Palmerston/Tiwi Islands C4C Program.
- Build the evaluation capacity of Palmerston and Tiwi Local Committees and interested community members to participate in the evaluation.
- Build the evaluation capacity of C4C Community Partner (CP) agencies (the service providers) and support them develop effective evaluation plans and processes for their C4C Activities.¹

The ARC NT committed to funding evaluation and capacity development as two separate but integrated projects (jointly referred to as the C4C Participatory Evaluation).

The Evaluator worked with ARC, Local Committee members and CPs over a four-year period to build their capacity to participate in the design and conduct of meaningful evaluation and strengthen their capacity to use evaluative knowledge to guide decision-making. The C4C Participatory Evaluation Activities were inclusive, responsive and empowering, and provided clear and direct benefits to the C4C Program and Palmerston and Tiwi Island communities. The evaluation aimed to:

- increase key stakeholders' and community members' knowledge about C4C Participatory Activities;
- increase Local Committee members' and CPs' evaluation knowledge and skills;
- engage community members and community leaders as participants in, and advocates for, the evaluation;
- develop fit-for-purpose and strengths-based evaluation design, data collection and reporting processes;
- provide useful and timely information about quality and outcomes of C4C Activities;
- support decision making and strengthened governance of the C4C;
- improve the accountability to community members and quality of service delivery; and
- embed ongoing reflection and learning into the C4C.

¹ The term C4C Activities refer to the individual projects conducted by CPs in Palmerston and Tiwi Islands

Session 1: Embedding evaluation as a community strengthening tool and governance strategy

The Palmerston / Tiwi Islands C4C established a tri-committee governance structure that aimed to increase community voice and empowerment. Two local committees, one in Tiwi (with representatives from both islands) and one in Palmerston were established to oversee, evaluate and monitor those program activities at a local level. An overarching committee was established to make decisions for the whole program. The Local committees meet quarterly and nominated representatives from each local community committee attend the C4C Overarching Committee meetings which are also held quarterly.

When we began working in Palmerston and Tiwi Islands in 2006, Red Cross engaged an external evaluator towards the end of the first funding cycle who provided a range of recommendations that helped frame the organisation's thinking about the project design for the new funding period from 2009 onwards. At this same time Red Cross adopted a community development approach to working with communities, with a particular emphasis on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI)communities and a way of working that valued community voice and two-way learning systems that could transform locally generated knowledge into action. The Expression of Interest process to determine new and/ or renewed CP activity funding from the C4C funding pool, demonstrated a program commitment to two of the Red Cross seven fundamental principles: Neutrality and Impartiality.

This organisational context and new committee structure provided a ripe environment for the participatory evaluation project to begin to build on the knowledge and commitment that community members uniquely provide. This period was characterised by:

- a comprehensive 6 month period of community consultation.
- establishment of a transparent Expressions of Interest process to appoint and approve funded activities delivered by contracted Community Partners.
- creation of the new governance structure.
- engagement of an external evaluator to build committee and community member evaluation skills and work alongside them to conduct evaluations in their communities over a 4 year period.

employment of local people. In the Tiwi Islands, community engagement workers (called Nimarra Workers) were employed to provide a conduit for information to be shared between the Red Cross, the C4C Committees, Community Partners and the communities in which they live and work. They also supported the establishment of a range of locally identified activities.

The C4C governance structure was a means of increasing community voice and supporting community engagement and empowerment. The actual local people attending the meetings where important decisions were being made was determined by the Tiwi community – not by the composition of the governance structure. This was important. To make good community decisions, the Committee made sure the right people were at the table at the right time, and the local community had the power to determine who the right person for particular issues was.

Over time the Palmerston/Tiwi Islands C4C Program continued to develop a diverse group of committed local people who moved in and out the program as their interest and family

commitments allowed. This strategy was fundamental to ensuring cultural protocols were observed and honoured. The resulting “come and go” membership guaranteed community support and commitment and contributed to the C4C program achieving wide community ownership.

By widening the decision-making net more people came to understand and recognise best-practice program delivery by being involved in program evaluation and decision making in a hands-on manner. This process has led to community members being inspired to create their own more localised, more culturally relevant and appropriate family and children programs.

Session 2: Participatory evaluation tools and methods

Session 2 provided an overview of the evaluation strategies used for working ethically in cross-cultural contexts to ensure rigorous and credible evaluation that engages community members. The evaluator customised evaluation training, data collection and feedback methods to meet the different contexts and specific needs of the people living in Palmerston and the Tiwi Islands.

Establishing evaluation teams for different contexts

Evaluation teams were established in the three Tiwi communities (Wurrumiyanga, Pirlangimpi and Milikapiti) and included community Elders, Local Committee and interested community members. The Tiwi Islands evaluation teams had a fluid membership to accommodate local priorities and commitments.

The Palmerston evaluation team was made up of five young mothers who sat on the Palmerston Local Committee as community representatives. Several had been clients of the C4C Activities. They had no previous experience in governance or evaluation.

Evaluation capacity development and support

Considerable time was spent building evaluation capacity of key stakeholders in the Palmerston / Tiwi Islands C4C.

Evaluation sessions and workshops were held with:

- All Tiwi Islands communities prior to the first round of data collection. The key focus of the workshops was on building knowledge of the aims and objectives of the program, the role of evaluation in support program development and assessing outcomes and evaluation planning.
- Members of the Palmerston / Tiwi Islands C4C Overarching Committee to support their use of evaluation findings.²
- Prospective Community Partners to help them embed evaluation into their submissions for funding.
- Community Partners to support them develop their individual evaluation plans and data collection tools. Six monthly evaluation sessions were held for community partners to enable Community Partners to share their successes and challenges and outcomes. The sessions provided a forum for problem solving and guidance for completing the performance reports. The funding body project officers, ARC NT C4C managers, and representatives of the local committees also attended.
- Local evaluation teams and interested community members before each evaluation activity to build their evaluation skills and knowledge.
- Introduction to evaluation workshops were conducted in all Tiwi Islands communities prior to the first round of data collection. The key focus of the workshops was on building knowledge of the aims and objectives of the program, the role of evaluation in supporting program development and assessing outcomes, and evaluation planning.

² The Overarching Committee is the governance group for the Tiwi Palmerston C4C. It comprises the Chairs and key members of the Palmerston and Tiwi Islands Local Committees, representatives of government and non-government agencies and early childhood experts.

Participatory development of a monitoring and evaluation framework

A working group incorporating members of the joint and local committees, early education experts, the evaluator and ARC NT developed a monitoring and evaluation framework for the Program. A quality rubric was developed to guide the systematic determination of merit for the multiple aspects of the Program.

Participatory development of the quality rubric was beneficial for helping key stakeholders clearly articulate what the expected (but usually fuzzy) outcomes such as quality community engagement, community acceptance and ownership, cultural appropriateness, partnership, governance and participation actually involved.

Quality assurance and ethical conduct

An evaluation reference group, comprising early childhood experts, community and government representatives and the ARC NT, oversaw the quality of the evaluation design and provided technical advice and support to the evaluator.

Local Committee members provided leadership to ensure processes were culturally safe and useful.³ During data collection on the Tiwi Islands, the evaluation teams met with community leaders and Traditional Owners to brief them and receive guidance about local issues or cultural sensitivities. Evaluation training included a strong focus on ethical conduct of evaluation and confidentiality.

The evaluation was conducted in accordance with the standards of the Australasian Evaluation Society, the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) Guidelines and was consistent with *Keeping Research on Track: a guide for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples about health research ethics* (NHMRC 2005). Ethical practice included development and use of information sheets and consent forms for provision and use of information and photos.

Evaluation processes

Planning

Prior to each round of six monthly data collection, the evaluator met with members of the evaluation teams in their home communities to discuss the objectives of the evaluation activities, review what information we already had (from reports, personal involvement, community feedback etc), decide what more we needed to find out and plan the data collection activities. In Palmerston, we held monthly meetings during the first year and in the following years, we met before the data collection activities. In the Tiwi Islands, we held planning meetings before the six monthly data collection visits. These visits were timed to coincide with local committee meetings whenever possible.

Data collection methods and tools

The complex and complicated nature of the Palmerston / Tiwi Islands C4C Program and the multiple purposes of the evaluation (implementation, outcome and program improvement) necessitated a range of evaluation methods and a high degree of flexibility and responsiveness. Data quality was ensured by the use of a multiple data methods and sources.

³ Cultural safety is “an environment that is safe for people: where there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity, of who they are and what they need. It is about shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge and experience, of learning, living and working together with dignity and truly listening” Williams, 1999.

Participation of Local Committee members in all aspects of the evaluation ensured the evaluation activities were culturally safe and locally responsive and that the information collected was meaningful and useful.

Data collection methods were tailored to meet the particular contexts and included:

- Focussed group and individual discussions;
- Semi structured interviews with key informants from schools and health centres and with child care providers, community leaders, local councils, participants and their families;
- Participant workshops for parenting and children's programs;
- Quality review using the Ripple tool to assess progress against aspects of the quality rubric with local committees included rating and discussion with committees;
- Observation of C4C Activities;
- Expert panels (with community members, parents, grandparents as local experts);
- Community workshops and meetings to collect data and share information;
- On-line surveys;
- Sound practices workshops were held in the Tiwi Islands and in Palmerston for Community Partners to share successes and challenges and showcase their activities to other service providers and to enable community discussion;
- Group document review; and
- Rapid assessments guided by the quality rubric.

A number of data collection methods were designed specifically for the Palmerston and Tiwi Islands C4C. A highly interactive and enjoyable data collection workshop was developed to collect quality and outcome data from participants at the end of each Palmerston C4C Activity. The workshops were engaging, appropriate for participants with low literacy and low confidence and suitable for adults and children. At the end of each workshop, the Evaluation team sought feedback from informants about the appropriateness of the evaluation method.

The Ripple tool was used by members of the Palmerston and Tiwi Islands Local committees to review progress against the governance, community ownership, cultural appropriateness and partnerships aspects of the quality rubric. The quality rubric also guided the selection of content for the sound practices workshops.

Expert panels were convened to gain additional information about local C4C activities from community members, parents and grandparents. These were very useful for validating data collected through other means and enabling open and frank discussion about challenges and issues.

Data analysis strategies

Data analysis meetings were held immediately after each data collection activity to review findings, identify further action needed, and prepare to report. These sessions included Chairs or key members of the local committees so that they could prepare to report back to the Joint Committee meeting.

Reporting and feedback strategies

Timely feedback on evaluation findings was provided to informants and community members after each data collection activity. On the Tiwi Islands, feedback was provided during the data collection week.

Evaluation findings were discussed at local committee meetings. Local committee members and the evaluator reported the evaluation findings to the Overarching Committee meetings. As the participatory evaluation progressed, local committee members demonstrated increased confidence in speaking about evaluation findings and took on increasingly active advisory roles. As a result, the C4C Overarching Committee's decision-making processes were improved from hearing directly from the local evaluation teams.

Reporting strategies included:

- short, sharp verbal and written reports of key findings were provided to the local committee meetings;
- written and verbal reports on evaluation and capacity development activities and findings was provided to the Overarching Committee meetings; and
- posting of copies of evaluation reports, photos, on the Palmerston/Tiwi Islands C4C Wordpress blog.

Feedback strategies included:

- Community meetings to feedback findings at the end of the data collection period;
- Presentation of findings at service provider forums and meetings;
- Newsletters;
- Reports of evaluation data collection workshop feedback provided to C4C Activity participants; and
- Meetings with Community Partners to provide feedback on findings on their programs.

Session 3: Utilisation of evaluation findings and outcomes

The Red Cross approach to evaluation actively and fully involved members of the recipient communities as equal partners, at every stage of the research process - from the identification of key issues, to the inception of research proposals, through to the evaluation and dissemination of data and results. The evaluation created a bridge between Red Cross staff, evaluators and communities, through the use of shared knowledge and valuable experience.

This collaboration further lent itself to the development of culturally appropriate data collection methods, thus making the evaluation more effective and efficient. During the workshop, collaboration was described by a Local Tiwi woman, using the river as a metaphor to show how evaluation has been woven through all aspects of the program: from planning, to doing, to changing how programs are run. The river also symbolised the merging of the Western and local Tiwi culture as a necessary condition to supporting the two-way learning journey towards more localised family and children programs.

Outcomes for program governance

As described by Paulo Friere, a Brazilian pedagogue; “If the structure does not permit dialogue the structure must be changed”.

Embedding evaluation processes in the general capacity building of the tri-committee structure, the Palmerston/Tiwi Islands Communities for Children program was able to develop a diverse group of local people who came to:

- understand best-practice program delivery
- contribute to decisions around program quality and cultural relevance
- play an active role in identifying actual program benefits to local family program participants and sharing that information across the broader community
- support ongoing conversations about community aspirations.

Training committee members in evaluation principles and processes, monitoring indicators and interpretation of data showed members what to look for in a good program and showed ARC and funders what a good local program looks like. This strategy built a feeling of community program ownership and contributed to greater local understanding of the intended outcomes of planned Communities for Children activities.

The immediate and direct use of evaluation knowledge was congruent with reporting and decision making processes. It allowed Local Committee members involved in assessing program activities and services delivered to communities to present their findings to the Overarching Committee and advocate for change in approaches and/or activities.

A Local Committee member from Tiwi Islands, reflecting on her involvement with the program spoke of the importance of valuing governance structures used for generations:

I didn't think I knew enough information or even had the authority to speak by myself for my people, but now things have changed. We all like to come over to Darwin now for the C4C meetings. We usually have Tiwi people from both islands come. We hear about what is happening at Palmerston. We make decisions about how the money is spent and we need to not only think about what is good for Tiwi. We also need to think what is good for the Palmerston part of the C4C program too. We think of the C4C program as part of our family now and we all want to know how things are going and how we can make things better for families in Palmerston and in Tiwi.⁴

Having an evaluator working alongside community members and program staff in a reciprocal co-leaner relationship during each stage of the evaluation has been a catalyst in reforming underlying power structures between the organisation and the communities with which the project operated.

Evaluation has provided Red Cross and C4C committee members with an insight into community aspirations and has allowed for further inquiry as to how other non-represented community voices can be heard. It has broadened the organisational/ beneficiaries' ability to be influenced by a strong the local voice and program strategy changed accordingly.

⁴ Personal Communication, Alberta Puruntatameri, Tiwi Local Committee member since 2008, 11.09.2014

Outcomes for Community Partners

Embedding the program evaluation process into the operation model of the Program has enabled difficult conversations about service performance and the relevance/appropriateness of the activities, to be conducted between the funder/s and subcontracted agencies as the discussions are based on the local findings of the evaluation groups and the incorporation of multiple viewpoints.

We found that C4C Community Partners (CP's) who were disappointed that their funding applications were not supported by the decisions of the C4C Committees, recognised they had gained good learning from the C4C participatory evaluation mechanisms. These mechanisms provided the opportunity for program participants and program stakeholders to give direct feedback to program providers about program relevance, cultural appropriateness and value among other things. Community Partners' willingness and ability to work collaboratively with the evaluation teams resulted in a heightened understanding of program quality requirements, increased insights into community social practice and has resulted in improved service performance.

Community partners attending the workshop described how their involvement in ongoing evaluation and the regular sharing of successes, challenges and learnings with other C4C community partners resulted in stronger programs and led to an organisational rethinking about their own evaluation methods.⁵

A catalyst for innovation, change and community led service delivery.

The C4C participatory evaluation was developmental. It was an "investment in finding what works" and provided a *creative space for innovation*.⁶ It provided the ARC with a mechanism for looking for new ways of doing things and testing and reflecting on these with community members and service providers.

A case story: The Tiwi Islands Cultural Kids Activity

Between 2009-12, a number of Tiwi programs aimed at family and children's were endorsed by the Committees and were being delivered by various service providers. Committee and community members were involved in quarterly monitoring and evaluation activities to review these activities. Many of these programs were 'fly in fly out' activities. During the evaluation activities, local people would discuss what was working well and what wasn't, offering suggestions for the future. Often the evaluation would show that the 'fly in fly out' parenting activities were not working well and people were not attending regularly. The evaluation findings were then fed back to the service providers and committees. In further evaluations, community members articulated a desire to have more "Tiwi way programs" - activities based on preservation of language, culture, kinship and run by local people.

On the recommendation of the Tiwi Local Committee, and specifically the desire of a group of Elders within the Committee, the C4C team brought together our local Nimarra Workers and Strong women to design a pilot program aimed at teaching Tiwi kids culture and language. This became the Cultural Crèche Activity.

At the beginning, the Committee wanted this activity to include a representative from each skin group and employ young women. However when local staff and the Evaluator went back to regularly review how the

⁵ Mal Galbraith, Families and Schools Together (FAST), Personal Communication, AES 2014 Conference 11 September 2014, Darwin

⁶ According to Michael Quinn Patton this is a primary role of developmental evaluation. The quotes are from a number of You Tube interviews.

program was going, significant challenges were found with the employment of young women. These findings were again presented to the Committee and the staffing of the activity adapted to better suit the reality.

Local C4C staff continue to embed reflective practice in these weekly activities and have been instrumental in training newer staff, committee members and other Red Cross staff in good data collection and review methods. Regular planning sessions are held with the Strong Women of the community and the team of local workers, to ensure the Cultural Kids Activities retain cultural relevance and are fun and interesting for the kids.

In 2012, a group of Tiwi Elders identified the need to reconstitute a local Women's Group so that it had the administrative authority to take over responsibility for the local Women's Centre and transform it into a family focussed facility with the capacity to apply for funds to deliver activities such as the Cultural Kids Activity. The C4C Committee endorsed Red Cross to work with the women to help them undertake the task. In November 2013 this group became a fully constitutional Aboriginal organisation.

In 2013, the evaluation of the Wurrumiyanga Cultural Kids Activity resulted in its expansion to the other two communities of Tiwi Islands, with some modifications made based on additional localised feedback obtained during the programs six monthly data collection process.

A case story – Palmerston Parent Get Togethers

Between 2010 - 12, all C4C funded activities participated in six monthly evaluation reviews. During this time the program funded a mix of family and children's activities, including an innovative cluster model that brought three organisations together to deliver a holistic family support program. Following the departure of one of the organisation, the remaining partners made a decision to come to a natural close.

The Activity evaluation provided an opportunity to capture the learnings from the cluster model way of working. The participant evaluation workshops were identified as a good way to provide program participants with an independent assessment of the life of the activity and the learnings that were drawn from that shared experience.

The local evaluation team, comprising of two local community women and the Evaluator conducted an evaluation workshop with participants that focused on:

- program quality
- what the participants had learnt,
- how they were able to apply these learnings in their own lives
- changes resulting from participating in the Activity
- suggestions for future family support programs

Alongside this, the C4C team was compiling information collected from other participants of C4C funded activities and the knowledge gained from the newly created community engagement positions. A common theme began to surface; the need for a local respite arrangements that could support families with child care on an occasional basis.

These findings were presented to the C4C Overarching Committee for discussion. A Committee member working as a local researcher offered to undertake a literature review of international, national and local child care arrangements that could inform a locally constructed model.

A small working group was formed to progress the locally constructed model. The group considered legislative, program and community imperatives and priorities.

The group worked with the Evaluator and C4C staff to develop a program logic, their 'road map' to supporting parents care for their kids, with a focus on developing informal support networks whilst building parenting

capacity within a community of parent's, grandparents, carers and neighbours. In 2012, the Parent Get Together (PGT) activity was born.

A local couple with experience of caring for their own children and many others, convene the monthly parent get togethers .The get togethers are held in various spaces and places that are accessible, child friendly and able to support local and cross neighbourhood interactions. The Activity is supported by Palmerston Community Engagement Workers (another C4C Activity).

Participating parents are asked to provide suggestions on monthly activities and are supported to source local experts, including parents and agencies that offer a specific skill, development opportunities and/or childrens' activities relevant to the group.

Some of the PGT members have formed at sub group they have called "Being Amazing Mothers Earning fantastic Money" to focus on their personal careers and aspirations.

Sharing successful strategies with others

The Palmerston/Tiwi Islands participatory evaluation model has contributed to breaking down silos, enabled testing of program concepts across the two diverse locations and established an organisational/program/community level memory that means not always starting from scratch and, having to reinvent the wheel.

Use of the learnings from Tiwi Islands Nimarra Worker model resulted in the decision to introduce community development roles to Palmerston and created a framework for stronger consultation with Palmerston community members.

Sharing evaluation findings across the two locations resulted in a Tiwi Elder and grandmother, two young Tiwi women, their children and the program Evaluator visiting a Palmerston parenting activity that had reported good outcomes for local parents. The Palmerston Activity participants shared their experiences with the Tiwi group and the Tiwi group were able to speak with the staff delivering the program. Following the session, the Tiwi guests worked with the Evaluator to document their observations and conversations and specifically think about the elements of the activity they thought applicable to their own communities. This information was then provided back to the community and program staff to determine a way to establish a community run mums and bubs group on the Tiwi Islands.

Members of the Tiwi Local C4C Committee were invited to Galiwin'ku community to share their experiences and help them plan for a new Stronger Communities for Children Program (SCfC).

Over a five year journey, Red Cross as the C4C Tiwi Islands/Palmerston Facilitating Partner and our contracted suppliers (Community Partners) have been robustly challenged by community members to critically assess the value of some western construct program models being delivered in the NT.

As a result of this experience, ARC and others have learnt valuable lessons in understanding that quality program outcomes can be determined by the community, using community driven practice and measures when real decision-making is held in the hands of the community.