

More Than a Drop in the Ocean:

How Can Good Examples of Remote Services be Replicated?

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Working paper

79

2011



Curtin University



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Desert Knowledge CRC Working Paper Number 79

ISBN: 978 1 74158 182 6 (Web copy)

ISSN: 1833-7309

Citation

Fisher S and Rola-Rubzen MF. 2011. *More Than a Drop in the Ocean: How Can Good Examples of Remote Services be Replicated?* DKCRC Working Paper 79. Ninti One Limited, Alice Springs.

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Acknowledgements

We wish to acknowledge the assistance of Dr Maria V. Rodrigues in providing background research support to this paper.

The work reported in this publication was supported by funding from the Australian Government Cooperative Research Centres Program through the Desert Knowledge CRC. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of Desert Knowledge CRC or its Participants. The Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre (2003–2010) was an unincorporated joint venture with 28 partners whose mission was to develop and disseminate an understanding of sustainable living in remote desert environments, deliver enduring regional economies and livelihoods based on Desert Knowledge, and create the networks to market this knowledge in other desert lands.

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List of shortened forms

APHCRI	Australian Primary Health Care Research Institute
CDEP	Community Development Employment Project
DETA	Queensland Government Department of Education, Training and the Arts
DKCRC	Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre
NGO	non-government organisation
NT	Northern Territory
NTER	Northern Territory Emergency Response
PNG	Papua New Guinea
REC	Remote Enterprise Centre
SIHIP	Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program
SME	small to medium-sized enterprise
TAS	tailored advisory service
WA	Western Australia

Services and economic development

Services cover every aspect of life: housing, water, phones, power, roads, rubbish, health, education and most of the necessities of modern living. In remote settlements these services come from governments, Aboriginal organisations and private companies. Services are critical to economic development in remote settlements. Where services are poor, enterprises are held back by higher costs and lower efficiencies of doing business. A lack of services inhibits businesses from taking part in the wider economy and reduces competitiveness. Businesses are service consumers themselves and rely on services such as infrastructure, banking, power supply and telecommunications in order to be effective.

In remote Australia there are examples of remote services that have worked consistently well over an extended period of time. But too often they remain isolated cases. One factor in their success may have been the work of individuals in key positions. Perhaps a particular set of circumstances came together at the right place and time. Or maybe the role of government staff or local residents was critical. Using insights gained from the research of the Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre (DKCRC) and lessons from other countries, this paper will explore the key ingredients in improving remote services and consider how greater replication of good practice can be achieved. In particular, the paper will consider the challenge of moving from person-dependent to system-dependent practice and the potential impact of replicated service models on economic development.

Research conducted by the DKCRC has shown that systemic problems prevent improvements taking place in services over time. These problems include limited learning through evaluation, inadequate engagement between service providers and users, and a supply-side emphasis that hampers proper consideration of investment returns and performance incentives. While proven approaches exist for defining good practice and then replicating it, they are barely evident in the service sector in regional and remote Australia. There are a number of steps that practitioners, community residents, service providers and policy-makers need to follow to ensure that the difference that good examples make can be more than a drop in the ocean.

This paper has three sections. The first provides an introduction to the elements of effective services. The second reviews international experiences on scaling up successful projects and programs, comparing them with the context of remote and regional Australia and identifying the barriers to better scaling up. In the third section, proposals are developed for improving the current situation, with a focus on better ways to identify effective practice. Material cited in the paper largely comes from the research of the DKCRC and particularly the projects 'Desert Services that Work; demand-responsive approaches to desert settlements' and 'Desert BizTM: Supporting the emergence of small businesses in desert Australia'.

What makes a service effective?

The DKCRC, through its research on Desert Services that Work (lead partner the Centre for Appropriate Technology, or CAT), has developed insights on the key ingredients that make for effective services. These are described as the ‘service principles’ (Moran et al. 2009; DKCRC 2009) and are summarised below.

Principle 1: Quality and adequacy of supply

Whether for telephones, rubbish collection or the maintenance of water bores, service providers set out to deliver a high quality service that meets the needs of users. There are many reasons why the supply of services often falls short of these aims. They include the challenges of recruiting and retaining suitable staff, the physical demands of the desert environment on equipment and materials, difficulties in communication, and poor access to knowledge and information.

A critical principle of service delivery is that the quality of the service meets a standard that is appropriate for the local context and that the supply is adequate for local needs.

Principle 2: Supply of service is adaptable to local conditions affecting demand

It may be cost-effective for service providers to deliver standardised services, but local circumstances often call for a more adaptable and flexible approach. For example, where people are committed to living in a certain place and accept that its natural resources may be limited, then for providers to insist on urban water or energy standards may ultimately lead to unsustainable costs of living for remote area residents.

This principle calls for an informed understanding of the aspirations of local people and responsiveness to local conditions.

Principle 3: Clear decision points

It is simplistic to argue that more localised decision-making produces better results. After all, local people may not have the specialised knowledge and skills to make informed decisions. But there is plenty of evidence from research, in the Northern Territory and Western Australia in particular, that local organisations charged with service delivery often find themselves at the sharp end of a long supply chain over which they have little influence (Sullivan 2010; Elvin et al. 2010). When policy changes centrally (meaning at state, territory or federal level) it is local staff who interpret and explain the changes to their customers. Some agency staff have described themselves as experiencing waves of reform coming one after the other.

The principle here is about service systems incorporating well-defined decision points that are relevant for the kind of service being planned. For example, the location of a payphone may be an important decision in which local people need to be involved, but the actual decisions around the technical functioning of that service is a central rather than local matter. By contrast, the development of a ranger service will require a high level of local discussion and a series of decision points mapped out in advance.

Principle 4: Involvement of trusted outsiders and insiders

Where services are provided in English and with a heavy sprinkling of acronyms, technical jargon and official terms, desert dwellers often rely on outsiders to help interpret what is going on. DKCRC studies in Martu country in Western Australia, and also in western Queensland, have shown that local

organisations can help to bridge the gap (or span the boundary) between service providers and Aboriginal people (McGrath et al. 2010; Memmott 2010). This also applies to insiders. In the case of the PYKu Remote Transaction Centre Program, the employment of local (Anangu) people as staff has encouraged use of the service and enabled users to count on support from people who understand their perspective and their priorities (Tedmanson, in press).

Principle 5: Quality of interpersonal relationships across a service network

In small desert communities, relationships are important. Time is needed to build rapport and understanding between people. It is no coincidence that services perceived to be effective are often those in which people with an ability to anticipate local concerns, manage misunderstandings and communicate clearly are involved. The quality of the service is person-dependent rather than system-dependent. Fostering good relationships and putting the resources into maintaining them is critical to effective services.

Principle 6: Form of engagement between service providers and users is determined by function

The term ‘engagement’ is used here to describe the way in which providers and users of services communicate, negotiate and cooperate to ensure best outcomes. Research in different locations in desert Australia is producing insights on the form of engagement in different situations and the influences on it. Different forms of engagement suit different situations. Effective engagement is determined by the scope and nature of services. In examples such as housing maintenance, ongoing negotiation with residents about the maintenance regime is appropriate. In others, such as access to energy services, long-term agreements may be more suitable to local circumstances (Bushlight 2006).

Principle 7: Stability in the policy environment

Users of services become accustomed to the way they are delivered. When the system changes, people have to become used to new arrangements and learn how to gain the most benefit from them. Efficiency is often lost and the faith of service users becomes stretched, especially when the reasons for the change are determined centrally and are not apparent to them.

The DKCRC research team examined aspects of policy stability in its work at Ali Curung, NT, where the reform of local government and the effects of the Northern Territory Emergency Response led to a rapidly changing policy environment (Elvin 2009). The closure of the Law and Justice Program, which was widely perceived to be an effective service with strong community commitment behind it, is a good example of central policy change undermining confidence in services locally and is the subject of further commentary later in this paper. Conversely, the presence of mature local organisations and a low turnover of staff in key positions have enabled transitions from one policy to another to be managed effectively in other locations in which researchers are working, a signal of policy stability being overcome through clear local responses.

Principle 8: Service match to local needs and capacity

The concept of ‘demand-responsive’ services came from the experience of improved strategies around access to water during the 1990s (Black 1998). Demand-responsive services ensure that the capacity of a remote community to use a service for their particular needs is central to planning and investment.

Research by the DKCRC on the Ngaanyatjarra lands (Sullivan 2010) shows how a long-term vision for a settlement and the region within which it is located enables the supply chain of services to be better designed and orientated to goals to which residents themselves make a commitment. In this context, a key principle is that service development and implementation views both sides of the

supply–demand equation and avoids the pitfall of focusing only on better *delivery* of services as opposed to improved *access* to services for locally determined objectives.

More of what works (and less of what doesn't)

To most people with a passing knowledge of remote Australia, the principles of effective services described in the previous section are unsurprising. Yet poor performance of services is common, meaning that services do not always reach their intended users, users cannot get access to them, or the service delivered is different from that which was envisaged in the first place. Housing is a common example, well documented by programs such as Housing for Better Health (McPeake & Pholeros 2005) and through the more recent debates around the implementation of the Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program (SIHIP), on which more background research by DKCRC has been conducted (Porter 2009). Housing is the entry point for other services such as water and energy.

Examples of service failure are extensive across remote Australia. A case in point is the shortcomings in water quality and quantity in Dajarra, Queensland, which have been documented over several years, most recently through a video produced by Jimberella Cooperative members (DKCRC 2010). Initial findings from a recent study at Dajarra have shown a pattern of evaluations and assessments of the water problem that remain isolated and disconnected efforts that have led to no change (O'Rourke 2011). In the Western Desert and East Pilbara region in WA, despite the presence and the efforts of two major service providers from the government and mining sector, representation of local Martu people in the service system remains scant (McGrath et al. 2010).

Community investment in law and justice

On the other hand, there are many examples of services that are effective. They are reliable, timely and consistent. They deliver what is needed at a cost that is reasonable for a remote location. And they are a practical expression of many of the service principles described above. The Ali Curung Law and Justice Program is an example. It was originally developed as a Northern Territory Government response to the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody Enquiry of 1991. The enquiry made recommendations for states and territories to implement program initiatives that involved people in justice processes and to set up local programs that better understood Aboriginal customary law.

According to research carried out by the DKCRC (Wright, in press), the Ali Curung Law and Justice Program is considered by community members as a successful experience from which other services could learn. The life of the program was from 1998 until 2004, when it was closed following a decision on funding priorities by the NT Government. Its achievements are:

- The establishment of a safe house and night patrol services.
- Recognition of Aboriginal decision-making processes within court procedures.
- Establishment of processes of pre-court meetings and negotiations.
- Development of regional understandings of law and order.
- Increased capacity and skills of Aboriginal people in peer mentoring and support.
- Development of a strategy towards dealing with town camp violence and alcohol abuse.
- Reduced occurrences of domestic violence, assault and abuse in the Ali Curung community.

The Ali Curung Law and Order Plan, created in 1997, provides a framework for signatory NT Government departments and the Ali Curung community to work together towards improved law and justice outcomes. The work within the plan was a product of the ongoing relationship between the government and the community.

Strengthening store services

Another successful example is that of the company Outback Stores. Community stores play an important role in food availability for people living in remote areas. Often, community stores are the main and, sometimes, only source of food and other basic commodities needed by people living in communities and outstations. Unfortunately, many communities' stores are poorly serviced and only provide a limited range of products, including fresh food.

Outback Stores is a company that provides retail services to community stores in remote and very remote Aboriginal communities in Australia. It manages stores on behalf of Aboriginal communities. It was established in May 2006 in response to the need for viable stores that would meet the health and nutritional requirements of Aboriginal people. Currently, Outback Stores manages community stores in the Northern Territory, Western Australia and Queensland. The community stores offer a core range of products including groceries, dairy and frozen items, meat, fruits and vegetables, as well as household items and clothing. The company has a support office in Darwin. It also has an office in Alice Springs and a training centre in Berrimah, Northern Territory.

Research by the DKCRC Desert BizTM project (Ferguson & Rola-Rubzen 2009) showed that Outback Stores offers a model of successfully delivering a very important service in remote and very remote communities. It has improved food availability and food security in the communities involved in the study, enhanced health outcomes, increased awareness of healthy food, provided employment, and improved access to goods and services in communities, as well as providing support for the long-term sustainability of the community store as a business enterprise.

Outback Stores aims not only to establish the infrastructure of community stores but also to make them economically sustainable and become commercial hubs in remote communities. Outback Stores is a service provider for a fee. It charges community stores a relatively low fee at the rate of 4% of total sales. Being a non-profit organisation, it engages with communities and re-invests profits for the benefit of communities. It forms partnerships with Aboriginal communities in managing their stores, providing a whole suite of services, including training and development, in order to capacitate people in managing the stores.

Business-enabling services

Enterprise Connect is another case that offers positive insights into remote services. One of the challenges faced by desert small and medium enterprises (SMEs) or aspiring entrepreneurs is the lack of advisory support services, particularly in remote areas. In most cities or urban centres, small business development centres or small business development units are readily available, which contributes to the growth in the number of start-up businesses and the development in scope and size of existing businesses. Not so in remote areas. In fact, in many cases people who may have a sound idea for a business could not start because of lack of basic know-how.

Recently the Australian Government initiated the Remote Enterprise Centre (REC) as a way to respond to this issue. The REC is one of the six innovation centres under Enterprise Connect. Based in Alice Springs, REC provides advisory services to business located in remote areas. REC provides business advisers who are highly experienced and have expert knowledge in a wide range of industries. Other services provided by REC to SMEs are business reviews, workshops and briefings. Qualified businesses can also obtain tailored advisory service (TAS) (up to \$20,000). REC also runs innovative programs geared towards strengthening the linkages between researchers and businesses through their Researchers in Business program. While an analysis of the impact of the REC is not available at the time of publication, it is a positive step in improving the business-enabling environment in remote areas (Ferguson & Rola-Rubzen 2009).

Opening markets to competition

The experiences of countries that neighbour Australia are relevant to our thinking about remote area services. In the Philippines, telecommunications used to be a monopoly. To improve access by people the government introduced competition into the telecommunications industry. Private companies were encouraged to enter the market for mobile phone services, resulting in lower costs and increased access. What followed was an explosion of mobile phone users, with the Philippines becoming one of the highest per capita phone users in the Asia-Pacific region.

Governments also introduced competition into the telecommunications sector in some Pacific nations. Countries such as Tonga, Samoa, Palau, Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Vanuatu introduced competition. In all cases these reforms have resulted in improved access to communications services by the population and reduced the cost of telecommunications. For example, according to the Pacific Economic Survey (AusAID 2009), since the introduction of competition there has been a tremendous growth in the number of mobile phone subscribers – from about 100 000 in 2006 to about 1 million users in 2008 in PNG. In Vanuatu the number of mobile phone subscribers jumped from 20% to about 75% in a period of one year. This has been accompanied by a lowering of equipment cost as well the cost of calling. More importantly, it has improved access in remote and rural areas.

Bringing power back to the people

In Indonesia, improvements in access and the delivery of basic services have been attributed to three underlying principles: choice, participation and transparency (World Bank 2004). From a top-down approach to service delivery, which was deemed to be generally ineffective, a shift to a bottom-up approach was instigated. Infrastructure and water supply projects that were more participatory in nature were found to be more effective. Participation came in the form of providing people with the power to choose which project they most needed. This was accompanied by transparency and accountability. Despite encountering some problems, this approach was found to be mostly effective such that it was scaled up from about 40 villages in 1998 to more than 15 000 villages in 2002.

Given that successful case studies exist, the key question addressed by this paper is how effective examples be replicated or, to use a term common in the international development field, ‘scaled up’ to reach more people in more places.

Approaches to scaling up

The international development sector (sometimes shortened to the ‘aid sector’) has grappled with the challenges of scaling up the impact of successful programs for many years. The World Bank has devoted considerable effort to the subject, describing how ‘community-driven development boasts many islands of success, but these have not scaled-up to cover entire countries’ (Binswanger & Aiyar 2003, p. 2). This observation resonates with the experience of programs and services in remote Australia.

Internal strategic reviews by major non-government organisations, academic studies, seminars and workshops have produced an extensive literature on the subject. The most relevant to the setting of remote Australia come from research on international development programs conducted by Gillespie (2003) and Uvin et al. (2000). According to this research there are four ways in which organisations can scale up their impact; Gillespie calls them ‘quantitative’, ‘functional’, ‘political’ and ‘organisational’.

Quantitative scaling up occurs where a program or organisation increases its size or coverage. In our context, examples can be found where a service sets up in a regional centre such as Alice Springs and finds that clients come from Tennant Creek. It then decides to establish a presence in Tennant Creek and increases its client base and geographical reach.

Functional scaling up refers to an increase in the types of activities the organisation or program offers, meaning an increase in the range of services it offers. Uvin et al. further categorise ‘horizontal’ and ‘vertical’ ways of functional scaling up, the former referring to a diversification of services and the latter to provision of activities to complement primary services. For example, for vertical development they might add maintenance of water bores to a capital works program of installation. A good example of horizontal development is the development of services from the new PYKu Remote Transaction Centre Program in South Australia.

Political scaling up is when organisations begin to take part in advocacy and other activities that aim to change the social and institutional environment impacting their client base. This is common where a program, often run by a non-government organisation, builds communication activities into the work from the outset, collects data and then shares that with government as a means of encouraging uptake of the results or influences policy in a particular direction.

Organisational scaling up refers to the strengthening and stabilising of organisational functions, including improvements in management processes. It includes better financial viability through consultancies or subcontracting as well as the diversification of funders and links with other organisations. This is typical of the experience of many Aboriginal organisations established in the 1980s.

Further insight comes from the work of Binswanger and Aiyar (2003) who argue for the importance of decentralising control of service delivery. They advocate a number of strategies, including: providing technical assistance to local governments from an early stage of project development; ensuring that political, administrative, and fiscal components of decentralisation move together ‘in harmony’; devolving functional and then fiscal control to the lowest level; and engaging in training and capacity-building exercises to emphasise a ‘learning by doing’ approach (2003, p. 31).

But of course to stand a chance of successful scaling up, users and suppliers first need to be able to identify clearly what it is that they want to scale up. In a fragmented sector such as remote services in Australia – with three layers of government and the challenges of distance and limited access to information – this is easier said than done.

Replicating good examples: what holds us back?

There are a range of approaches to scaling up and replicating examples of effective programs. If these approaches are, to varying degrees, successful in other countries and settings, how can they work in remote Australia?

The good news is that when the four approaches described above (organisational, quantitative, functional and political) are considered against an Australian context it is clear that all of them can be found in the remote service sector in remote Australia. Many organisations increase their size and coverage and others increase the range of services they offer. Informing and influencing the direction of policy is a common activity. And many organisations become stronger over time, managing their activities more effectively and establishing a more viable long-term model of operations.

The problem is that these processes largely happen in isolated bubbles of activity. Too often, good practice is not articulated and its value is not recognised. As a result, the potential for replication is not realised and opportunities for systemic change are not identified. Overall, the wider benefits of good practice are not properly achieved (Dyer & Fisher 2009).

The particular conditions that exist in regional and remote Australia are important factors in the effectiveness or otherwise of services. The DKCRC developed an analysis of the ‘desert syndrome’ (Stafford Smith 2008) which describes key characteristics of deserts and their influence on new livelihoods and business opportunities for desert peoples, as well as the ability of settlements and

services to function well. But the conditions that prevail in remote Australia represent only part of the picture that has been built up on factors affecting service performance. Other influences come from systemic shortcomings in the service sector itself. These include poor practice in evaluation coupled with lack of transparency on performance, service design that almost entirely focuses on supply, underdeveloped processes of engagement with service users, and an absence of incentives. In the following sections of this paper, we will address each of these areas.

Supply-side fixations

Since services are so frequently defined by their budgets and the ability of providers to ‘get dollars out the door’ within a particular time period, it is little wonder that policy and practice remains overwhelmingly concerned with supply. After all, the supply of a service falls more within the bounds of management control than the messy and chaotic business of engagement with service users to achieve more demand-responsive services.

Supply side fixation hampers the improvement of services in three ways. It devalues the importance and the practice of evaluation, preventing learning from existing programs. It restricts the development of service models. And it hampers the location of services within longer-term planning for communities and regions. Services are implicitly considered a means of preventing or fixing a problem rather than a contribution to longer-term development goals in health, education and employment.

Studies of government initiatives on social inclusion point to the shortcomings of centralised planning of public services (Milburn 2009). It leads to standardised services delivered to users who are expected to act as passive recipients. In other countries, progressive governments are actively developing new models of user-led services to replace the provider-led approaches of the past (Milburn 2009). As ambitious as it sounds on paper, headway has been made in public policy in this area, especially through governments relinquishing decision-making control in favour of setting frameworks within which decentralised service arrangements are configured (Fitzpatrick 2009). There are certainly challenges for remote services in moving in this direction but firm steps can be taken with manageable risks and potentially far-reaching benefits.

Policy and practice shortcomings in evaluation

The experience of most people involved in services, either as providers or users, is that reviews and evaluations are usually an indication of an existing problem. Reviews are commissioned by the funders of a program in order to justify planned changes or they may be a precursor to restructuring or reallocation of resources elsewhere. Evaluations tend to be set-piece affairs which imply predetermined roles of the service provider as defendant and evaluator as probing investigator. Given such a limited policy framework for assessing service performance it is little wonder that practice in evaluating services is backward. While occasional high-level reviews do take place, such as the Performance Audit of Whole of Government Indigenous Service Delivery Arrangements (ANAO 2007), more nitty-gritty examinations of the impact of services and ways to improve them are almost entirely absent.

A vivid example of the problems inherent in much evaluation practice comes from the Australian Primary Health Care Research Institute (APHCRI), which reviewed 68 studies of primary health care models in mental health during 2006. Only 7% of this literature addressed consumer and patient health outcomes. The overwhelming focus was on the implementation of various models and the most common outcome measure was data on the process, and often the satisfaction of providers (Christensen et al. 2006). For studies of service effectiveness to concentrate mainly on the perceptions of the people delivering them is negligent to say the least.

In a separate exercise, APHCRI reviewed almost 600 articles in newspapers, magazines, on radio programs and television on mental health, finding that the greatest emphasis was on budgets. ‘Winners all round in \$2bn spree’ from the *Age* at the end of May 2006 is typical of these (Christensen et al. 2006). Very few stories examined how the mental health funding might be spent and what the results of the services are intended to be. The emphasis is the same in the remote services sector. Recent coverage of housing reform in the Northern Territory was all about the dollars and said little about the rationale for the planning, consultation and design phase of the Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program (SIHIP) described in the project documentation and in studies of the implementation (Porter 2009). Public administration of services focuses on ‘tightening ever more restrictively procedures for accounting solely along the lines of the disbursement of public money’ (Sullivan 2009, p. 66). This comes at the expense of accountability arrangements that emphasise results, performance and improvement.

When evaluation practice emphasises compliance with supply-side requirements alone a whole perspective is overlooked since only the delivery of the service is evaluated. There is little assessment of achievements by and for users of services and the voices of service users are rarely heard. Effective service evaluation would enable the full picture to be painted, with pointers for improvement and lessons for future practice identified. And yet evaluation is too often seen as a mystical art that is threatening at best and disruptive at worst. It is something that funders ‘do to us’ and a reason to put up defences. Standardised and simplified approaches to service evaluation that are established as part of ongoing monitoring and evaluation practice would open opportunities for replication that are currently stifled.

Therefore a change in thinking is needed in this area. Evaluations should not be seen as a ‘blame game’ but rather as a tool for finding out what works and learning on how best to improve delivery of services. The international development community provides us with some pointers to improved practice in remote Australia. The World Bank has an evaluation unit that monitors and evaluates projects, with the main focus of learning from the experience and applying the learnings for continuous improvement and greater development impact. Unicef – and development organisations such as the Canadian International Development Agency, AusAID, Swedish International Development Agency and USAID – have followed suit. Such emphasis on evaluations for improvement can play a critical role in bringing about a change in thinking on the role of evaluations to increase development effectiveness.

In this context, the commitment made in the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Service Delivery signed by the Council of Australian Governments in December 2008 to an accountability principle that ‘programs and services should have regular and transparent performance monitoring, review and evaluation’ (COAG 2008, C-4) is welcome. An important emphasis is on ‘evaluating programs and services from multiple perspectives including from the client, Indigenous communities and government perspectives and incorporating lessons into future program and services design’ (COAG 2008, C-4).

Opacity where transparency should be

Where evaluations do take place, information on their findings is rarely available outside the organisation that was evaluated and the records of its funding agency. The lack of transparency around evaluation means that service users cannot easily find out how their services measure up. They are once again relegated to the role of passive recipient of services rather than informed chooser. In remote Australia, this shortcoming is exacerbated by the absence of effective consumer groups that are able to represent the interests of service users. While industry and government is able to count on peak bodies, consumers are often not. By contrast, an advantage for Aboriginal people in remote areas is that local representative bodies do exist, including land councils and community councils. But they rarely see their role as advocating for transparency in service delivery arrangements or being engaged in monitoring of service results.

The Australian National Audit Office, in assessing whole-of-government arrangements for Indigenous service delivery, concluded that ‘Overall, performance information enabling the measurement of an individual department’s contribution to whole-of-government initiatives is either absent or poorly developed’ (ANAO 2007, p. 84). It went on to recommend that ‘at a minimum, participating departments identify their individual contribution to achieving improvements ... and collectively settle an appropriate model to present public information on the performance of Australian Government departments’ (ANAO 2007, p.85). This aspiration, along with the principles of the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Service Delivery, needs to be met and extended to the project and program level. The problem is often the tortuous path of translating policy aspirations into practical change.

In summary, our argument is that the open availability of summary evaluations within a culture that considers data on performance as essential to ongoing improvement would mark a significant step forward in the replication and scaling up of effective services.

Underdeveloped processes of engagement with service users

Research conducted by the DKCRC on remote services across four jurisdictions showed the importance of effective interactions between service providers and service users – the interface between supply and demand. Its influence on the author’s thinking can be seen in the service principles described earlier in this paper. In some cases there is almost no engagement. The reasons often come down to an absence of representation of local people in governance arrangements relating to services. This problem has been observed in Martu communities in Western Australia (McGrath et al. 2010). In other settings, engagement is inconsistent due to the high mobility of local people and the changing staff within service providers. Alternatively, efforts to resolve a service issue, such as access to good water in Dajarra, Queensland, have involved much discussion but little tangible change (O’Rourke 2011). The disjointed nature of efforts to assess and make recommendations on improvements to the service, high staff turnover and low capacity to attract and retain technically qualified staff have exacerbated a problem of poor understanding between the local council and residents.

A frequent shortcoming is miscommunication and misunderstanding between service users and service providers about the scope and nature of services, the choices available, and the needs and demand at the local level. A case in point is the experience by residents of the Tjuwanpa outstations to the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) (Kennedy 2009). Kennedy describes the communication difficulties between residents and staff of agencies implementing measures introduced through the NTER. This included a new vocabulary of words that accompanied the NTER: ‘...people heard that jobs would be “normalised” and “mainstreamed”, there would be “compulsory acquisition” of Aboriginal land; people would be “transitioned” off CDEP, “income management” would replace CDEP wages, and Centrelink benefits would be quarantined.’ (Kennedy 2009, p. 5).

A symptom of these problems is that service providers, finding engagement with local people to be difficult, tend to stay firmly on the supply-side of the equation, delivering a service that they feel they are being paid to provide. There are few incentives to do otherwise. This problem, coupled with the shortage of good evaluative data from existing programs, leads to weaknesses in design and development of services. Beyond technical improvements, real change in a way that is felt by service users is limited.

Despite widespread rhetoric around cross-cultural communication and understanding in remote Australia, achievements lag far behind. Incentives for better engagement are lacking and so practice is often defined by what will suffice as a minimum standard rather than aspirations to more meaningful dialogue across the divide between service providers and service users. While this remains the case, the goal of identifying effective practice, let alone scaling it up, will remain elusive.

Towards the replication of effective services

It is often said that the remote service sector works in silos. Despite conferences and workshops, whole-of-government policies and ‘joined-up’ initiatives, integrated programs and systemic models, this will be the way that the sector continues. If this is accepted then it is possible to move beyond the thankless task of trying to break down the silos towards a pattern of spending energy on other ways to replicate effective services. This starts with basic systemic improvements on evaluation, transparency, engagement with users, and shifting the focus towards user-responsive services.

The arguments presented in this paper can be distilled into a single line of reasoning. Effective services depend on an investment approach being taken whereby those who have a stake in better service performance have incentives to achieve the best results. For services that produce good results to be scaled up, policy-makers, practitioners and communities need to be able to determine what makes an effective service. This depends on good processes of evaluation and transparency in providing access to information. Scaling up itself should be supported by active promotion of good examples and key ingredients so that effective practice can be more easily adopted.

Identification of key ingredients

To know where we are heading, we need to know where we have been. This means that results have to be measured and a critical edge brought to the assessment of performance. The discipline of evaluation should be integrated into service design in a cost-effective way. Contrasting to the general thrust of the analysis of services presented in this paper, it calls for a simpler and standardised methodology that focuses on learning, identifying success factors and providing advice that enables improvement. In this way, evaluations should encourage the agency being evaluated to be a proactive player rather than a defensive recipient of an evaluation.

The practice of evaluation needs to become embedded in program and service design so that it becomes simply a part of the cycle of service development and implementation. The principles adopted by the Queensland Government Department of Education, Training and the Arts (DETA) are relevant here. DETA has sought to foster a culture change from ‘ “evaluation is too hard” to “evaluation is how things are done here” ’ (Hanwright & Makinson 2008, p. 6). A suitable evaluation model for remote services, along the lines of the one illustrated below, is needed.

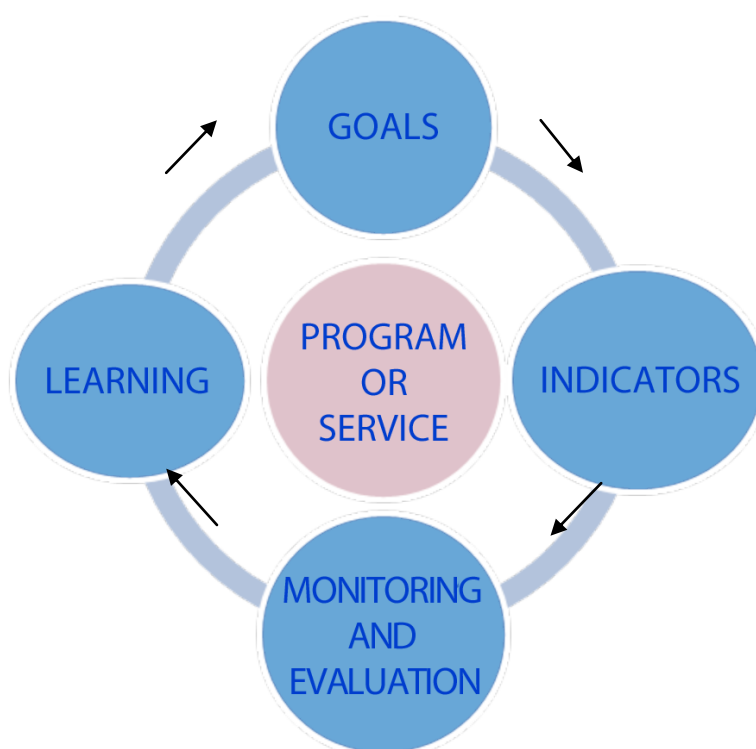


Figure 1: Simplified model of monitoring and evaluation

A recent paper produced for the North Australia Research Unit provides further guidance on approaches to the evaluation of programs that may be complex but for which evaluation tools and processes can be developed and applied (Guenther et al. 2009).

Monitoring frameworks

Progress in evaluation would establish it as part of a broader framework of design, planning and monitoring of remote services that draws on the experience of logical frameworks in international development. Logical framework planning and analysis is a technique that is well established internationally and a modified logical framework approach is effective in monitoring remote services. It is favoured by government departments engaged in community-based development programs (AusAID, for example), multilateral aid agencies (such as the World Bank) and non-government organisations working in community settings (meaning most of them, including WorldVision, Catholic Relief Services and Oxfam). In the Northern Territory, it has been used extensively by Bushlight in remote area power service planning and was recently adopted by the Aboriginal Mental Health Worker Program to design and monitor services to clients in remote locations. Logical frameworks are used by the Western Australia Department of Agriculture and Food for project planning, monitoring and evaluation.

Logical framework planning involves the preparation of a planning matrix that establishes key measureable indicators for the services being delivered. These are located within a strategic framework that sets overall objectives. In the context of remote Australia indicators could include, for example:

- performance of housing and infrastructure (costs of services, reliability, numbers of service visits)
- crime and community safety (night patrol activity, incidence of crime, etc.)
- employment in service provision (local residents and external contractors)
- childcare (places available, uptake of childcare, etc.).

Quantitative, qualitative and behavioural measures are included. It is important that higher-level performance measures are kept in view, such as longer-term service outcomes and returns on investment in service infrastructure. Managed effectively, logical framework planning provides for rigorous project design, analysis and monitoring. Importantly, the method enables participation by lay people and also allows for flexibility and change throughout the term of a program of work.

In their practical application, logical frameworks are prepared and agreed at the outset by participants in the service model. The definition of a 'participant' will certainly include government staff but could also be widened to bring in community perspectives. The same group then remains involved in the monitoring from that point onwards. Typically, key staff working in service delivery will report progress on a monthly or quarterly basis against the indicators. A regular review is undertaken at six-monthly or annual intervals. This enables the design and implementation of the model to be changed in the light of progress and for indicators to be modified accordingly.

The emphasis of logical framework planning is on maintaining effective measurement and continual dialogue between key participants so as to achieve results and capture lessons which inform changes and improvements. The challenge lies in agreeing on the indicators that determine whether a service is effective or not, which is why monitoring and evaluation requires decisions to be made at the commencement of a program or service.

The right indicators

Measuring the effectiveness of services relies on the selection of indicators that are relevant to the needs and expectations of service users and policy-makers. The Ali Curung Law and Justice Program is an example where key factors were identified both by the community and by external commentators. Allen's (2001) review of Aboriginal community justice initiatives stated that the approach to addressing:

... community violence at Ali Curung has occurred both at an institutional and a community level. At the institutional level, the Ali Curung Law and Order Plan have been endorsed by ten government agencies. At the community level, the plan has facilitated an appropriate representation of different language groups in the community to negotiate and liaise with agencies on a holistic approach to addressing community violence. The coordination for the various agencies has also increased interagency communication and effectiveness in reducing community violence at Ali Curung.

These sentiments are reflected in other documentation reviewing law and justice programs (Cairnduff 2001). The program benefited from the work of Northern Territory Government employees with a strong understanding of community development principles and applied these to working with Ali Curung people. In addition, Ryan (2003) has suggested that the effectiveness of the program was supported by a participatory planning process, a formalised agreement, coordination of agencies and service delivery at the local level, an adaptive policy environment, individual development of Aboriginal people, and in-depth field-work time.

According to community members (Wright 2007), the key factors in the success of the Ali Curung Law and Justice Program were:

1. Control, participation and ownership of the program at the community level.
2. Two-way (cultural system and Australian-recognised system) or intercultural process.
3. Clearly articulated coordination of government agencies and their roles.
4. Outside support and assistance from a male and a female field officer.
5. Peer modelling and interaction with other communities.
6. Recognition of traditional decision-making processes.

This information was collected through interviews and workshops facilitated by CAT through the DKCRC (Wright, in press). In essence, they provide a glimpse of the kinds of valuable feedback from

the demand-side of the service equation that ought to contribute to planning in the future. A problem in this case was that the aspects of the program valued locally did not align with the measures of effectiveness employed by the government, specifically on the reduction of crime. The closure of the program stemmed from a basis difference in indicators of effectiveness between providers and users.

Similarly, preliminary findings from research by the DKCRC with people at the Tjuwanpa Outstation Resource Centre points to a need ‘to create a level playing field within which the Aboriginal participants can meaningfully contribute to and participate in the programs and services that are meant to benefit them. Not only does it require conditions which enable Aboriginal people to understand and make sense of government initiatives, but also that governments reach a more informed understanding of Aboriginal aspirations and realities’ (Kennedy 2009). For this to happen, better processes and models for engagement with communities are needed. This does not mean a ‘walking on eggshells’ approach to working with people but a business-like discussion of needs, options and access to services in a way that negotiates the arrangements within resource limitations that are the reality for service providers and users.

These arguments for better practice in community engagement and evaluation are qualified by acknowledgement of the justifiable criticism of the work of non-government organisations in this area (Buckland 1998). Community engagement, like participation before it, will become diluted in its value if NGOs are excessive in their promotion of it while failing to distinguish between true engagement and simply consultation that enables boxes to be ticked in the column marked ‘talk to community’. Put simply, the users are not always right. Services have to be designed and implemented within a range of parameters. But ongoing failure to understand the perspectives of users undermines good design.

Capacity for change

So, with proper engagement and improved approaches to evaluation in place, there is a basis for identifying the key ingredients in effective services. To enable this to happen, evaluations ought to lead to sharing of information and knowledge. But the service sector in regional and remote Australia lacks a means by which key lessons, data and results can be accessed.

It doesn’t have to be this way. The services sector can strengthen its own capacity to evaluate. Rather than dependence on outsiders, often with limited knowledge of local conditions, a network of people who can undertake evaluations according to a standard format and which becomes part of normal practice in service development needs to be developed. The approach being taken by the Western Australia Department of Indigenous Affairs to evaluating the Capacity Builders Project at Balgo (Kavanagh 2008), while also developing internal skills to undertake similar exercises in the future, is worthy of attention. But this kind of initiative is itself often isolated. A concerted effort is required within the sector to pull together a critical mass of resources and improved practice in this area.

In this context, the improvement of services to poor communities north of the USA–Mexico border is instructive (Donelson 2004). These settlements, known as *colonias*, are home to around 1.5 million people in the border area. Often falling outside formal service provision, residents are affected by poor quality housing and infrastructure. A large number of local NGOs have become involved in working with *colonia* residents, focusing almost entirely on improving services. Through recognition that individually they lack capacity, backed by studies to that effect, NGOs have formed networks that have been effective in developing technical skills, increasing access to funding and brokering between governments and local residents. Notwithstanding some shortcomings, research on the subject has concluded that ‘network organisations have great potential in “scaling up” the successes of local NGOs by sharing and networking successes’ (Donelson 2004, p. 341).

The challenge here is how the remote service sector in Australia can establish a means for identifying and replicating good practice in services across jurisdictions, sectors and organisational cultures. Formal networks of the kind found in international development and as a response to service

shortcomings in countries such as Bangladesh, Laos and India provide inspiration for remote Australia. A recent example of innovation in this area is the training and mentoring program implemented by the NGO BasicNeeds within a strategy of ‘training for impact’ through strengthening practice in community mental health services (Fisher 2010).

There is scope for a community of practice to be established in remote services. This would be a vehicle for improving practice and the promotion and active exchange of knowledge and lessons on the subject. The activities of the Asian Development Bank to foster communities of practice across its own sectors of operation provide practical illustrations of how this achieved. Access to the findings of evaluations is at the heart of such processes (Serrat 2008).

Conclusion

More than a drop in the ocean

Often services work well due to the skills and drive of key individuals. Examples of effective services described in this paper have key individuals at their centre. A change to personnel is therefore usually met with trepidation by local people who fear that the departure of individuals will mean deterioration in the quality of services, regardless of who takes over.

Achieving systematised practice – meaning services that are grounded in a systems-based approach rather than subject to the vagaries of individual skills and capacity – is a big challenge. But achieving a process for understanding effective practice and replicating it is an important step along that particular road. The research of DKCRC on services and small enterprise in remote Australia has produced a range of publications, videos and tools on the subject, which are a contribution to this goal.

Ultimately, the argument comes back to the fundamentals of policy-makers, practitioners and users of service being able to know and describe what makes a service effective. Without this, there is nothing to replicate. It may be ironic to conclude by saying that before we can replicate effective services we need to replicate effective evaluation.

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